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# Working Papers on University Reform

Working Paper 23:

## **Shooting Arrows – Disruptions, Intersections and Tracing Lines in Gender Research**

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University Reform, Globalisation  
and Regionalisation

Department of Education, Aarhus University

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**Shooting Arrows: Disruptions, Intersections, and  
Tracing Lines in Gender Research**

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*Shooting Arrows: Disruptions, Intersections, and Tracing Lines in Gender Research*

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## Introduction

*Suddenly I'm furious, that with my life on the line, they don't even have the decency to pay attention to me. That I'm being upstaged by a dead pig. My heart starts to pound, I can feel my face burning. Without thinking, I pull an arrow from my quiver and send it straight at the Gamemakers' table. I hear shouts of alarm as people stumble back. The arrow skewers the apple in the pig's mouth and pins it to the wall behind it. Everyone stares at me in disbelief. 'Thank you for your consideration', I say. (Katniss Everdeen in Collins 2008: 141).*

In the dystopian future of *The Hunger Games* the main protagonist shoots an arrow at a group of observers to knock them out of their apathy and to disrupt their preconceptions of how they thought she would perform. By using her refined hunting skills with a bow and arrow, the character, Katniss Everdeen, steps out of what is expected and demands that the observers look at things differently. This paper takes as its key motivator this theme of disruption and utilises Katniss' shooting arrow as a structural device to explore an incident that occurred to me as a researcher when interviewing a participant for a project that focused on women in management positions in higher education institutions. Like Katniss' unsuspecting observers, my expectations of how a participant would perform, by linking her personal background in a seamless narrative to her success in her professional life, were unexpectedly turned upside down and challenged by a metaphorical arrow aimed at the heart of my research methodology. This paper explores the challenges presented by this disruption, and then utilises the productive dimensions initiated by this disruption to rethink, readjust, and recalibrate the methodological tools with which to approach this research in ways that avoid obvious connections and my own preconceived ideas about what the data I was gathering would say. Using the line of flight created by the motif of Katniss' arrow, the final section of the paper explores the reflexive nature of the research process that emerges from the preceding discussion.

The context of this paper and the research I was undertaking were under the auspices of the EU FP7 PEOPLE IRSES project 'University Reform, Globalization and

Europeanization' (URGE) with a focus on a comparative study of women in positions of academic leadership and management in New Zealand and Denmark. At the point of time this paper refers to, I was undertaking interviews with a group of 20 women from a selection of well-established universities during October and November, 2013. All of the women had reached either professorial positions in their university, or were working at a high level of academic leadership in research, or as head of department, head of faculty and in one case a former pro-rector of a university. An underlying driver of the study, at this very early phase of data gathering, was the very large discrepancy between the numbers of male and female professors in both the Danish and New Zealand university systems. The last significant statistical stock take from the Danish Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation put the percentage of women professors at 14.1%, as opposed to the male cohort of 85.9% (Ministeriet for Videnskab Teknologi og Udvikling 2009). Likewise, the New Zealand Census of Women's Participation released in 2012 reported 17.22% women were at professorial level compared to the 82.78% apportioned to their male colleagues in the New Zealand tertiary system (Human Rights Commission 2012: 137). This statistical imbalance set the context for the direction the data gathering would take, and shaped the kinds of questions that would be asked.

Each participant had been emailed in advance with a broad agenda and outline of what the interviews would consist of, and the way the interview would take the form of a semi-structured conversation that would traverse professional and personal elements that the participant considered important to the trajectory of their academic career. The interview structure and timetable had been planned collaboratively with a more senior colleague. Some of the interviews were conducted together and I conducted some on my own, as was the case in this particular interview. By the time I reached the participant who is the motivating force behind this paper I had interviewed 18 women in their offices at the place of their employment for roughly two hours each. Each interview had followed the same course whereby I introduced myself and proceeded to read the significant milestones of each participant's career. The performative element of relaying each woman's curriculum vitae had produced an interesting and very stimulating start to the interviews. This would initiate an in



depth discussion of the various challenges and obstacles faced by each participant in their working lives, and for the purposes of the overall structure of the interview, also provided an important ‘warming up’ phase that made the transition into the part of the interview that dealt with the personal lives of the women outside of academia, much easier to make. All the women up to this point had spoken with openness about their personal circumstances at home, whether they were mothers or wives, their domestic arrangements with their partners, and the support (or lack thereof) from their families and those closest to them. Most significantly to the purpose of this paper, all had made a tacit connection between their personal circumstances and how these had affected in positive and negative ways, their academic careers. With growing confidence in my own abilities to extract information and interview effectively, I was beginning to form a picture about how I could analyse and interpret the data I was gathering and the links I thought I could make that would be significant to the telling of the broader story about how women negotiated the academic sphere.

This particular interviewee was especially interesting to me because I was a great admirer of her work and was eager to spend time in conversation with her. The interview started in the same way as the preceding interviews with a recitation of the curriculum vitae. This prompted, as it had with the previous participants, an in-depth and considered narrative of the career steps that had been taken by this participant. She was immediately engaging and humorous, relaying with passion and verve the various obstacles, challenges, and victories that were encountered from her experience as a PhD student, then as an emerging academic, and finally in her role as professor. Not once was there reference to her private life, a difference from the other participants who all wove in the narrative of their personal circumstances or context at certain points during this first phase of the interview. Now more aware of the rhythms and pace of interviewing, I sensed it was time to make the transition into the next phase of the interview which dealt with the personal dimension and I communicated this intention to the participant. There was silence, for at least 30 seconds, and then the participant hooted with laughter. I laughed too, it was a hard not to. What was said next was the interview equivalent of Katniss’ stunt with the arrow:

*I don't think I want to answer that ... But I can tell you why, and that is because it's such a traditional way of looking upon other people. Did you see, no of course you didn't, every time there's a mention of people who have done something in the newspaper, you will get in the story, 'Oh they're married to that person, they've got two children, one boy, one girl, blah, blah, blah, blah'. The whole heteronormative matrix is being pulled out all the time on people to explain them. And I don't really recognise that kind of explanation ... I don't want to be explained in terms of the heterosexual matrix ... I don't want to be understood within those premises.*

These words, this response, said with humour, grace, and not an ounce of accusation in tone or intent, stopped me dead in my tracks and have given me pause for reflection many times since this interview. The arrow this participant shot was into my own increasing confidence and sureness that these women, in some important ways, could explain their success in academia through a narrative linked to their private lives. More importantly, the arrow shattered my own positioning that was implicitly enacted throughout all the interview processes in that even with a methodology I thought would be nuanced enough to cope with the complexities of gendered career success, I realised I was viewing this tool through my own set of normativities associated with the categories I thought were important in understanding career progression. Drawing on Butler's queer theory (Butler 1990), this participant had made me question not her particular sexual orientation as may be expected in the general use of the term, but the way I had delineated significant narrative points in a binary relationship that was defined inside the private realm, and outside in the professional realm. The participant had also pointed out the tendency to view expectations about identity formation in the academy through a normalised heteronormative matrix in which 'institutionalized heterosexuality constitutes the standard for legitimate and prescriptive sociosexual arrangement' (Ingraham 1994: 204).

This paper explores the implications of what this participant was most adamant about, that she would not be explained and understood through these traditional lenses. Her 'story' of how she read, negotiated, and navigated her academic trajectory would have

to be explored otherwise and the methodology with which I interpreted this story would need careful consideration. The implications for staying true to the integrity of this participant's story signalled a wider concern for the stories of all the participants and the necessity to view their career trajectories as involving many different, multifaceted and intersecting forces and categories that coalesced through temporal, performative, and discursive practices and contexts in ways that were not determined or defined within a conventional framework of interpretation. The participant's hesitation to comply with my request to discuss personal circumstances and biography precipitated a reappraisal of the implicit taken-for-granted constitutive patterns or forces that delineate and define a heteronormative grid of interpretation ingrained with its own set of traditional and clichéd meanings and constructions of gender. The questioning of this frame of reference by the participant was not only about sexuality, but implicated a broader questioning of the links I was making between particular ways of organising private life and particular kinds of career trajectories, that was also relevant to the reading of the other participants' career trajectories and the wider methodological scope of the project. However, it is at this point that I leave this participant behind, and instead pick up the arrow to look further at the methodological implications with which it took aim.

## **Picking Up the Arrow: Intersectionality**

*The key thing, as Nietzsche said, is thinkers are always, so to speak, shooting arrows into the air, and other thinkers pick them up and shoot them in another direction (Deleuze 1995: 118).*

This statement from Deleuze when talking of the Nietzschean-inspired rhizomatic quality of thinking and researching is utilized in this section to explore the recalibrations I decided to undertake when considering the methodological framework with which I would be analysing the data I collected from the interviewing process. Returning to the metaphor of the shooting arrow, I was looking for a conceptual lens that would cope with the many different 'lines of flight' of the various discursive

threads, their interactions, cross-overs, and repetitions in the play of forces at work in women's academic career trajectories. Even before the disruption explained above, I had been looking at the literature on the concept of intersectionality as the 'focus on complex relations between multiple groups not only within but across identities and analytic categories' (Connell 2012: 1675). First articulated as a defined concept of analysis in the context of the marginalisation and positioning of black women in critical race theory (Crenshaw 1991a, 1991b), intersectionality offered a framework of analysis that considered the complex ways different sociocultural categories such as the family, class, ethnicity, gender, religious affiliation, and nationality, intersect and mutually construct each other (Collins 1998). For instance when talking of the idea of the traditional family as the exemplary locus of intersecting categories, Collins looks at the way 'certain ideas and practices surface repeatedly across multiple systems of oppression and serve as focal points or privileged social locations for these intersecting systems' (1998: 63). While the intersections between the categories of white male, heterosexual, father, would be explained by Collins as an exemplary formation of intersecting categories that optimise power and social agility, the categories of black, woman, poor, mother, could create a site of compounded deprivation and oppression. Intersectionality provides a lens with which to view the way certain social categories, utilised by Collins originally in the context of black women in the United States, are positioned in such a way as to distinguish 'insiders from outsiders' (Collins 1998: 69). People with certain social categories are imbued with privileges other people miss out on, and are framed and defined as either troublesome or non-troublesome.

This immediately raised questions for my use of intersectionality. What would be the 'exemplary' intersection of categories for success in academia for women? The preconceptions exposed by the participant displaced what I subconsciously valued as important: that is, the private circumstances of women, and the way they organised their domestic circumstances to maximise their professional lives. Following Collins however, what would be the exemplary intersections of categories in academia that would frame subjects as troublesome and therefore marginalised? My participant had refused to be explained or understood within the heterosexual matrix that permeates

so much of the social codes and modes for interacting with others. Would she have been framed as troublesome in her professional life because of this personal stance, and if so, how had she negotiated the categories and their intersections that crossed her subjective positionings in academia in ways that enabled career progression? These were questions that emerged as important once I had interviewed this participant, and precipitated a harder look at the conceptual boundaries that constituted intersectionality as a methodological tool.

An important consideration to take into account is the way the interweaving categories that constitute the concept of intersectionality are not only non-mutually exclusive, but cannot be understood in isolation from each other (Staunæs and Søndergaard 2011). These interrelated dimensions are often couched in metaphorical language in the literature to explain the intersecting nature of different sociocultural categories and Staunæs and Søndergaard go on to identify some common descriptors such as “weaving”, “entangling”, “interplay”, “tinting”, “toning”, “imbuing”, “interlocking” (2011: 45). As a method to examine complexity and differentiation in a narrative context, intersectionality provided a potentially productive conceptual lens with which to view the kaleidoscopic realities of my participants. However, I was clearly highlighting certain categories over others, in this case the narrative linkages between the private lives of women academics and their public professional lives. Added to this, as gauged from the disruption precipitated by my participant, I was also privileging the past life experiences of my participants as a significant tool with which to interpret their present circumstances; a narrative stance that was also mirrored in the way most participants spoke about their own career trajectories. Privileging certain categories over others is not in itself necessarily problematic. However as Donna Haraway explains in an interview, ‘It matters which categories you use to think other categories with ... you turn up the volume in some categories, and down on others’ (cited in Søndergaard 2005a: 298). I had ‘turned up the volume’ perhaps a little too much on narrative and teleology, and now needed to recalibrate this stance with a more refined approach that did not privilege these categories as the strongest dimensions of ‘tinting’ or ‘toning’ of other potential categories and their interplay with each other. The statements, ‘I don’t want to be understood within those

premises’, and ‘I don’t want to be explained in terms of the heterosexual matrix’ haunted and displaced my desire to neatly join a private narrative to a public site of interaction and negotiation that marked the site of the professional lives of my participants.

As Søndergaard (2005a: 310) cautions, ‘it seems very appropriate to be sceptical about a biographical quest for stable, personality structures and unambiguous trajectories of experience’ in academia, simply because there are so many interrelated and context specific forces at play that are constantly recalibrating, reshaping and destabilising ‘multifaceted links of synthesis’ that unfold in a subject’s experience of relating and working with other subjects and multifarious discourses and forces. The contingency of each interrelated and intersecting category, for instance, ‘white’, ‘middleclass’, ‘woman’, ‘middle aged’, do not guarantee stable and conforming behaviour patterns and career trajectories for the women participants in this study, even though most of the participants could be categorised in these ways. Søndergaard (2005a) further identifies various interacting forces that are also in play, such as contradictory disciplinary discourses, contradicting political discourses, gendered codes that shape performance, and biographical trajectories of experience, all of which spontaneously intersect, intertwine, and collide with the parallel processes of other individuals. The participant in the research project who refused my invitation to ‘explain’ herself through her personal biography outside of academia was simply highlighting the nuanced complexity with which I was to view personal narrative and its interaction and intersections with so many other threads of discourse and potential categories.

Within the field of gender studies and specifically as a methodological approach, there has been a move to retool and refine intersectionality as a major paradigm of research. For instance, McCall identifies the biggest challenge to the concept as the need to overcome disciplinary boundaries in order to embrace the multiple approaches to the study of intersectionality in ways that handle complexity, yet manage complexity enough to be intelligible (McCall 2005). Resonating with my growing awareness of the complexities of my own research study, McCall’s call is particularly relevant. The

strength of intersectionality, in that so many different forces can be included in the study, is also a weakness and potentially a major pitfall in my own application of this approach to the study of women in academia. Davis (2008) also explores the strengths and weaknesses of intersectionality as multiple identities and experiences of exclusion and subordination, and like McCall, looks at the way the open-ended ambiguities involved in intersecting categories can be a major strength in feminist theory. However, Connell draws attention to the traditional categorising of intersectionality as consisting of race, gender, class, and the limitations of these discourses as discreet categories that no longer have stable meanings in local and global contexts (Connell 2012). A key approach taken by Søndergaard explores a related argument, wherein the categories of race, gender, and class are interpreted as cumulatively oppressive, thus enabling ‘a far too stereotyped and deterministic analysis of the sociocultural processes and the persons subjectified through them’ (2005b: 192).

As a further modification, Staunæs (2003) explores the need to highlight the subjectification processes that occur when the overall categories intersect with the lived experiences of the subjects. Staunæs identifies the temporal dimension of the constituting processes of the subject that make way for the emergence of new subjectivities. Staunæs explains further, ‘To grasp the unexpected, the difference, the ruptures, the ambivalence in subject positions and the components that are part of these processes is to make discursive room of the becoming of new subjects, new subjectivities’ (Staunæs 2003: 109). When considering the participants in the research project I was involved in, the positioning of women in academia as ‘troublesome’ or marginalised was also unsettling from my position as the researcher. As mentioned above, each woman was in some kind of managerial position and therefore each one of my participants could be classified as ‘successful’ to certain extents. In the context of my research project, I was interested in the framing of women academics as the ‘other within’, as Blackmore (2010) describes, or as troublesome and problematic within the site of academia. Had my participants experienced marginalisation within their academic lives because of their gender, as explored by Søndergaard (2001)?

Staunæs and Søndergaard (2011) emphasise a further adjustment to the classical

concept of intersectionality espoused by Collins (1998) and Crenshaw (1991a, 1991b), amongst others, by highlighting the productive dimension of power in a Foucauldian sense, rather than simply classifying power as oppressive. Recalling Collins's notion of 'exemplary' intersecting of categories that serve to marginalise certain groups over others, Staunæs and Søndergaard call for further exploration into the 'productive place for the emergence of (not only oppression but also) new possibilities of identity and agency' (2011: 53). Importantly for where I planned to next shoot the arrow, the site of intersectionality as a spatial and temporal 'disorderly space of emergence' offered a vital and vibrant dimension, which I could utilise to consider the women in my research differently. This site is explained by Staunæs and Søndergaard as 'an ambivalent place also endowed with emancipatory potential' (2011: 53). They explain further that the site of intersectionality is

*A place for the development of strategies (not only of subjugation but also) of resistance and transgressive subject positions ... but also places which appear to result in more comfortable subject positions which are amenable, easy, unproblematic and livable (Staunæs and Søndergaard 2011: 53).*

The notion of disorderly emergent spaces is the inspiration for the next section of the paper, which transplants the categories of intersecting discourse to the event of the interview process itself, and explores the impact of my own presence and participation in this context.

## **A Longer Bow: Intersecting Reflexivity**

*To speak the truth and to know well how to handle bow and arrow ... (Nietzsche 1969: 85).*

To return to the metaphor of the arrow, I now take the notion of intersectionality and 'shoot' it in another direction, and to do so I bring back my participant who initiated this redirection. Viewed as differentiated categorisations that intersect and thus position a subject, this section looks at intersectionality as a metaphor itself, in which



I explore the intersection of myself in the interview, intersecting with the temporality and event of the interview in interplay with the embodied dimension of interviewing the participant. In ethnographic research the self-conscious interplay between interviewer and interviewee refers to the notion of reflexivity and the way ‘race, nationality, gender, age and personal history of the fieldworker affect the process, interaction and emergent material’ (Okely and Callaway 1992: ix). To speak the truth, in the above quote from Nietzsche, in this case means to utilise a reflexive approach within the telling (and in this case, re-telling) of the disruption that took place in the interview, as a turning back on myself and process of self-reference to further analyse what happened (Davies 1999). The focus of this section of the paper is the role I played in the disruption, and the necessity to consider reflexively my position and the ‘self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious analytical scrutiny of the self as researcher’ (England 1994: 82). The above sections talk of needing to read differently the tendency to join private and public narratives in a cause and effect equation when interpreting my participants’ academic trajectories. The focus now turns to the interview and the way my position, my body, history, general department, cultural capital, and embodiment, are to be read in such a way that reveals the interview as a site of contestation in which intersecting and often contradictory effects and affects are at play as a tool to utilise in research.

I had a hunch from the beginning of the interview that this participant would possibly not follow the established routine the previous interviews had taken. All the interviews up to this point had unfolded in very similar ways. Whilst I recognised the importance of letting the interviewee take the lead in certain ways, I had been quite surprised at how fluidly the transitions between interview topics had been made in the previous interviews. Along with my co-researcher, I had worked and reworked potential leading questions and subject ‘hooks’ that I could utilise to turn the conversation to another direction or to a more detailed explication of the current topic. As a younger emerging academic, I was aware of the hierarchical position of the participants who were all significantly more experienced and established than me. Whilst certainly not intending to be ‘naval gazing’, which Okely (1992) identified as a common criticism of reflexivity in ethnographic research, I was particularly conscious

of my position as significantly lower in professional status than that of my interviewees. However, this participant utilised her superior status in a way that was quite different from the previous interviews. Rather than simply ignoring it politely, as had been the appropriate (and expected) stance of the other interviewees, this participant acknowledged it at the top of the interview and set the tone by telling me I was at the start of my career and this would be a learning event for me personally. In terms of being in control of the interview and steering the direction, this instantly framed the interview very differently in that to a certain extent, the interview context was about me, and my relationship to the information I would be given. This had the effect of twisting the previously very clearly defined roles between ‘interviewer’ and ‘informant’, to a position of co-construction and collaboration, where the ‘data’ I was collecting, ostensibly for objective purposes, was suddenly charged with personal meanings and implications.

Using the metaphor of intersectionality, the categorisations of younger academic, older academic, junior researcher, senior researcher, were intersecting in such a way as to deconstruct and even dissolve the clearly defined borders and power positions that up until this interview had not been played with. Not being personally imbricated in the emerging material in the previous interviews had preserved a stance of objectivity that enabled a clearer and less self-conscious transition to the personal and private narratives of the participants. The temporal unfolding of this interview was absorbing the subjective positions and categories to the extent that each intervention I made to consciously steer the interview in another direction sounded jarring and enforced. I did not get the feeling I was out of control, or the interview itself was out of control. Rather, it was simply that the interview was heading along its own course, with a flow and pacing of its own, and I had no choice but to run with it. On reflection, the interview itself was performing its own disruption to my previous experiences and preconceptions about the interviewing process. By the time I asked the participant about her personal circumstances, the ‘answer’ had already been performed within the performative perimeters of the interview. The temporal discontinuities initiated by my questions did not match the narrative of the interview; the interview as a performative event could not be explained or understood outside its

own temporal perimeters of existence. In an important way, the disruption that my participant performed by refusing to be explained within a heterosexual matrix of conformity had been interwoven into the interview as a disorderly space of emergence itself.

## **Tracing Lines: Complexity and Intersectionality**

This paper has concentrated on one participant, one event, and one interview at the beginning of a much larger project, in the context of disrupting easily assumed preconceptions around narrative, career trajectory, and research methodology and process. As a conceptual lens with which to analyse data, intersectionality has been explored as the initial methodological approach, then with the recalibrations that needed to take place to ensure certain categories were not privileged over others, and finally as a metaphor with which to view the intersecting and reflexive relationship between myself as an interviewer and the performative event of the interview process. Whilst the research project is in the very early stages it is in some ways fortuitous that such a disruption occurred at the beginning, if only to reinforce the knowledge that searching for meaning in the lives of my participants and the ways they have navigated the terrain of academia throughout time, requires of intersectionality as a methodological approach, a lens of analysis that is highly tuned to the nuances, discontinuities, and contradictions of the categories that intersect and crossover the lived realities of the participants. While it is very tempting to view the congruencies and similarities between participants as somehow deeply meaningful and significant, as a conceptual lens intersectionality provides the tools with which to deconstruct preconceptions and to dig deeper into the analysis in a way that should provide some interesting and innovative insights into the career trajectories of women in academia.

This raises the question of how the unsettling of heteronormativity, so effectively performed by the participant at the heart of this paper, suggests a reading of gendered career trajectories that can be constructed differently. While it is not possible to provide any definitive answers at this point in the project, I can signal a direction

initiated by the retooling of my use of intersectionality. Of particular interest is the facility intersectionality offers in teasing out and making visible the multifaceted discursive and performative movements and realities each woman negotiated. From here, the purpose would be to seek out and trace the constituting identity patterns and interacting movements among many more details in these women's lives that encompass, but are not limited to, past experiences, disciplinary contexts, and their performance of gendered roles and codes ascribed through, in, and by their academic contexts. Of importance is to look at how these different categories and forces intersect, interact and move at certain moments of these women's career trajectories in ways that shaped their academic subjectivities and created (or closed off) spaces for upwardly mobile career progression. Perhaps the most significant direction signalled in this paper is the methodological stance to seek out other patterns and intersecting lines that can be explored aside from conventional family-work relations and patterns that fit so neatly into the normative spaces delineated by a heteronormative matrix.

As I turned off my voice recorder and started to get ready to leave the office of the participant, she turned to me and said rather nonchalantly, 'Well, I shall tell you a few things' and proceeded to tell me some personal details outside of her life in academia. This interview was by far the most challenging of all the interviews to that point, but also from a personal view the most satisfying. I enjoyed the confronting nature of the interview and the way it had highlighted the need to be reflexive and self-aware of the interrelations between myself and my participants, and the probably novice tendency to want to draw simple links between meaning and action, personal narrative and public success. However, once I did have a few more pieces of information about the private life of my participant I could make no direct link between that and its relevance to how she had negotiated her career and reached the point she was at now. To return to the opening metaphor, the arrow had performed its job only too well.

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