



UNIVERSITÉ
DE GENÈVE

PRESS RELEASE

Geneva | 30 July 2020

Does the Queen Bee phenomenon still exist in Academia?

Fifteen years ago, a set of studies documented that female professors were more likely than their male counterparts to express stereotyped views of female PhD candidates and to describe themselves in stereotypically masculine terms. A team of scientists from the University of Geneva (UNIGE), Switzerland, and the University of Utrecht, the Netherlands, show that this phenomenon known as the Queen Bee (QB) phenomenon still exists. The results of their research, published in the *British Journal of Social Psychology*, show that advanced career female academics are more likely than their male counterparts to underestimate the career commitment of women at the beginning of their academic careers. At the same time, both male and female academics at advanced career stages describe themselves in more masculine terms than those at early career stages. The study points out that this phenomenon is the consequence of gender discrimination that continues to prevail in academia, as in many other professional settings.

Successful women in male-dominated contexts don't always support women in early career stages. An international team of scientists show that this phenomenon is linked to the difficulties they encounter in the workplace.

Reaching a fair representation of women in top level positions is a serious challenge for many organisations. It is often assumed that promoting some women into key positions will make it easier for other women to follow. But are successful women in male-dominated professions and organisations indeed ready to support women in early career stages? Although fictional, the 2006 comedy drama *The Devil Wears Prada* suggests the opposite. The female manager played by Meryl Streep turns out to be particularly harsh and demanding towards her female intern. "What could be seen as 'entertaining fiction' is actually uncomfortably close to reality in some organisations" says Klea Faniko, senior research and lecturer at the Social Psychology Department from the UNIGE's Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences (FPSE), who co-authored the research with Naomi Ellemers and Belle Derks from Utrecht University.

The three researchers have examined the mechanisms that lead women in senior positions to underestimate the abilities and dedication of women at early career stages, in this way – sometimes unwittingly - putting up obstacles for other women aiming to climb the organisational ladder. These negative reactions of senior women toward junior women are labelled as the Queen Bee reactions.

Does the Queen Bee phenomenon still exist in academia?

The QB phenomenon was first documented in academia in 2004, and was interpreted as a phenomenon characterizing a generation of women who constituted a small minority among academic faculty. Since then, several actions have been undertaken by different institutions to promote women's careers in academia and increase female representation, including at the highest job levels. The share of female students graduating from universities now exceeds that of male students and women pursuing an academic career are not as exceptional as used to be the case for prior generations of female professors, many of which went through the experience of being the first woman ever having reached a faculty position in their field.

At the same time, there also is reason to believe that, despite the increased presence of women in the workplace including academia, stereotypes about women in science persist and impede their career progress. In fact, many women in academia still suffer sexism and negative career experiences that might trigger QB responses.

Following up on the #MeToo movement, several reports have recently noted that ongoing harassment and sexism in academia may discourage women from pursuing an academic career. Despite the larger influx of female students and junior academics, relevant statistics continue to indicate a so-called scissor effect between the genders with men outnumbering women in highest job positions.

The researchers show that the QB phenomenon is still visible: whereas female and male early career academics indicate similar levels of career commitment in their self-reports, female advanced career academics perceive female early career academics to be less dedicated to their career than men at early career stages. By contrast, male academics at advanced career stages do not perceive a difference between the career commitment of men and women at early career stages. Further, women at advanced career stages are more inclined to describe themselves as non-prototypical group members (i.e., in masculine terms) than do women at early career stages.

“These results suggest that the organization equates masculinity with career success, implicitly communicating that -like men- women can only be successful when they present themselves as stereotypically masculine. However, in the case of women this also implies that they self-describe as non-prototypical group members”, says Klea Faniko.

Why does the Queen Bee phenomenon occur?

“Our research shows that the response pattern seen to characterise the ‘Queen Bee’ is not to be attributed to ‘the way some women are’ or how they typically interact with each-other at work. Instead, research reveals that factors in the organisational context and more



© Jacques Erard / UNIGE

Institutions must reward more heterogeneous models of success, so that emphasizing masculine qualities and distancing from one's group will no longer be a road to success, says UNIGE researcher Klea Faniko.

High resolution pictures

specifically the exposure to gender stereotypical expectations, negative career experiences, and lack of organisational support contribute to the maintenance of the QB phenomenon”, explains Klea Faniko. For example, QB responses were found mostly among women holding senior positions, who showed low gender identification at the beginning of their career and had experienced gender discrimination as their career advanced. Such responses only become visible at senior career stages, and are related to the negative experiences, namely sacrifices they had made in different domains or the lack of support encountered by women during the course of their career.

Lessons for the future

It conveys that efforts to increase diversity at academic institutions should not just focus on increasing the numbers of women (or other minorities), but aim to make these institutions more inclusive by rewarding more heterogeneous models of success, so that emphasizing masculine qualities and distancing from one’s group is no longer the royal road to success.

contact

Klea Faniko

Senior Lecturer
Social Psychology Department
Faculty of Psychology and
Educational Sciences

+41 22 379 78 41
Klea.Faniko@unige.ch

DOI: [10.1111/bjso.12408](https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12408)

UNIVERSITÉ DE GENÈVE **Communication Department**

24 rue du Général-Dufour
CH-1211 Geneva 4

Tel. +41 22 379 77 17

media@unige.ch
www.unige.ch