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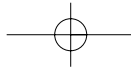
## GENDERED LESSONS IN IVORY TOWERS

Judith Okely

Feminist knowledge entails a theory of power because, as Ramazanoglu and Holland assert in relation to feminist methodology, 'the power to produce authoritative knowledge is not equally open to all' (2002: 13). Certainly this has been my experience as a woman academic. I am confronted with disparities in power. I am obliged to confront my gender because it is made clear to me on a daily basis. In what is ideally presented as a centre for open and rational knowledge, the university is not free of specificity in history and is marked by gender, class, and ethnic differences. Nevertheless, I approached university as a student, as a postgraduate, and then as a lecturer with awe and longing. I wanted to enter the temple of knowledge, something that a person of my era, class, and gender was not supposed to enter even as a novice (see Okely 1978, 2003).

Some aspects of being a woman academic may be taken for granted that were very different in Britain thirty years ago. In this chapter, I explore the changing historical background to the position of women lecturers, drawing on my own experience as a case study. There is an excellent precedent for doing so in the autobiographical work of the sociologist Olive Banks, who recounted her position in academia from the 1940s through to the 1960s (1999). As an anthropologist, I am accustomed to analysing accumulative ethnographic material based on participant observation. Here the culture is that of several British universities, lived by myself as female informant, participant, and later analyst. At the time of each experience, I was only subliminally doing fieldwork in these institutions. I was more a passive recipient of their procedures, taking it for granted that this was normality in an organisation supposedly founded on reason and equity.

In this chapter I review four strands of my experience as a woman anthropologist. The first concerns aspects of the structural and daily reaction of the universities to the presence of a female lecturer. The experience commenced before equal opportunities legislation was recognised as a necessary code of practice and ends with new and unexpected twists in presumed gender equality. Secondly, I examine the institutional reaction to my attempts to introduce and teach courses on women and gender. Earlier examples show the considerable



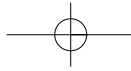
restrictions in gaining approval. After thirty years it seems either that gender studies have become gentrified or that feminism is still marginalised. Thirdly, the significance of supportive colleagues, usually female but some key males, in some male-dominated or hostile contexts is traced. This strand links to the book's networking theme. These network patterns are contrasted with the masculinist or new managerial values that have captured universities. Finally, I consider the production of my feminist publications and how they both influenced and reflected my teaching commitments. In all these strands, Shirley Ardener's influence is ever present through three decades of changing intellectual and academic institutional trends. All four strands can be read as ideas and practices arising from fieldwork in academia.

### **Institutionalised Experience**

Today, there is greater sensitivity towards discrimination, encouraged by compulsory race, if not gender, awareness workshops for senior managers. Over twenty-five years ago, when I started as a lecturer at an English university, there was no such thing. The discrimination was blatant as well as implicit.

In the discipline of social anthropology, the majority of undergraduates were women during the 1970s (which continues to be the case today). Even when women gained first-class degrees, they were less likely to proceed to a doctorate than the male graduates. Women graduates tended to opt for a less ambitious masters and not to progress to a doctorate. Barker (1975) and Caplan (1975), in a study of several anthropology departments in southern England, noted how male graduates were often crucially encouraged by male lecturer patrons to continue. That patronage did not operate to the same degree for women, especially since the proportion of female members of staff to male was increasingly small. Women staff formed a tiny minority and women professors were rare indeed. This gender imbalance was general. A survey in the early 1970s of university teachers in Britain in all disciplines revealed that 12 per cent of lecturers, 6 per cent of senior lecturers and readers and only 1 per cent of professors were women (Blackstone 1973).

Ramazanoglu and Holland, in defending the use of experience for feminist knowledge, argue that 'the passions in struggles over knowledge of difference comes from actual and personal experience of difference' (2002: 123). They confront the criticism of experience as a source of knowledge in that 'any one person's experience will be limited, partial and socially located' (ibid.: 125). It cannot be denied that experience is partial. But detailed accounts may give insights that otherwise remain hidden, especially and precisely because the experience is not that of a majority and the dominant hegemony. They argue that 'experience of power relations can provide information on the realities of people's lives that is otherwise unavailable' and that 'there is a case for grounding feminist knowledge in experience' (ibid.: 127).



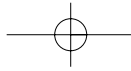
Knowledge based on first-hand experience is essential to the discipline of social anthropology. We do fieldwork. I have long argued, especially in the edited volume *Anthropology and Autobiography* (Okely and Callaway 1992), that even though the discipline has traditionally studied groups and cultures, often other than one's own, the anthropologist should confront his/her specificity. The gender, race, age, class, and personality will affect the interaction and ensuing access and knowledge of the people of that culture.

In this case, I am attempting to throw light on the context of the production of knowledge itself through universities. My experience is indeed partial because I have usually researched and lectured in universities where women as permanent academic staff form a tiny minority. But this chapter is intended to add to insights not only into an institution and its members per se but into the way in which we learn about the world generally.

Universities and many public institutions are now often obliged to have an equal opportunities policy, especially in relation to race, disability, and to some extent gender. In the 1970s, such intrusive policies were invisible, but at the same time the universities had intellectual freedoms and institutional autonomy that academics could enjoy.

State intrusions that demand some formal equalities, if not window dressing, have exacted a huge price. The audit culture has brought the madness of counterproductive bureaucracy (Shore and Wright 1999). Academics are less engaged in forging new knowledge than in filling in reports on multiple assessments. Thus the controls on institutional sexism and racism have been a Pyrrhic victory. In so far as the intellectual and original ideas and practices of a university are increasingly constrained, Mary Evans, in discussing the changes undergone by universities since the 1960s, supports feminism's challenge to universalisms. The second battle, she suggests, is 'less to overthrow the ivory tower than retain it' (Evans 1997: 52). She notes 'the gradual transformation of many of the liberal assumptions of universities into questionable habits and the values of the market economy' (ibid.). The managerial attitude brings 'a ruthless belief in policing the behaviour and the "performance" of both students and academic staff and the imposition on the curriculum of unanswerable questions about the "aims of the course" and the "learning outcome"' (ibid.).

The period from the mid-1970s through the 1980s, and with some more general observations about the 1990s and after, reveals some gains in women's appointments and the acceptance of gender studies but also the loss of innovation in research and teaching practice. The gender gains are still marginal. Evans emphasises that 'in the dual sense in which universities are run, that of allocating material resources and deciding the central issues of the curriculum, it is men, and masculine interests, which prevail' (ibid.: 49).



## Gendered Ethnography

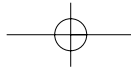
To commence my ethnography: in the mid-1970s, I applied for both a permanent and a temporary lectureship at a northern and older university, founded in the early nineteenth century. I was shortlisted only for the nine-month temporary job. I had innocently but proudly put on my CV that I was the first woman member of the Oxford Union Debating Society. I had also contributed to the first post-Women's Liberation anthropology volume published in the U.K., *Perceiving Women* (1975), edited by Shirley Ardener. Thus I was marked as someone with feminist interests.

The woman anthropologist on leave had successfully run a course entitled 'Women and Anthropology' the previous year. She had presented it under the general and flexible rubric 'Current Problems in Anthropology' filled in by a lecturer's choice, so it did not require scrutiny by Senate. When the next year's students learned that the woman lecturer would be on leave, they drew up a petition asking if that same course could be made available for their year in her absence. All this was done without my prior knowledge, but was seen by some as a 'feminist conspiracy'. To my surprise, at the interview by an all-male panel, I was asked by a professor, if I would be still interested in the job if I could not teach anything on women. Like a meek schoolgirl, I put my head down and said 'Yes'. The implication in the question was that anthropology was only about men. Thus the teaching and research culture had lines clearly demarcated to exclude any problematisation of gender, as if male hegemony were natural.

I was given the nine-month post and another young woman a six-month temporary post. As the two new women in the department, we conferred about the so-called ban on teaching anything on women and agreed that for the first-year introductory anthropology course we would both introduce gender issues. I put *Woman, Culture and Society* (Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974) on the reading list, together with *Sex, Gender and Society* (Oakley 1972), *Perceiving Women* (Ardener 1975), and *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (Reiter 1974). There were no comments from our senior colleagues, but we were nervous because we felt we had put our jobs on the line, especially if permanent posts were to come up.

Amongst those attending the first-year lectures there was one undergraduate who later became known as a prominent feminist anthropologist in the 1980s. Oblivious to the context in which we had 'daringly' introduced such themes and readings and probably assuming that this was part of some orthodox curriculum, she critiqued such publications as not being feminist because they allegedly focused on women rather than gender (Moore 1988: 6). In fact we would have welcomed any problematisation of masculinity. Some of us women anthropologists were busy challenging the presumed universalisms in male authors who were unwittingly privileging a masculine viewpoint.

At the first departmental social event, I met the two new male permanent lecturers, the second employed as a physical anthropologist and a postgraduate in the department. Several years younger than me, and presumably of a liberal



generation, he approached me saying, 'When the man came to paint your name on the office door, we made sure he didn't put Ms in front of your name. We had heard you were a feminist and we told him to put Miss.' I was baffled and replied that I considered it irrelevant. I was merely looking forward to the day when it would say Dr, which in fact happened within a year.

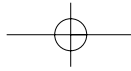
In London I joint-owned a house with my partner, who was supportive of my regular commute every other weekend. The train took a minimum of five hours. My need to have a job far from southern England and what has been termed the 'golden triangle' of Oxford, Cambridge, and London was also a reflection of the competition for university appointments in the more privileged regions and universities. My partner was a philosopher who would not dream of moving north. Like a growing number of women, I had done my anthropological fieldwork 'at home' and in Europe, namely among Gypsies. To the orthodox, anthropology should only be done in exotica far from Europe and the West. Again, this has changed today. Although preceded by others, especially Frankenberg (1990 [1957]), my work has also been seen as pioneering in western Europe in general. Europe and anthropology 'at home' are now territories that men can also cover with career advantages, although there remains hesitation in the golden triangle (Okely 1996: 1).

### **Masculine Collegiality**

Important questions to consider in academia are the extent to which one should form an academic community and, if so, what happens to individuals who are excluded from shared residence and commensality.

Some older universities like Oxford and Cambridge are collegiate, where members reside and eat in colleges. In Oxbridge even teaching is associated with colleges. This was not the case at the collegiate university where I had my first lectureship, but collegiality as shared residence and commensality formed a major power base for networking and domestic support. These major universities were also former theological colleges, with a history of all-male membership and celibacy. Shirley Ardener (1984) and Lidia Sciana (1984) have explored how it was only during the nineteenth century that Oxbridge allowed the all-male 'dons' to marry. Subsequently, the wives of lecturers became a problematic category. In the latter half of the twentieth century, wives had an ambiguous place. But the presence of women academics was even more problematic. They were rare and usually seen as spinsters and 'bluestockings', i.e., sexless nuns of knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

By the late 1960s at least, women academics were seen as rivals or threats to male academics' wives who were expected to act in a service role. We therefore had also to appear unsexed to please all parties. For my first lectureship interview at this hallowed institution, I was advised by the woman whose job had become temporarily vacant that, for the interview, I should look utterly dowdy. At first, I was generally unaware of these conflicting categories, naively believing that an

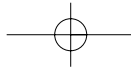


academic, as intellectual, achieved his/her position on merit, regardless of gender. But my feminine gender was marked. There were exclusions. Sandra Harding, drawing also on Hilary Rose, explores parallels with the gendered production of knowledge in science. These 1980s insights reflected my own ambiguous position. Women 'are forced to deny that they are women in order to survive. ... They are prohibited from becoming (masculine) science knowers and also from admitting to being what they are primarily perceived as being: women' (Harding 1986: 143). This 'ancient' university could not cope with women academics – only its wives, who were afforded a marginalised niche as domestic servicers and mothers. Some months into my position, I encountered the token woman lecturer in the geography department, who expressed discontent about the lack of childcare facilities. After a woman lecturer in Senate had bravely suggested a crèche, the geographer described contemptuously how the male establishment had agreed, but only for a couple of hours a day. 'This', she said, 'enabled the academics' wives to go shopping.' It was useless for full-time women academics.

Although universities in the U.K. had begun to accept women academics, it was still rare in the 1970s for any woman academic to have children. Another woman lecturer, appointed in the faculty several years before me, was asked at her interview how she, as a married woman, could continue to be an academic if she had children. Fully prepared in advance, she claimed that she was infertile. Miraculously she conceived some years later. My predecessor returned to her office early from maternity leave, having found an excellent childminder. She was bored. But her line manager's wife, a full-time housewife, telephoned to reprimand the lecturer for being a neglectful mother. Regrettably, at that time, I found maternity to be broadly incompatible with a commuting career. Today, matters have changed in that by EU law, paid maternity leave of six months is available, and the professions, including universities, have come to accept, even be impressed by, commuting marriages of high-profile careers.

Upon my appointment, I needed somewhere to live in this tiny northern city. I approached the staff accommodation office but was told that, since I was not married, they could not supply me with anything. I approached the residential mixed colleges, but again was told that I could not even be a member with dining rights. Apparently, if I had a husband who was a member of such a college, then I would be acceptable. I only once dined in a college in all the years I taught there, and merely as the guest of a male colleague. In contrast, a year or so after my appointment, when two single male lecturers arrived in the department, one was given immediate accommodation in college and the other within months, a flat five minutes from the department. Decades later, I attended two conferences at the university and with accommodation in colleges which I had not previously entered. There were high-ceilinged dining rooms, glass-fronted views of trees, a lake, fountain and herbaceous pathways. In this congenial setting, I enjoyed waves of nostalgia about all the best I had experienced in the past.

Having been unsuccessful with staff accommodation when I was first appointed, I was advised to try the Student Union office. The young man told me



that since I was a 'privileged' member of staff, he would give me addresses only ten miles or more from the city. The one available address was an unfurnished terraced house twelve miles away. I took a taxi there to meet the landlady. I grabbed at this windswept house on a hill, even a mile from the centre of the former mining village. I returned in my little Renault Four with blankets, pots, and an old Calor-gas camping cooker that I had used for fieldwork among the Gypsies. In the market I bought a length of foam rubber for a mattress.

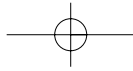
This seemingly austere locality turned out to be my escape and sanctuary. One winter night there was a knock on my door, and this woman explained she had been baking and presented me with a plate heaped with meat rolls and cakes. She fled shyly up the path. This was Sue, wife of Dick, a retired miner who lived in that terrace. They were to treat me as an adoptive daughter. I spent wonderful evenings in their home listening to tales of the 1930s and the miners' strikes, past poverty and camaraderie. I in turn took them for drives in my battered Renault. We visited Beamish Museum. Each evening, as I drove away from my office, there was a wondrous moment as I crossed a bridge and turned up a hill. The weight of stress fell away. I was far from the fusty claustrophobia in this university, which had the lowest proportion of women lecturers of any university in Great Britain.

## Reception

Back to my entry in the hallowed ivory tower: early in my appointment, I was invited as a new member of staff to a welcoming reception at the Education Department. Wearing a thick red woollen jumper, I drove ten miles from my unheated lodgings on the designated evening. When I eventually found the building, the cleaner turned me away: 'The library's closed.' After explaining I was not a student, I asked where the ladies room was, so I could comb my windswept hair. 'It's locked.' Thus it was assumed that no academic woman would step over the threshold. Already deflated by my genderised access, I walked into the reception room to see about twenty men, all seemingly in grey suits, while I was in scarlet. Everyone, except the director, presumed I was the secretary.

That week I ventured to the main library to collect a staff member's card. The receptionist could not believe I was a member of staff and accused me of fraud. Next, I was barred from the university staffroom and cafeteria as an interloper student. When finally admitted to this haven of men in fading tweed jackets and crumpled grey trousers, I selected lunch at the self-service. The woman at the till stared at my meal. In my anxiety, I had failed to pick up a plate and had spooned all my food straight onto the plastic tray. Thus even the domesticity associated with femininity had failed me in this male-dominated environment.

I can retrospectively appreciate the observation by Morley and Walsh: 'In a culture where emotional literacy is discursively located in opposition to reason, feminist academics frequently have to repress pain and anger, and hide the



contradictions and tensions that arise from being members of subordinate groups in powerful institutions' (1995: 2).

The isolation and challenge in becoming a university lecturer brought massive physical side-effects. For months I found that the only food that did not pass straight through me was brown rice. I could not eat fruit, vegetables, or meat. All alcohol was impossible. Colleagues congregating in the pub in the evenings or for lunch teased me about being teetotal. I could not tell them that it was a nervous stomach ailment. On return to my terraced house, I would ask if it was worth putting my body through this agony. Eventually, I visited the local doctor and wept. He gave me tranquillisers.

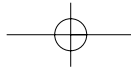
### Teaching Linked to Research

The stress leaked into my teaching plans, but with unexpected consequences, thanks to my good fortune in having David, a supportive colleague. One evening, visiting his family home, I let slip that I was sick with nerves. His sympathetic enquiry opened me up and I sobbed uncontrollably, saying I did not know how to continue. Moreover, I had to give a lecture on Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1914) the next day. I was now in no mood to run through my notes that evening. In passing, I mentioned my thesis chapter on Gypsy death rituals (Okely 1982: 215–30), where I had argued a different angle on Durkheim's analysis of mortuary rites. David was astonished at my troubled state of mind and smilingly revealed, 'No one could guess. No one has a clue. They think you are so in control, so cool and of course your middle-class accent adds to that impression. ... Meanwhile, why not give a lecture on your own material? Go in there and wow them.'

What wonderful advice. It echoed Shirley Ardener's encouragement in 1973 when she first asked me to think about a paper on Gypsy women (Okely 1975a). Likewise in this new setting, David gave me confidence to use my own research and to hell with the main reading list: let the students in on some original material, as yet unpublished. The next day, I dressed entirely in funereal black and wowed them.

Subsequently, when giving a lecture on Marcel Mauss's *Les Techniques du corps* (1950), which I translated, I used the example of bodily training from my British boarding school. I moved away from the lectern and imitated the military style of marching instilled at my school. Months after, a student told me how this had really inspired them. They saw the modern relevance and application of theories some half a century old to lived experience. All this was thanks to the non-macho sensitivity of my rare male colleague who rescued me from drowning. I was blessed with a brilliant intellectual mentor and friend. At the same time, my use of first-hand autobiographical material drew on the inescapable feminist reflexivity that incorporates experience into wider theory and academic knowledge. After a couple of years, I came to love giving lectures, having been encouraged to innovate and see the occasion as performance.





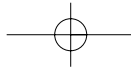
### Pre-audit Innovations

The ironically positive side to the sexism was that it coincided with a general absence of monitoring. Unfortunately, the audit culture has now curtailed the intellectual freedom that a gender- and race-sensitive policy might have liberated. In the 1970s, once appointed as lecturer and indeed only temporary, I was trusted with devising my own reading lists, albeit within the existing course titles. No one questioned the content. I was free to go wherever creative and imaginative ideas took me. At the completion stage of my doctorate, and inspired by my Oxford postgraduate seminars and peer group which included Kirsten Hastrup, Charlotte Hardman, Helen Callaway, Lidia Sciama, Juliet Blair, Jan Oveson, Martin Thom, Paul Heelas, and Malcolm Crick, I could inject experimental ideas and texts into the courses. In those pre-audit days, we were trusted to use our intellects with originality. I had proved my ability through my CV, the interview, and references. Those initial freedoms laid the foundations for all my subsequent lecturing styles. In contrast, today all modules are closely monitored and subject to absurd anti-intellectual constraints. On the horizon, there is standardisation as to the very form of lectures (Okely 2006).

Back then, I gradually became adventurous, in both content and performance. My colleague, David, had already drawn on his first-hand fieldwork among the Bahktiari. I became confident in the feminist emphasis on the personal and subjective. My article 'The Self and Scientism' (Okely 1975b, 1996) argued for the importance of studying Malinowski's posthumous *Diary* (1967). This was used as a major part of a lecture on methods, which I argued should also be taught within the core anthropological theory course.

I would try out ideas and then recount strategies of performance with my colleague David. Before my arrival he had felt intellectually isolated and we, as well as the students, found that our lectures and courses complemented each other. Scandalously, David was mocked by some of his more orthodox colleagues. While a simplistic form of political economy prevailed at that time, few could appreciate his pioneering or reinvigorated interest in religion, dance and performance. One time he arranged for an evening with a hired belly dancer. It inspired us and lived long after the envious mockery that had circulated down the corridors. Years later, our students of that era, an exceptional number of whom are academic anthropologists, including four professors, recall those heady teaching years. On my return to a conference in 2004, we watched a special screening of David's film on the Bahktiari, once nominated for an Oscar, and witnessed the award of a prize in his name for the best dissertation.

As a novice lecturer, I was entrusted with the supervision of several doctoral students, one within days of my first arrival. Marie was studying the women's movement in Iceland. In this non-audit culture, there was not even a second supervisor. I was blissfully unaware how fortunate I was to have as my first student someone who was outstanding and productive from start to completion.



## Private Life as Public

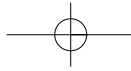
The spinster/wife opposing categories continued to haunt women academics. My temporary job was extended to two years. Then the person I was standing in for resigned, and the permanent job was to be advertised. I listened to David's advice and believe that this was correct. He had been in his post for ten years. He said that I should let a rumour spread that I had broken up with my partner in London and that if I got the permanent job I would buy a house in the northern town to which I would be committed. I did just that and got the job. I carried on commuting alternate weekends and in the vacations. A few years on, when my partner in London became seriously ill and was hospitalised, David again advised me not to inform the head of department as it would emphasise my 'lack of commitment' to the university if it was known that I commuted more frequently. Obviously David did not believe in the justice of this but he acted as a useful conduit of the institution's values. The liminal celibate woman was still the preferred female category. Today, in contrast, women and men can publicly celebrate their commuting partnerships.

## Gendering Knowledge

Back in the 1970s, the form of knowledge available to students depended on the approval of the dominant male hegemony. The content of the undergraduate degree was profoundly affected by gender specificities and the social context. Some years later, Hilary Rose would articulate in relation to science what I was experiencing in the social sciences, observing that women are 'by and large shut out of the production system of scientific knowledge, with its ideological power to define what is and what is not objective knowledge' (1983: 88). Now a permanent lecturer, I wanted to introduce the gender course for which the students had long petitioned. There was now a serious accumulation of anthropological literature that had moved beyond popularist texts (Okely 1996: 115–38).

Again, I was advised that, for it to be properly instituted and approved by Senate, I had better watch the title. Apparently the Head would be mortified if his department had a course with the word 'women'. I devised a way out by calling the course 'Race and Gender'. No one would dare question the respectability of discussing race.

To my surprise, more men than women signed up and I felt an even greater need to introduce reading on masculinity. It was sparse. The most informative book was Andrew Tolson's (1977) *The Limits of Masculinity*. It grew out of a men's consciousness-raising group. The students were excited by the text and wanted to invite him to speak. Other texts which problematised masculinity included Mead's (1935) classic *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* and Margaret Walters' (1978) *The Nude. Male*. After checking my order for Walters at the university bookshop, the assistant summoned the manager. He reminded me that



the bookshop was a Christian institution which did not stock pornography. I pointed out that many of the centuries old images were of Jesus Christ.

Another unexpected twist was the number of visits by individual male students to the privacy of my office. Each confessed that they were nervous about making statements in front of other students that would cause them to lose face. Here again was practical confirmation of the need for men to present a power-laden front in public. There were parallels with the absence of men's autobiographical and personalised accounts of fieldwork in the anthropological literature. This is something I would explore later in the volume *Anthropology and Autobiography* (Okely and Callaway 1992).

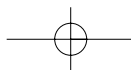
I persuaded David to give several lectures on gender in the Middle East. We had lively arguments in that he would not accept that women were subordinate. He emphasised the power of women, especially in the domestic and sometimes sacred spheres. I now appreciate his focus on what were referred to as lion women among the Bahktiari, who were identified as powerful individual women. He also drew attention to the importance to men of women behaving in a non-shameful way. At the same time, he pointed to the control over male sexuality.

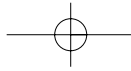
By this time, I had already noticed gender differences in undergraduate essays on non-genderised topics. I had set a first-year question, 'Discuss some of the problems and challenges in studying other cultures.' Without prior assumptions, I found that male students focused on broad and generalised philosophical issues about clashing cosmologies, whereas women used concrete, specific examples and minute aspects of interaction, like body language, dress, movement, and conversation.

An explanation is based on the gendered upbringing of both boys and girls. Both sexes are brought up in early childhood by women, whether or not these are biological mothers, as elaborated in Chodorow (1974). The girl child learns about adult and future femininity by immediate example. But the boy has to learn about masculinity by abstraction. The father figure is more often absent (Tolson 1977), so the boy has to theorise his future masculinity. All this affects each gender's intellectual grasp of the world. Thankfully over the years, I have found some wonderful counter-examples. But invariably, the background of the individual revealed exceptional circumstances.

## Women Networking

It has been increasingly recognised that male networks are important in work and professional advancement. Naturally, with the very low proportion of women academics, especially some decades ago, networks were thin and few. But, as I experienced with the isolated women in my first post, the rare contacts were all the more valuable. This had already affected my academic production, publication, and a section of my doctorate. I was fortunate to be a member of the first Women's Anthropology Seminar, when I was a postgraduate at Oxford. It was Shirley Ardener who first suggested that I present a paper on Gypsy women.





Ironically, as a feminist, I had not thought of focusing on women per se in the field. Given my own restricted bourgeois education, I had naively believed that it was a feminist act to go to university and proceed to postgraduate research. I had done fieldwork among a very gender-divided ethnic group. I was too busy trying to get information about both genders. In any case, in those days it was hardly possible to submit a doctorate that focused on women alone – no matter that most monographs written by male anthropologists claimed to research and write about a whole people when in fact they had depended largely on male informants.

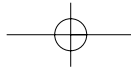
At a London women's anthropology conference in the early 1970s, I saw the link between feminist practice and academic work. But it was mainly thanks to Shirley Ardener that I was inspired to write about Gypsy women as a category and in contrast to men.

The same influence occurred when Shirley later urged me to write a paper on my girls' boarding school (Okely 1978, 1996). I had kept in touch with her during my return visits to submit my doctorate. She had noticed that I had frequently referred to my schooling and insisted it was the time to write it up. In Oxford, there was a newly funded interdisciplinary women's seminar forum. I savour the drama of giving my first presentation on the boarding-school theme the day before my doctoral viva. It was doubly dramatic as Shirley was in black, having returned from the funeral of Phyllis Kaberry. I had never and would never have had a request from a male anthropologist mentor to write on such concerns.

Again, there are resonances with my observations on student writing. If women tend to learn about the world through specifics, they are also more open to considering an autobiographical approach to knowledge. If men live gender disguised as the universalised norm, then they do not have to question their specificity. In contrast, women are not brought up in a universalised norm, so they have first to make sense of their place in the world on a subjective level.

However small the numbers in this conservative university where I obtained my lectureship, women formed a crucial potential for sisterly solidarity. I also appreciated two other 'token' women in other departments – one in the English department, and one in the sociology department; the celebrated African National Congress (ANC) activist Ruth First. She likewise could not obtain a job in the 'golden triangle' and commuted weekly to London, where her daughters lived. After my appointment, she went out of her way to contact me. She initiated some alternative female network and we would meet regularly for lunch in a pub/hotel.

The experience of sexism was no longer simply imagined since I could match it with hers. The most distressing memory from those years together was of her description of a staff meeting where she objected to something to her all-male colleagues. As sociologists, they prided themselves on their liberal view of the social world. Ruth said that she was upset about something and a younger male colleague said, 'Perhaps it's your time of life', i.e., the menopause. No one objected to this outrageous reduction to biological causes. Ruth was shattered and we talked at length about her bizarre colleagues. Some later helped raise funds for



a memorial in her honour when she was blown up by a letter bomb in Mozambique. Such gestures seemingly only recognised a woman academic's value after her heroic masculinist death.

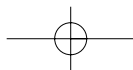
### **Move to a New University**

My partner in London could be released from the hospital in the early months only if I was at home. So long as I did not miss teaching, no one would notice. Thus personal tragedy was to be concealed. A married man would have been given different treatment if his live-in wife were ill. Eventually, so I could be near my partner and because I wanted to live in southern England, I applied for various posts and was shortlisted for a post in a sociology department in southern England. Here, precisely because I had done field research in the U.K., I could also be classified as a sociologist. Some two hundred sociologists applied and I, the lone anthropologist, got the job. It was exciting to be in a department where, out of seventeen staff, six were women. Finding overlaps with the sociological literature on so-called deviants, I looked forward to ever-expanding intellectual exchange. Although the (all-male) selection committee was unanimous, I learned months after that a leading feminist sociologist initiated a petition protesting against my appointment, in part because I was an anthropologist.

Meanwhile at my previous university, a man was appointed to my vacant lectureship. An eminent married woman applied but was not shortlisted as it was argued that, since her husband did not live in the town, the department would not impose 'the burden of commuting' on her. In contrast, at my new university, there were no enquiries about one's marital or domestic status. As long as the lecturer had a local base, there were no comments about commuting for weekends. The most vivid contrast with my previous university occurred at a staff meeting when a lesbian senior colleague argued successfully for a three-year delay in becoming head of department because her female partner was expecting a baby.

### **Anthropology in Question**

The teaching of gender courses was entirely monopolised by the existing women. However, as in my previous appointment, I introduced gender and feminism into all my teaching. By my third year in this sociology department, I was able to introduce a course entitled 'Social Anthropology', despite some resistance from a feminist Marxist who declared there were 'too many hunter-gatherers' in the outline reading. When I pointed out that the texts by Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard, Geertz, Douglas, Bohannan, Turner, Tambiah, Caplan, Richards, Ardener, La Fontaine and Leach did not concern such groups, the silence revealed that high theoreticians arrogantly labelled any non-urban group beyond Dover as 'hunter-gatherers'. This was the era when pastiche Althusserian mandarins



dominated social science. Ethnographic work was denigrated as Anglo-Saxon empiricism. In the same department the alternative was quantitative survey research or symbolic interactionism. It was not understood that anthropology could embrace many theoretical perspectives that were neither positivist nor uniquely desk-bound.

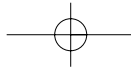
Despite some intellectual gulfs, I eventually had the freedom to set the agenda and introduce aspects of my previous gender course and other anthropological debates. The course was extremely popular. The students enjoyed the ethnographic detail and a cross-cultural perspective, in contrast to theoretical abstractions, which concealed so much Western ethnocentrism. One young woman, now a leading public figure, confided that she resented the Western bias in the mainstream gender courses where high theory ruled.

I also taught so-called 'qualitative methodology' in the core courses, following others who taught quantitative methods. I was free to develop the implications of the gender, ethnicity, race and age of the fieldworker. This interaction between teaching and writing gave me the impetus to bid for the 1989 conference theme of the Association of Social Anthropologists, which I called *Anthropology and Autobiography* (Okely and Callaway 1992).

The research support facilities were outstanding. Secretaries were not as yet engulfed by IT-driven documentation and audit. They typed our books and articles and so had a direct engagement with our work. My book on Simone de Beauvoir (Okely 1986a) was typed entirely in departmental time. Here I could also experiment with changing autobiographical interpretations of her famous texts in order to give the historical setting of different women readers.

My memories through the 1980s were of relative freedom to do my own thing. Teaching on the faculty course 'The Enlightenment' created inspiring cross-disciplinary connections with the humanities. I obtained a major Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) grant to do research amongst the rural aged in France on condition that I did a comparative study with rural England (Okely 1986b, 1991a). I disappeared to Normandy for months of fieldwork (Okely 1991b, 2001). Some years previously in Oxford, Shirley Ardener had initiated an annual lecture in honour of three women anthropologists, and in 1989 I was invited to give the Phyllis Kaberry Memorial Lecture (Okely 1991b, 1996).

In that second university I made two valuable friendships with women linked to the department. One was a lecturer in development whose first degree in anthropology encouraged a cross-cultural perspective. In addition, she had been to a similar boarding school to mine. It was her reading of my article on that topic which consolidated our friendship. Then there was a mature student who came up to me at a party at the end of my first year to thank me for my teaching. She would become my research officer on another ESRC project. All three of us were born in the same year. The mingling of the personal with the professional was normal. We shared discussions of personal tragedies and joys, relationships, and intellectual pursuits.



After thirteen years as a lecturer and at the top of the scale and having produced three books, numerous articles and gained two major ESRC grants, as well as having introduced postgraduate initiatives, I applied for promotion to a senior lectureship. Casually in the corridor and within earshot of passing students and staff, the female head of department informed me that the department would not be recommending me. This public humiliation undermined any naive belief in collegial sisterhood. I was fortunate to be invited by a male professor to transfer to an anthropology department in another university where I was elected to a Readership within the year and a personal chair a couple of years later.

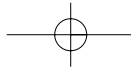
### Postgraduate Culture

It was in this sociology department that I had the experience of supervising my first male doctoral student. As an undergraduate, he had gravitated towards social anthropology, thanks to my one course. In the year of the 1984 miners' strike, I obtained an ESRC-linked Ph.D. award for him to study elderly and retired miners in the north-east of England, near where I had once taught. As someone from a family with a long mining tradition, my Ph.D. student was less likely to have been accepted at my previous university, with its heavy public-school intake. He has recently been appointed to a chair in social anthropology in Australia. I also supervised an Algerian male university lecturer and women from Greece, Bengal, Turkey, and Canada. Here my anthropology was highly relevant to theses concerned with cultures beyond Dover. It was important that I could supervise men in addition to some outstanding women doctoral students and not be expected to be a dominant authority figure. I did not see myself as some authoritarian guru.

When I ran postgraduate seminars in the different universities where I worked, the ambience I sought had been greatly influenced by that generated by the Women's Anthropology Seminar at Oxford. I was deeply impressed by Shirley Ardener's comment that a seminar had been a success because 'everyone had spoken'. The atmosphere was supportive but subtly critical. The participants' questions could point gently to flaws, which eventually the speaker would come round to recognising without being publicly humiliated, let alone destroyed.

This seminar style was to puzzle a male lecturer at my future Scottish university. Apparently he referred to my male postgraduates as 'Judith's eunuchs'. This younger academic believed in the macho mode, where postgraduates were encouraged to perform with aggression and publicly 'destroy' paper givers in a blood letting cockfight. Four of those so-called eunuchs are now university lecturers elsewhere. A fifth became a respected consultant.

From my appointments in the 1970s and 1980s, I moved to become a professor in two other universities. In one, out of some two hundred professors, there were just eight women professors. In my most recent university, for eight years I was the only woman professor in the social sciences. At this institution, the



core module in gender was now monopolised by a young male lecturer. As in the past, I brought gender issues into all my teaching.

Female networks across departments continued to be crucial, however sparse. My great privilege was to have a Nigerian sociology colleague, the late Dr Obi Igwara, whom I saw as an ever-optimistic soul sister. Our friendship was a wondrous mixture of the personal, the intellectual, and the academic. While in the 1970s as a (white) woman over thirty, it was presumed I was a mere student, she in the 1990s and over forty had the added experience of being presumed to be a student because of her race. With a confident upbringing in Nigeria, she used various scintillating strategies to confront or ignore racism (cf. Mirza 1995; Rassool 1995).

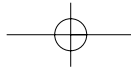
### **Gender Institutionalised or Appropriated**

Whereas in the 1970s and doubtless before, women were severely disadvantaged in attempting to move into academic spheres beyond that of servant research assistant, by the 1990s there were greater opportunities for women. The old categories of male academic's unwaged wife versus desexed academic spinster are now transformed. There is the increased presence of the academic partner or wife. The latter may provide less domestic servicing for a study-bound husband than was the expectation in the past. Instead, she brings a lucrative salary in her own right for a double-income household. Gone are the days when a woman lecturer had to conceal a commuting relationship. Such split lives are now considered signs of status. It is now illegal for a committee to ask how a woman organises childcare. And women as new mothers will feel free to celebrate their identity as mothers in conferences and public presentations.

The greater sensitivity towards female appointments, driven in part by equal opportunities legislation, has however, been manipulated by male-dominated power structures to put their own women in place.<sup>2</sup> The husband cannot officially be on the appointing committee, but there are informal networks and pressures on colleagues.<sup>3</sup> In Canada the practice is at least transparent through negotiated spouse appointments.

Alternative practices have emerged officially in the name of gender equality, namely the appointment or promotion of unofficial sexual partners to key staff positions. If the relationship is illicit, few dare question those in power about conflict of interest precisely because the liaison is not in the public domain. Thus men may use the modern legal challenge to gender inequalities to continue to strengthen their own power base, while their client women are predictably complicitous. This is to the detriment of other women, who are seen as rivals rather than potential allies.





## Conclusion

There are triumphs in the increasing acceptance of gender issues. Disciplines have shown a wondrous flowering in many arenas. Gender is in the academic and intellectual public domain (Davies and Holloway 1995). There are centres of gender studies, degrees, and gender publications in many disciplines. Gone are the early days when I could read gender publications in history, archaeology, literature, languages, art, philosophy, sociology and geography as well as anthropology across all the disciplines. Now, to the credit of gender research, we cannot hope to cover all disciplines, but there remain vital interdisciplinary connections, in contrast to the strict or even antagonistic boundaries between disciplines in so many other intellectual fields.

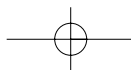
Women are more visible and with occasional access to academic power. An example was recently recounted by Shirley Ardener. After a special dinner in a prestigious college, she talked with two younger women professors over coffee. Shirley felt that there was something very different that evening. Then she realised it was because the women were happy to talk together as a self-sufficient unit without searching for eye contact and validation among male academics in the vicinity. The women had independent power.

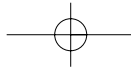
I have argued that not only is the feminist argument 'the personal is political' of value, but also 'the personal is theoretical' (Okely 1992: 9). In this chapter, I have introduced a thread of narrative examples about my experience as a woman academic through a career over decades at several universities. Key incidents, seemingly trivial, give insights into the university power structures. A passing remark can betray the core values and day-to-day practice of academic institutions. The latter I contest are uniquely important, as they are the creators and conveyors of established and new knowledge. Universities are different from industries, which produce physical objects or marketing spin where accuracy and truth are negotiable. As my colleague David once noted, 'We produce human beings' (Okely 2004). Universities guard and create ideas, not mere products. Both the academic staff and students will be affected by the identity and positionality of whoever is producing and transmitting that knowledge.

It is unfortunate that just when U.K. universities have to be sensitive to gender, race, class, and disability, they are under overwhelming pressures to mimic the ideals of the market economy and state-dictated ideas of utility and bureaucratic priorities rather than intellectual creativity. Over a number of decades, Shirley Ardener has been an inspiring example of a woman academic betwixt and between power structures that have moved from gender phobia to audit mania.

## Notes

1. This was a path set earlier in my Oxford college, where we women undergraduates had to sign a form agreeing not to marry during our three-year course of study (Okely 1986a).

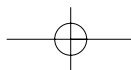
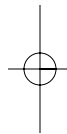
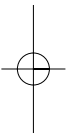




2. I recall a celebrated woman anthropologist saying how shocked she was when in the 1980s she obtained an Oxbridge fellowship. She was later told that the committee felt safe in her appointment because her husband, a former fellow, had been there before her. The all-male committee needed to know that her 'reliability' had been put to the test by one of the 'chaps'.
3. In one appointment whose procedure I witnessed, a man was allowed to sit on the shortlisting meeting, although it was public departmental knowledge that his mistress was applying. He was permitted to assess another woman's application after he boasted, to shrieks of laddish laughter, of a 'dalliance' with her.

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