False promises: growing precarity for early stage researchers

Employment in academic science today is changing considerably following the multiple transformations of scientific environment related to the rise of academic capitalism (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004). Normative visions of science as an instrument of economic growth have come to replace the previous humanistic long-term promise of contributing to social wellbeing and understanding the world around us (Godin 2002, Guston 2000). This does not mean, however, that one normative framework has replaced another. Rather, they coexist and are used strategically to achieve different goals in different contexts, as a way to manage, control and even manipulate academic workers (Stöckelová 2009, Shore and Wright 2000). These changes in the academic environment are accompanied with increasing precarization. This is one result of a changing organization of the research lab, particularly in the natural sciences, where the dynamic model of laboratory has superseded the dynastic model. Natural science labs are today increasingly organized around the group leader, with PhD students and postdocs circulating on short-term contracts (Linková and Červinková 2013). While there is not such data available in the Czech Republic, in the UK contract research staff constitutes as many as 28% of all full time employees (in the biosciences it is 55% and in physics 54%) (Roberts 2002: 145). Less than 20% of researchers in these precarious positions will ever find a permanent academic position (ibid: 12; see also Knights and Richards 2003: 217).

Notwithstanding this situation on the academic labor market, early career researchers are trained to adopt the traditional scientific ethos presenting the scientific profession as a vocation (Shapin 2008). Early stage researchers are presented with a vision of the beginning of the academic path based on the sacrifice of private life and high workload which is redeemed by a promise of future independence and professional stability. With the disappearance of stable senior non-leadership positions and the logical scarcity of group leader positions, it is obvious that this promise is no more than a chimera. Nevertheless, the idea of science as a vocation and mission is sustained in the media, discussions between supervisors and students and among researchers themselves. Early stage researchers are consequently caught in a trap of Orwellian double-think – on the one hand, they need to act in interviews as if an academic career was the single most important thing in their life for
which they are willing to make sacrifices and be prepared a long-term vision of their research, while, on the other hand, they need to constantly keep in mind the possibility that there may not be a position for them in academic science in the future. Thus, the interview practices and self-presentations continue to promulgate a normative image of a progressive, linear career when such a career is a mystique (Moen 2005) not only in terms of gender and women’s careers in science, but increasingly for all people caught in between positions, on successive postdocs, with periods of unemployment and instability.

In our presentation we will discuss the taboo of the linear, progressive career. Drawing on in-depth interviews with graduate students and postdoctoral fellows, mostly from the natural sciences, we will discuss career imaginaries of these early stage researchers. Our data reveal that despite the normativity of reaching the leadership position, many early stage researchers, women and men alike, are critical of this competitive academic career system, and would in fact prefer mid-rank research positions. In conclusion we will consider what purposes the maintenance of the normative vision of a linear, upward career progress serves, who tends to be excluded by such imaginaries and who can be fit these criteria.

Key words: science, academic career, career planning, early stage researchers

References:


