



Women's networking in Spanish academia: a 'catch-all' strategy or strategic sisterhood?

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ABSTRACT

The relevance of networking in academia and the gendered dynamics involved are well established in the literature. The persistence of the old-boy network pushes academic women to rationalize whether or not to 'play the game' and under what terms. Inspired by Feminist Institutionalism, this article explores the schemas of interpretation which academic women rely on to find meaning and to guide day-to-day relational dynamics. Drawing on 40 in-depth interviews with women from different age-groups and disciplines, three distinct approaches to networking are revealed in Spanish academia: rejection, collaboration and strategic sisterhood. Rejection refers to the detachment from all network dynamics, collaboration to the 'catch-all' (though not exclusively) cross-gender network connections, and strategic sisterhood to an in-built women-only support system. The inbreeding university logic, crucial to understanding Spanish idiosyncrasies, emerges as a transversal dimension to further our understanding of how the institutional context influences women's strategic choices. The operationalization of academic merits and perceptions about the old-boys dynamics and female solidarity mark different ways of experiencing networking, while gender inequalities (partly) unify women's discourses. Controversies are raised about collaborative strategies, and particularly women-only networks, in helping women evolve as agents of change in academia.

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Introduction

Academic logics are complex, often unstated and characterized by gender, particularly by such 'male norms' that even apparently gender-neutral practices often produce gendered effects. Networking emerges as an important career strategy in academia, ex ante in boosting the accumulation of merits and ex post in the evaluation of merits per se. However, the gender dynamics involved tend to foster burgeoning inequalities. In her poem, *Grievance*, Dossor (1990) claims: '(t)he big boys are doing bad things in the room behind closed doors, and the clatter of their instruments is more terrifying for being unseen. Their laughter goes through us like a machine gun and it is all part of a - normal day's business' (Morley & Walsh, 1995, p. 192). The described androcentric atmosphere has been characterized as a gentlemen's club, boys' gang or men's room

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(Hearn, 1999), constituting the so-called old-boy network. This refers to ‘an “in-group” of scholars who claim to have access to everyone of significance in a particular area of research’ (O’Leary & Mitchell, 1990, p. 59). They exercise a remarkable influence on hindering women’s careers, which partly explains gender imbalances (Bagilhole & Goode, 2001; Caprile et al., 2012).

Women’s limited access to, or (auto)exclusion from powerful networks, mainly associated with homophily and work-family issues, pushes them to rationalize whether or not to ‘play the game’ and under what terms. A strategic alternative lies in the women-only networks (WONs), with transformative potential to secure gender equality and long-term organizational and societal change (Cockburn, 1991; Pini et al., 2004). Lipman-Blumen (1976) recognized an emerging ‘new-girl network’, analogous to the old-boys. Studying women’s networking gives insights into how the social structure of interactions provides a source of academic merits and can impact career strategies. Further, accepting that promotes a sense of collective identity and erodes male power (Bierema, 2005; Pini et al., 2004), it may foster changes in women’s status and enhance gender equality. Nowadays, some WONs are forums for developing informal groups, based on cooperation rather than on patron-client relations (Ibarra, 1993; O’Connor et al., 2019; Šadl, 2009). Others, which have received remarkably little attention, have a rather institutionalized character, crucial in mitigating the Queen-Bee-Syndrome (Villesèche & Josserand, 2015). Whilst allowing for partnerships and academic women’s prestige and visibility, previous studies have highlighted the relevance of cross-cultural differences in this collective strategy. Etzkowitz et al. (2000) found that women are loosely associated with rather large, interdepartmental networks in US universities. In French academia, Sabatier et al. (2006) concluded that women are required to demonstrate a higher involvement within networks in order to be promoted, than their male peers. Travers et al. (1997) also identified US women as instrumentalists, UK women as developers and Spanish women as socialites. While more research is needed in this area, by placing the importance on social aspects rather than on career contacts, Spanish women seem less likely to take advantage of available networks.

WONs’ controversial character has been partially discussed. The formula fails to solve tensions between individual and collective interests, does not challenge male domination (Bierema, 2005) and may lead to women’s assimilation into the existing patriarchal support system. Mimicking men’s successful formula and ‘playing the game’ will not favour gender equality (Burkinshaw & White, 2019; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2011). By contrast, WONs are also seen as an emancipatory, consciousness-raising, collective strategy to challenge the gender order (Benschop, 2009) and promote universities’ strategic goals (O’Neil et al., 2011). However, women’s reluctance to be involved and establish their own groups, which is partly explained by cultural conventions that act as individual gendered prescribers (Bagilhole & Goode, 2001; Greguletz et al., 2018), may ultimately diminish their strategic potential. Furthermore, academic women are rarely gatekeepers of finances, scientific ideas and reputations. Opportunities to counteract the homophilic and multipurpose power of the old-boy network and select the *heritiers* are limited (Pini et al., 2004). Accordingly, increasing network awareness, gender-neutral networking opportunities, organized mentoring and formalized programmes to target

and connect women to influential leaders are increasingly requested initiatives (Zdroik & Babiak, 2017).

Hidden sex-discrimination, (in)formal networks and WONs have been under-studied in Spanish academia. Research has focused on the power of family networks to distribute professorships amongst relatives and friends (Nieto, 1984), concluding that women's support (e.g. obtained through endogamic marriages) does not counteract men's ingrained advantage (García de León & García de Cortázar, 2001). Male interests tend to be reproduced in a myriad of subtle ways, such as the boys-exclusive 'gastronomic routes', a phenomenon consisting of an all-male group habitually organizing culinary events at which the attendance of women was strictly prohibited (Vázquez-Cupeiro & Elston, 2006). Overall, the study of network experiences has been women-centred, but WONs' potential to 'fit in' or to challenge the academic gender order (Vázquez-Cupeiro, 2006; Torrado, 2018) is under-researched. Further, this collective strategy has neither been explored in relation to women's schemes of interpretation, nor to the institutionalised inbreeding logic.

Networking dynamics, which comprise the patriarchal protégé system and WONs, reveal the enactment of informal power in Spanish academia. The article focuses on strategic agency and the way in which academic women navigate through 'behind-the-scenes' politics. By identifying distinct approaches to networking, the empirical issue of interest is to show how women's schemes of interpretation guide their choices and lead them to choose certain strategies over others. Feminist Institutionalism (FI) provides insights concerning how (in)formal rules shape gendered academic life, while interlacing women's agency and the institutional inbreeding-logic. Spanish idiosyncrasies are detailed below to disclose how micropolitical practices, specifically networking dynamics and academic inbreeding, are inscribed in an institutional logic, assessing merit-based appointments and, ultimately, hindering gender equality.

In-house logics and (gendered) ceremonies of public consecration in Spanish universities

While academics encounter similar obstacles across national contexts, the need to account for national idiosyncrasies to further understand gender (in)equality has been acknowledged (Acker, 1992). Spain is, in terms of gender parity, among the top ten most advanced countries. Yet, despite some progress, institutional inertia continues to hamper academic women's careers and, for more than a decade, women only represent 16% of rectors, 21% of professors and 25% of top rank researchers (Puy, 2018). Collegiality is the main characteristic of this university system (Montes & O'Connor, 2018). The governing body, headed by a rector, defines the staffing policy and the general criteria to evaluate applications for academic positions. Universities have a relatively large degree of academic and financial autonomy, but they do not legislate on job descriptions, salaries and working conditions. The 2001 University Organic Law, reformed in 2007, changed the procedures for appointments. They take place when a department council successfully puts a case to the university for a new position. The vacancy is announced publicly, open to both internal and external candidates, and the department itself is responsible for selecting the members of the committee that will evaluate the applications.

The definition and assessment of the academic merits comprises *de jure* scientific elements, universalistic and legally recognised, and *de facto* particularistic and often unwritten procedures. Besides providing means for career progression, network dynamics are fundamental in defining and assessing scientific excellence (Heffernan, 2020). These dynamics are strengthened by the Spanish ‘endogamia universitaria’, usually translated as ‘academic inbreeding’, which involves the power of inner male-dominant tribes in selecting new members (Vázquez-Cupeiro, 2006). Networks have long been dominated by an internal market, organized around clientelistic networks that usually favour the ‘house’ candidate (Mora, 2001). In contrast to Anglo-Saxon countries, there is a longstanding unofficial convention, according to which each new member of a department is regularly drawn from the local dominant clan (Montes & O’Connor, 2018). Most departments lack a clear tenure track record, reinforcing the so-called ‘insider kingdoms’ (Vázquez-Cupeiro & Elston, 2006) and often transforming the processes of appointment and promotion into mere ‘ceremonies of public consecration’ (Nieto, 1984).

Until the early 1980 s, there was a relatively overt avoidance of universalistic and gender-neutral rules. To improve merit-based assessments, and overcome the challenges associated with its long-standing inbreeding nature and absence of academic mobility, various systems have been put in place in less than two decades (Sanz-Menéndez & Cruz-Castro, 2019). This includes a system of national accreditations. More recently, to increase academic competition, Catalan and Madrid universities backed initiatives to promote temporary intra-national mobility to attract non-local candidates (e.g. the Echegaray Programme). These initiatives are not without controversy. Few candidatures are put forward for positions in other universities and if they are, then tensions emerge due to the departmental tacit ‘system of (*insider*) turns’. There is also something picaresque about academics’ exchanges between intra-city universities to meet the requirements to apply for a position. Overall, the male-dominated in-house (local) logic often leads to gendered ceremonies of consecration (Vázquez-Cupeiro, 2006; Nieto, 1984), warranting the pertinence to study women’s networking dynamics. As shown below, the organizational culture is at the heart of the theoretical framework, constituting the basis for understanding how women’s perceptions of an institutional context marked by an inbreeding-logic mediate their networking approaches.

Feminist institutionalism and academic micropolitics

FI illuminates the analytical approach (Krook & Mackay, 2011; Mackay et al., 2010). Building on the work of Acker (1992) and Connell (2002), this perspective provides insights on persistent gender inequalities in organizations. By focusing on structural aspects, the context and the continuum between formal norms and informal dynamics, the essence of academic life can be captured. This approach sheds light on how women’s strategic choices are informed by their perceptions of the context. Gendered processes, enacted through interactions between academics, are interlinked with veiled inequities and the micropolitics of the academic world. Micropolitics refers to the use of formal and informal actions, by individuals and groups, to achieve their goals. Morley (1999) argues that micropolitics is about ‘influence, networks, coalitions, political and personal

strategies to effect or resist change. It involves rumour, gossip, sarcasm, humour, denial, “throwaway-remarks”, alliance-building’ (pp. 4–5). O’Connor et al. (2017) identified three gendered micropolitical practices in academia: masculinist, relational dynamics (e.g. sponsorship) and ‘local-fit’, referring to academic inbreeding. All determinant in hindering women’s careers and often facilitating men’s professional advancement (Montes & O’Connor, 2018).

Informal politics are presented as reinforcing the gender status quo and dynamiting any attempt at change (Waylen, 2014). FI recognizes the gendered dynamic relationship between structure and agency (Krook & Mackay, 2011), and therefore, recognizes women’s voices in accepting or resisting network dynamics. The approach acknowledges that unofficial politics operate as gendered processes and are well-suited to exploring gendered strategic actions (Mackay et al., 2010). Strategies range from individual to collective solutions for career progression. While some have a limited scope, the spectrum is broader. The (in)formal protégée system, and specifically WONS, are understood as strategic responses to navigate academia. This analytical approach prioritizes the examination of women’s career strategies and, in line with Parsons and Priola (2013), their potential implications (e.g. strategies can either lead to the reproduction of power or to organizational change).

Career strategies refer to the ways in which academics adapt, assimilate and/or resist actions or failures to act. Understood as volatile and changeable, actions are shaped by social and institutional contexts, and by how the context is internalized, perceived and interpreted (Benschop, 2009). Perceptions and choice of action could be uncovered through frame analysis, a type of discourse analysis that complements FI. The ‘gendered frames of meaning’ are, according to Erikson (2019), adequate analytical tools in exploring the way in which women’s perceptions of the institutional context help understand their choice of strategies. Women’s strategies are also mediated by the perception of their own and other academics’ responses, and situations can often be framed in different, even contradictory, ways. Consequently, it may be difficult to identify the frame that underpins a particular position, and one set of actions could be consistent with different frames. Furthermore, uncovering frames is always conducted from within a particular frame and, as they have normative implications, a certain type of solution (and no other) is called for (Goffman, 1974; Schon & Rein, 1994). Acknowledging the difficulties that arise when attempting to recognize and reconstruct frames, and the complex equilibrium between them, the article disentangles complex and heterogeneous responses which resist and incorporate dominant discourses. Inspired by FI, the schemes of interpretation which academic women rely on to find meaning and to respond to gendered network dynamics are the analytical tools to, ultimately, enlighten their strategic approaches across age-groups and academic fields.

Revisiting the data

This exploratory study builds upon data obtained from in-depth interviews in two cross-national research projects, developed in Spain and England. The first, held in 2005, studied academic informal support systems and the second, conducted in 2018–2019, focused on parenthood and career trajectories across generations in academia. Though

the focus was not exactly the same in both studies, additional questions were asked in the second, so all interviewees were questioned about networking dynamics, old-boys-networks and WONs. This methodological strategy, adopted in previous research (Šadl, 2009), enables an examination of networking dynamics in subsequent time periods. For the purposes of this article, only 40 interviews with Spanish women (23 from the first study and 17 from the second study) were considered.

The participants, different in both pools of data, were recruited from the web pages of three Spanish public universities, located in the city of Madrid. The rationale was to select top institutions, with major research activity and at the forefront of gender equality initiatives. The sampling was purposive, and different age groups/generations and academic fields were selected. Acknowledging intersecting systems of inequality, age illustrates heterogeneity across different cohorts of women to further understand the chosen relational strategies. The mid-forties were considered a crucial range in terms of differentiating between senior and junior generations in tenured positions (Professor-top A and Assistant Professor-entry). Two academic fields, engineering (masculinized) and psychology (feminized), are understood as microcosms with their own habitus – the Bourdieusian concept that refers to a system of shared perspectives, norms, strategies and practices – and gender systems. This involves a distinct division of labour, ideology(ies) about sexual behaviour and character, and a set of practices and constructed notions with regard to masculinity and femininity. The particularities of both fields help to understand why certain relational strategies may be chosen over others.

Besides providing a larger and richer sample, using two sets of data in different time periods gives an insight into prevailing and emergent approaches. In relation to the rationale behind revisiting the data, social scientists use their own experience to examine and interpret intellectual work (Mills, 1959/2000). While maintaining the relevance of the original analysis, the previous reading is one of many that could have been chosen (Andrews, 2013). As a result of professional and personal experiences, the opportunity to revisit data from earlier research offers a new perspective, bringing about the redefinition of our own interpretation frameworks.

Gaining access to the interviewees was difficult, particularly in the second study, due to the time pressures in neoliberal academia, and because of the nature of the topic. Academics were not always keen to divulge ‘taken-for-granted’ practices which may conflict with the alleged gender-neutral meritocratic logics (Vázquez-Cupeiro, 2006). Senior generations also tended to distance themselves from the subject matter due to the lack of additional career aspirations. Their testimonies rely on their (selective) memories, on what they wanted to remember or tell, and what they chose not to remember or reveal. This can be also stated for junior generations. The data were undoubtedly influenced by the politics behind the research process. The interviewer was a woman (the author of the article), and the interviewees may have given more socially desirable answers if the interview had been conducted by a man. They were asked for permission to record the interview which lasted between 60–90 minutes, and reassured about the confidentiality of their responses.

Manual analysis involved reviewing the interview transcripts and extrapolating categories from the identified codes. To capture the sense of contextuality, the frames of meaning were connected both with the variables used for the sample selection (age and field) and with emerging themes, such as the operationalization of academic merits, perceptions about networking dynamics, gender equality and female solidarity. The way

in which the repertoire of responses was perceived by other interviewees was also observed. Women's schemes of interpretation were compared and three core networking approaches discerned: rejection from all-network dynamics, cross-gender (though not exclusively) network collaboration ('catch-all') and sisterhood to an in-built feminist support system. Several interview extracts, translated from Spanish, offer a flavour of the empirical basis of the constructed categories. FI inspires the all-encompassing approach – particularly useful to illuminate how women's strategies are framed by an inbreeding-logic and the informal network-dynamics which shape academic life.

Detached from network dynamics: the rejection of WONs

The profile of this group of interviewees is restricted, though not exclusively, to senior female Professors in engineering (nine in my sample). Their approach is to work as hard as possible to match male achievements. This is in line with previous studies which conclude that individualist strategies are likely to be adopted by women working in masculine environments (Parsons & Priola, 2013). They are committed to 'fit in' by adopting the academic habitus as a means of progressing (Burkinshaw & White, 2019) and to avoid being seen as a threat. They claim to be aware of how power operates but present themselves as unwilling (more than unable) to engage in academic politics. This tactic provokes a certain tension between submitting to the dominant academic logic and being independent agents who remain consciously detached from a protégée system which they hardly acknowledge or underestimate.

The rejection strategy leads them to be detached from networking. Most interviewees in the first study neither considered WONs an alternative to the old-boy network, nor showed any enthusiasm to join them to further their own career progression. The second study reveals a surprisingly slow pattern of change considering the long tradition of WONs in science and engineering. The stagnation of the approach over time may be partially explained by the inbreeding system where male-dominating dynamics are often further reproduced (Lovakov et al., 2019). They distance themselves from feminist institutionalized initiatives (associations, forums, etc.) and downplay informal WONs to counter male-networks, on the basis of three arguments: meritocracy rules academia and women do not face discrimination; WONs amount to 'radical feminist lobbies'; and involve women's self-segregation.

Here there are very few women's networks. Now there is one relating to women and science, but they have not achieved much . . . I have been in touch with one but sometimes think that it is a kind of illusion. I don't know, to continue to segregate women and men, do you understand? I'm not sure if we are self-marginalizing ourselves with this type of thing. I'm not sure if I agree, I mean, if it is a good idea to create isolated groups to make demands . . . maybe they are not necessary and what is needed is to get away from the women's networks and compete for posts and secure them. In fact, I do not have great confidence in WONs (2SPE:24).

This approach corroborates previous research which concludes that WONs are discriminatory, anti-ethical, divisive and contradictory (Pini et al., 2004). By non-spontaneously emulating the old-boy network, WONs create servilities and ultimately engender female gatekeepers. They may also involve demands for positive

discrimination, which they reject as unnecessary. Overall, being involved in WONs is viewed as a pointless and futile strategy.

The schema of interpretation behind this strategy is underpinned by a neoliberal discourse, based on the conviction that individual capacities rule academia. It revolves around a male view of the phenomenon, legitimating the ‘naturally-built’ sponsor-system and ignoring the existence of gendered biased practices. The discourse is reminiscent of the *Queen-Bees*, women who have achieved professional success but fail to support other women. It rejects ‘sisterhood’ and distrusts gender equality initiatives, including a parallel women’s buddy system’.

Three practical consequences of this individualist approach can be identified. Firstly, they draw on the dominant institutional ethos, but rejecting networks locate themselves as outsiders of the local order. Secondly, by being isolated, they position themselves far from academic power. Thirdly, by dismissing gendered academic politics, over which FI has provided important insight, they perpetuate/legitimize the old-boy network (Bierema, 2005), and are deterred from joining WONs. Overall, the rejection approach has a limited scope and it seems destined to remain non-dominant in an increasingly globalised academia.

Collaboration with (fe)male peers: ‘catch-all’ strategy

This approach predominantly, but not exclusively, comprises junior academics in engineering (15 in my sample, of which five work in the area of psychology). They aim to be part of the system rather than turning it upside-down. Under this umbrella or ‘catch-all’ strategy, they seek proactive collaboration with male and/or female colleagues. Two different strategic actions can, however, be identified. The first, more relevant in the first study, is perpetuated by those rejecting any type of sisterhood adscription and formal self-help women’s fraternities, which are perceived as self-discriminatory. They are prone to draw upon the old-boys’ local-network. However, invitations to be ‘one of the guys’ are agreed on the basis of homosocial relations, preventing many from joining male networks (Bagilhole & Goode, 2001). Furthermore, they may also be acquiring fewer advantages and less power to influence the trading of favours, insofar as relevant decisions are controlled by men and women’s status is often regarded as being ‘second-class’.

I have experienced it (exclusion from the old boys’ network). They are the great and the good, shameless with regard to putting friends forward ... until very recently, Spanish universities have been rather misogynistic. They have always preferred a man as a candidate instead of a woman ... there was something of a ‘shift’ and my turn came. There was a vacancy for a tenured position. (Name of consecrated academic) had already decided to give the post to someone else. This candidate was his friend but he did not have any training in psychology ... can you believe that they actually rejected me?” (1SPP:03).

The second strategy, with an apparent broader spectrum, increases in relevance over time. It is mainly articulated by junior women, inclined to be involved both in the male-protégé system and reporting occasional participation in formal and cross-disciplinary women’s associations, institutes, etc. While bonding amongst women used to be orientated to socializing (Travers et al., 1997), by focusing on professional counselling and building

up prestige and visibility, those prone to the ‘catch-all’ strategy adopt a rather ‘masculine approach’. In a context in which networks are of increasing relevance, this collaborative cross-gender formula is seen as pragmatic to compensate for their status quo.

If you can network and do it successfully, it really does help. In fact, I got the job here in that way . . . it is about informal networking and it is extremely important to have contacts within the department, within the faculty and within the discipline . . . to have a ‘policy’, I mean, to value time and effort correctly. The more contacts you have, men and women, the better off you are to be able to compete (2JLE:31).

This ‘catch-all’ stance is, however, limited. While in Anglo-Saxon countries the protégé system is more formally based (Caprile et al., 2012), the inbreeding logic tends to reward long-lasting (strong) relations. Both strategies, however, legitimize the informal-local reward discourse, implying that scientific merits are not sufficient to guarantee a successful career. The scheme of interpretation revolves around the controversial belief that informal politics relate to power and relationships, as underlined by FI, but no longer to gender. Besides the lack of role models and the long-standing labour-division characteristics of Mediterranean countries (Caprile et al., 2012), the old-boys invoke gendered power dynamics. However, for most interviewees prone to be part of them, they do not necessarily exclude women. The main difference between the two collaborative actions lies in their approach to WONs. While the former strategy seamlessly rejects them, the latter reveals a more ambivalent vision. Both recognize that relevant decisions continue to be controlled by men, but they are more inclined to ‘fit in’ their dominant groups than be part of WONs. This is partially due to their limited diversity and lack of power (Pini et al., 2004), the latter being particularly relevant within the local Spanish system, and the fact that the members are mostly junior academics. Overall, they agree upon the persistence of inequalities and the relevance of the sponsorship system, but positive-action initiatives in Spanish academia are often mistrusted.

Various practical consequences of engaging in a ‘catch-all’ strategy can be identified. Firstly, by engaging in male clubs and having reservations (even a reluctance) to participate in WONs, they embrace the dominant local order and reject promises of sisterhood. Secondly, by participating in the exclusive circle of power, they enjoy a privileged position (in comparison to other women) though not always elevated to the same status as their male-peers. Thirdly, paradoxically, and as founded in US universities (Etzkowitz et al., 2000), those engaging with men and women acquire more but probably less influential contacts, and with differential levels of effectiveness, than women only engaging in male-networks.

Refusal to play the male game: strategic sisterhood?

This approach is referred to by senior and junior academics mainly in the field of psychology (16 in my sample, of which three are engineers). The strategy promotes sisterhood to an in-built support system, rejecting any pressure to be part of the male dominant order. They defend the necessity to endorse and be actively involved in exclusive (though not exclusively) formal and institutionalized WONs. These are presented as a strategy of survival and defiance, to counteract the gendered habitus and the

local old-boy academic network. In line with Parsons and Priola (2013), they believe that WONs can contribute to the creation of critical awareness and motivate institutional change. Some go further and, by comparison to the collaborative strategy advocates, encourage others 'to change the rules of the game' by adopting positive discriminatory actions based on sisterhood.

I believe that one of the responsibilities of those that have been lucky enough to reach the top is to instigate change among current preconceptions and, of course, help women to become professors. I applied for a professorship not too long ago ... [In the panel there was] a woman that I did not know at all. I could tell immediately that there was a rapport between us, from her smile. I did well but essentially, there was a gender harmony. I think these processes should be conducted under conditions of equality, and if this is not the case, I would be prepared to do so! We have to help each other. Seriously, I do not say that I am going to support a woman applying for promotion if she is not as good as the other applicants. But all being equal, even if she had one or two fewer qualifications, I would definitely support her (1SPP:12).

They aim to break the mould, albeit in a quixotic manner, as many have recognized they see themselves largely 'tilting at windmills'. WONs are seen as 'artificially' created tools to establish support amongst and for discriminated-against women. By comparison with the 'catch-all' strategy, they use bonding amongst women both for professional sponsorship and to share personal experiences and develop friendships, although they are aware of the limitations: *[W]omen's networks are much harder to set up and cultivate than men's, especially if you are in a field that is very specialized, very male-dominated and benefits are also dissimilar* (1SPE:08). This is related to women's particular dependence upon networks outside their own institutions (O'Leary & Mitchell, 1990) and with an interdisciplinary character. In contrast to previous research (Ng & Hau-siu Chow, 2009), they do not necessarily seek to be part of mix-gender networks but changes emerge over time. The most recent interviews with junior academics reveal an increasing involvement in online women-networks. According to the literature (Donelan et al., 2009; Knouse & Webb, 2001), some interviewees consider this an alternative with potential to get ahead of long-established local gatekeepers, counter women's exclusion (not self-exclusion) from informal networks and operate as pressure groups campaigning around gender equality.

This discourse is passionate and subversive. Gender is a uniting factor confronting locally based informal networks in neoliberal academia. Most interviewees label themselves as feminists and, informed by FI framework, highlight the meso and macro level (lack of conciliation policies, gender stereotypes, etc.) influence on their frames of meaning which guide their actions. The strategy of the *Queen-Bees* is perceived to work against all women, but they also reject intermediate solutions. They state that only a parallel 'women-buddy' system can provide a sense of collective identity (Pini et al., 2004) to erode male power (Bierema, 2005), while constituting a crucial source to further women's trajectories.

The discourse has evolved and become more heterogeneous. Two sub-discourses can be identified when comparing both sets of data. For some, WONs are adequate and necessary organizations, working towards gender equality both at an individual and an institutional level. Others, mainly junior academics, also with a strong feminist identity, are increasingly 'disenchanted' with institutionalized WONs.

I have seen practices that I do not like amongst those who are part of the hard-core of power in the Feminist Research Institute, both senior and junior members. They hide relevant information and benefit more than others from financial resources, publication opportunities, prestigious courses . . . the ‘sisters’ criticize the male system, but they end up replicating the same procedures, reproducing servilities . . . and everyone remains silent! If you talk, you become a nuisance and, at best, they ignore your requests . . . it’s very frustrating (2JLP:33).

Amorós (2011) suggests that Spanish women have had hardly any time to conform to the practices of power. Yet several interviewees (mainly but not exclusively junior) vehemently question malpractices within WONs. They acknowledge that the incorporation of hegemonic discourses can be problematic and that women may be marginalized within their ‘own’ spaces. This corroborates previous studies (Thomas & Davies, 2005) but not recent research (O’Connor et al., 2019), therefore, it may be rather specific to the Spanish setting. Formal and institutionalized WONs are however presented as the best possible strategy in a globalized academia in which it is not pragmatic to remain isolated.

This approach also faces many challenges. WONs often imply more ‘work’ than ‘net’ (Schor, 1998). These women deliberately position themselves as outsiders by rejecting male-relational dynamics and becoming part of a parallel ‘new-girl’ system. The complexity also relies on avoiding mimicking the men’s formula. Rather than playing the ‘male game’, the gender practices involved in the construction of academic excellence need to be turned around (Van den Brink & Benschop, 2011). Thus, not only must more women in powerful positions become involved in WONs, but the tension between feminist values and the incorporation of co-opting dominant practices must be solved. Furthermore, while strategic sisterhood implies the kinship of being sisters, sorority is a collective response which does not necessarily challenge male domination (Handler, 1995). Overall, they highlight the need to be critical of current women’s support-systems (Torrado, 2018), but also acknowledge the demand to reflect on renewed models of long-term political cooperation, which evidences women’s diversity.

Summary and conclusions

Women’s networking strategies are framed by the schemes of interpretation – relating to the operationalization of academic merits, and perceptions of the old-boys dynamics and female solidarity– on which they rely. The analysis offers an insight into further understanding country-specific cultural barriers to women’s career trajectories. Overall, individual approaches are mostly congruent with the cultural processes favoured by Spanish universities, which continue to be mediated by micropolitical practices, such as the inbreeding logic and the need to cultivate local connections. The FI framework sheds light on the continuum between the formal structure and informal relational dynamics, which entrench the inbreeding culture and legitimize gender imbalances. While family networks seem to be losing power in Spain, long-lasting gendered relationships continue to be fostered. WONs are unlikely to be institutionalized and based on equal partnership cooperation. Therefore, neither women’s informal networking limitations nor the Queen-Bee-Syndrome are likely to be mitigated (Villesèche & Josserand, 2015). WONs continue to be mainly interdisciplinary and interinstitutional (Caprile et al., 2012). By contrast to previous studies, utilitarian connections increase relevance over socializing (Travers et al., 1997). However, using networks instrumentally, as an arena for self-

projection, and being involved in the old-boy network, does not necessarily lead, mainly junior, Spanish women to achieve the same outcomes as their male-peers. Certain strategies have been revealed to be more effective than others. WONs' rejection is a rather dead-end strategy in an increasingly marketised and globalised academia. Strategic sisterhood to an in-built women-only support system raises controversies and challenges, some partially explained by the inbreeding logic. Renewed long-term cooperation schemes have, however, the potential to back up women's trajectories. The 'catch-all' strategy, which implies collaboration and combining social and utilitarian approaches (Ibarra, 1993), emerges as the most beneficial for the interviewees' career progression.

Commonalities such as the impact of hostile organizational cultures on gender equality (Morley, 1999) are nuanced when age groups and academic fields are considered. Senior academics, many feminists and *Queen-Bees* rarely view mix-gender collaboration as the best possible option. However, the former agree that strategic sisterhood enhances women's careers. In contrast, many reject the long-term promises of sisterhood, by showing reluctance to participate in WONs and refraining even less from engaging in male-dominated networks. This 'catch-all' strategy has an apparently (considering the unknown strength of the ties) broader scope. The analysis only partially confirms that women are becoming increasingly strategic and aware of networking throughout their careers (Zdroik & Babiak, 2017). There is no agreement with the conclusions of Burkinshaw and White (2019) because the majority of senior academics, *Queen-Bees* and many feminists challenge masculine networks rather than try to 'fit in', a persistent tendency over time. Furthermore, while feminists acknowledge their network's expansion as their career progresses, junior academics seem more aware than their senior peers, particularly in the second study, of the need to have a long-term networking strategy. However, as previously found (Bagilhole & White, 2013), the approaches of the new generations of women are not always acceptable to the older generations. The diversity across and within generations, marked by the organizational setting and wider social context, demonstrates the benefits of examining intersecting inequalities to challenge age-group homogeneity and over-generalizations of women's accounts. The complex avenues that bridge discourses and strategic actions across the two contrasting academic fields are also relevant and persistent over time. Many engineers hardly perceive a potential conflict between meritocracy and the sponsorship system, discounting the relevance of the latter and the potential difficulties faced by the younger generations. Psychologists acknowledge the significance of the protégé system and the male dominance within it. Although further research is required, the paper reveals the importance of considering the inner dynamics of power, status and labour organization across disciplines, to understand how gender inequalities are reproduced.

The study has revealed controversies in relation to the nature and limitations of WONs. This collaborative strategy is far from being an agreed-upon alternative to help women's careers. Constrained by institutional logics and gendered perceptions, women are either prone to adapt to or to challenge the dominant dynamics. WONs can be seen as an adaptive strategy, not necessarily exclusive, but with a limited capacity for change. The old-boy network is difficult to dismantle and (fe)male defenders of the status quo can rarely be displaced (Parsons & Priola, 2013). WONs have, however, a transformative potential at an institutional level, even with varied effectiveness across opportunity settings (e.g. in terms of the visibility of gender segregation or improving universities'

performance indicators), while being a valuable strategy for wider society. In contrast to previous research (Travers et al., 1997), the interviewees' understanding of networking goes beyond a mere social activity. WONs benefit career development and secure gender equality awareness. By this rationale, and according to Cockburn (1991) conceptualization of women's networks, WONs are viewed by feminists as a required strategy and a relevant source of resistance that constitute a means, rather than an end, to achieve a long-term transformation. Thus, in parallel to changes in the structure and culture of Spanish universities, and whilst avoiding essentializing them, articulating WONs as a political and strategic holistic response may help women raise awareness and ultimately, paraphrasing Morley and Walsh (1995), evolve as agents of change in academia.

Various limitations need to be acknowledged. Considering their intersecting nature (Schon & Rein, 1994), it has been a challenge to separate women's strategies and the discourses on which they base their practices. The schemes of interpretation seem to frame actions, but the narratives uncover how apparently contradictory discourses stand on similar strategies and, conversely, how conflicting responses are founded on similar perceptions. Relational networks are of crucial significance for career advancement; however, as previously stated (Zdroik & Babiak, 2017), discourses and strategies are full of nuances, underlining women's heterogeneity in the Spanish setting. By adopting a feminist approach to interpret women's frames of meaning, the analysis embraces the claim of FI to focus on unequal power relations and explore strategies to help women evolve as agents of change in academia, contributing to develop a critical sociology of education.

Further research should address how relational networks, and particularly WONs, impact women's trajectories. Comprehensive longitudinal and generational approaches, which will also help to overcome the potential bias associated with the retrospective nature of certain interviews in this study, could be adopted. Future research should include other accounts to fully comprehend the phenomenon (e.g. women in part-time positions and male academics). The dissatisfaction of women (rather than 'deficits') in networking practices should be explored. Analysis must investigate how sorority members experience sisterhood, WONs potential replication of exclusionary dynamics (Villesèche & Josserand, 2015) and the broader diversity that characterizes relational networks beyond the old-boy network and WONs. Online networking for career purposes, which timidly surfaced in this analysis, is the subject of a future study and will consider its gendered effects across opportunity settings. In *Three Guineas*, women are requested to reflect: 'For we have to ask ourselves, here and now, do we wish to join that procession, or don't we? On what terms shall we join that procession? Above all, where is it leading us, the procession of educated men?' (Wolf, 1938, p. 59). Given the current context of transformation in Spanish academia, it seems crucial to tackle its organizational structure and for academic women to ask themselves where to go and under what conditions.

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