

# Knowledge hustlers: Gendered micro-politics and networking in UK universities

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This article explores the role of gendered academic networks in the context of research evaluation, and women's lived experiences of UK universities. Gendered power is conceptualised as an important aspect of inequality regimes, providing insight into how men maintain power and how power dynamics and informal networks function, characterised in this article as 'the hustle'. A case study comprising 80 in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews was completed in a UK university. Acker's theory of inequality regimes informed the central analytical framework, and Bradley's resource-based theory of power was used to explore the power dynamics in the case study. The findings have resulted in the creation of a conceptual framework which theorises the hybridised nature of inequality, gendered power and organisational lived experience, in which inequality regimes and gendered power interact and are mutually reinforced through informal processes. This article argues, from the findings of the empirical research, that in the context of the neoliberal university, inequality regimes and gendered power interact, and are mutually reinforced through informal processes and networks—'the hustle'.

**Keywords:** gender; knowledge hustle; networks; research evaluation

## Introduction

This article explores the role of gendered micro-politics and informal networks, which are deemed to be integral to gender inequality (Morley, 2005a; Thomas & Davies, 2002; Van Den Brink *et al.*, 2010) and the proliferation of individual (gendered) self-interest in organisations. In-depth interviews with 80 female academics across all academic grades in one case study university explore gendered micro-politics in the context of research evaluation, the relationship between academic networks, relationships *within* these networks and, ultimately, women's navigation of these. Critical insight from participants' quotations demonstrates how the effects and demands of research evaluation interact with organisational-level inequality regimes to contribute to ongoing vertical gender segregation, and ultimately the marginalisation of women. 'The hustle' is proposed as a fundamental mode of navigation of gendered informal networks and micro-politics in the neoliberal university.

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This research presents a new framework for the understanding and analysis of gender and power in contemporary organisations, helping to expose inequality and gendered power interactions in the neoliberal university.

It is argued from the findings that women are forced to engage in what is known as the ‘knowledge hustle’, or simply ‘hustle’—defined here as a mode of survival in gendered organisations that involves navigating and understanding formal and informal practices and networks. In a context of gender inequality and vertical gender segregation that is heavily reliant on networks, the hustle serves as a means by which to develop power and voice in the neoliberal university. The hustle draws influence from the notion of strategy as hustle (Bhidé, 1986), whereby individuals ‘play each hand as it is dealt and quickly vary tactics to suit conditions’ (p. 62), a characteristic which is crucial when both formal and informal rules surrounding research evaluation are continually changing. Chappell and Waylen (2013) point out that understanding the ‘rules of the game’ is crucial to influencing organisational political life and outcomes (p. 599). The notion of the hustle was a key recurrent theme in the findings of the research, whereby the navigation of informal networks in the academy by participants was found to be integral, in part because of deeply ingrained gendered perceptions of merit (Krefting, 2003) and the finding that informal practices, rather than explicit discrimination, legitimise and further entrench existing inequalities through the undermining of formal policies and practices which are in place.

Building on and extending Acker’s (2006) and Bradley’s (1999) theorising on gender in the workplace, this study enhances current understandings of the concepts of gendered organisations, inequality regimes and gendered politics, through mobilising women’s lived experience of ‘the hustle’ in universities.

## **Background**

Gender bias and sexism are still everyday features of our society, and gender bias is an ongoing issue in UK universities. After more than two decades, exercises such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and, formerly, Research Assessment Exercises (RAEs) have become critical for assessing the research outputs (i.e. quality and quantity) of individual academics, departments and universities in the UK. In turn, such exercises impact the day-to-day working lives of academics, as well as their career trajectories (Willmott, 1995; Henkel, 1999; Knights and Richards, 2003; Davies *et al.*, 2020). There is a consistent and widespread lack of women in the upper echelons of the academy, and only around 23% of professors are female (Fletcher, 2007; Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2015). Women have long been, and continue to be, under-represented not only in the professoriate but also in senior academic management and full-time academic positions in British universities (Bett, 1999; ECU, 2015a; HEFCE, 2015; UCU, 2016). In REF 2014, 154 higher education institutions made submissions to 36 units of assessment, yet women are still proportionately less likely to be submitted for research evaluation exercises than their male counterparts. This occurs both nationally—where 67% of men are selected vs. 51% of women—and in the case study university, where only around 30% of staff submitted were women (confidential REF submissions data from HR department of the case university). Although nationally the proportion of women submitted has

increased (from 48%) in RAE 2008 (HEFCE, 2015), women continue to be under-represented in many aspects of research and evaluation, such as in impact case studies (Davies *et al.*, 2020). This article contributes to current understandings of the linkages between organisational hierarchy, inequality regimes and power play, where the latter refers to informal power games such as gendered informal networks, homo-social reproduction (Kanter, 1977) and homophily (Ibarra, 1993) in higher education.

### **Universities as gendered contexts**

Gender inequality remains one of the most pressing issues in the neoliberal university today, despite initiatives such as Athena SWAN, a UK gender equality representation and progress charter to ‘encourage and recognise commitment to advancing the careers of women’. This initially only focused on STEMM subjects, but has now been extended to the humanities and social sciences (ECU, 2015a). Women are still, both in universities and in the wider UK job market, less likely to earn the highest salary grade than men, and there is still a considerable gender pay gap (UCU, 2016). Furthermore, the most recent ECU equality in HE statistical report (ECU, 2015a) has revealed the current status of women more generally in the academy: in 2013/14, 62.7% of professional and support staff were women. In contrast, the majority of academic staff were men (55.4%).

Currently in UK universities, there is an average gender pay gap of around £528 million per year (UCU, 2016); the total salary spend on female academics is also £1.3 billion less than it is on male academics. Furthermore, at 154 higher education institutions women are on average paid less than men, and at only eight institutions are women paid equal to or more than men (UCU, 2016). It is evident that, across the sector, not only are women under-represented in full-time academic roles and in the professoriate, but they are also disproportionately over-represented in part-time and administrative roles, and so the gender gap in research positions remains an ongoing issue of significant concern. Most recently, Davies *et al.* (2020), in their study of research evaluation and the impact agenda, showed that gendered bureaucracies are still widespread and deeply engrained in higher education (p. 15).

The notion of gendered power (Bradley, 1999) is a phenomenon endemic in gendered organisations such as universities. Power has been outlined by Bradley as ‘the capacity to control patterns of social interaction’, which she categorises into nine main facets, referring to gendered power as ‘the capacity of one sex to control the behaviour of the other’ (Bradley, 1999, p. 33). Bradley advocates an approach which encompasses both individual and institutional assertions and understandings of power, and her theory of resource-based power is important as it allows insight into its variations ‘by showing how women and men have control of and access to different forms of power resource, and to differing amounts of each resource at different times. Thus, we can grasp power relations as complex and fluid’ (Bradley, 1999, p. 32). The statistics indicate that women hold less power in key strategic decision-making positions and fewer positions of power within universities; they also point to the ongoing undermining of women and gender equity policies in UK universities (Huppatz *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, Deem (1998, 2009) argues that because the management of universities is still male dominated, this further deepens both gendered power

relations and the (gendered) organisational cultures in universities, placing further restraints on women being a part of, and undertaking, academic management roles (Deem, 1998, p. 54) in the neoliberal university.

Empirical research in three UK universities has shown that increased managerialism co-occurs with an increasing amount of regulation and monitoring both of universities and of individual academics through a broad range of mechanisms, ‘including league tables, teaching quality audits, research assessment exercises (RAE), line management and appraisal’ (Thomas and Davies, 2002, p. 375). Research also shows that this changing context is also considerably affecting the organisation of the general requirements of work, which is highly focused on output, and driving the increasing requirement for academics and universities to demonstrate value for money (Neyland, 2007) for example. Deem introduces a gender perspective to the current context of UK universities, whereby she argues ‘the gendering of organisational cultures in universities by the wide permeation of masculine values, beliefs and practices, and the retention of some traditional views about the roles of women and the maintenance of highly unequal male/female power relations’ (Deem, 1998, p. 49). As the management of universities is still male dominated, this further deepens both gendered power relations and (gendered) organisational cultures in universities.

#### *Recruitment, selection and associated micro-politics*

The concept of gendered micro-politics is often presented in the extant literature in relation to gendered networks (Fletcher *et al.*, 2007; Van Den Brink and Benschop, 2012), as are the gendered implications of national research evaluation (most notably the RAE and increasingly now also the REF) (Fletcher, 2007; Shaw & Cassell, 2007; Deem *et al.*, 2009; Doherty & Manfredi, 2010; Hicks & Katz, 2011; Davies *et al.*, 2016). Gendered micro-politics, however, is an integral concept to ‘the hustle’ due to the ongoing and prevalent ‘notions of leadership, superiority, and academic excellence which continue to be characterized as masculine’ in the academy (Morley, 2001, p. 229).

Recruitment and selection from gendered networks are rife in the academy, and contribute to the ongoing marginalisation of female academics (Barrett and Barrett, 2011; Aiston and Jung, 2015; Davies *et al.*, 2016). Micro-politics play a role not only in research evaluation, but also in academic recruitment, selection and promotions, academic organising (Benschop and Brouns, 2003; Krefting, 2003) and networking (Benschop, 2009). Van Den Brink *et al.* (2010, p. 1463) argue that gendered practices in recruitment and selection are both political and technical exercises that involve multiple stages of negotiations. In their later work, Van Den Brink and Benschop (2012, p. 507) found that in the Dutch context of recruiting professors, informal networks and their effects often result not only in hindrances for women, but also—critically—privileges for men, which come together and further intensify, thereby producing extensive (gendered) inequalities in the construction and perception of excellence.

Social interactions play an integral role in academic recruitment and selection in academia as a political arena where informal practices of gendered micro-politics serve to: ‘dominate and detract from, distort, or even hijack attempts to introduce

gender equality practices' (Van Den Brink *et al.*, 2010, p. 1479). Furthermore, Morley (2005a, p. 15) argues that quality audits in higher education are rife with 'micro-political interference'. It was found in Morley's study, as well as within this research, that micro-politics undermines and subverts the process of recruitment and selection, as well as the associated policies that may be in place in an organisation (Morley, 2001, 2003), thereby bringing to the fore the role of informal networks, in particular those of organisational leaders such as heads of department or research deans, identified in this article as key figures in 'the hustle'. It is nonetheless important to consider that networking is indeed presented as an extremely important, valuable and actively encouraged endeavour, in which all academics are keenly encouraged to engage, by universities themselves, funding bodies, as well as gender equality initiatives such as Athena SWAN. This article acknowledges this, but seeks to cast light on the ways in which informal networks subvert formal practices and policies, and serve to further perpetuate gendered privilege and, in turn, gender inequality. Furthermore, much empirical research demonstrates that despite the positive aspects associated with networks for women, networks 'continue to advantage men on average more than women' (Bird, 2011, p. 204).

The problematic nature of informal networks cannot be downplayed. As a concrete example, informal elements of recruitment and selection are deeply imbued with issues not only around perceived fairness and equality but also, according to Acker (2006, p. 450): 'hiring through social networks is one of the ways in which gender and racial inequalities are maintained in organizations'. Furthermore, Van Den Brink and Benschop (2012, p. 507) found in the Dutch context of recruiting professors that informal networks and their effects often result not only in hindrances for women, but also—critically—privileges for men, which come together and further intensify, thereby producing extensive (gendered) inequalities in the construction and perception of excellence. Indeed, 'the analyses of processes in interpersonal networks provides the most fruitful micro-macro bridge. In one way or another, it is through these networks that small-scale interaction becomes translated into large-scale patterns' (Granovetter, 1973, p. 1360), thereby also highlighting the linkage between the hustle, informal networks and micro-politics as interrelated concepts.

Gendered micro-politics in the neoliberal university holds the potential to further negatively affect women's academic career development and lived experiences of academic organisational life. Thomas and Davies (2002, p. 375) suggest, based on their empirical research in three UK universities, that there has been an increasing amount of regulation and monitoring both of universities and of individual academics through a broad range of mechanisms, 'including league tables, teaching quality audits, research assessment exercises (RAE), line management and appraisal'. This changing context is also considerably affecting the organisation of the general requirements of work, which are highly focused on output and productivity.

Critically, it is evident from the findings, as well as from the extant body of literature and current national patterns (Doherty and Manfredi, 2006; ECU, 2015a, b; UCU, 2016), that women continue to be under-represented and suffer the effects of the gender pay gap. In terms of recruitment and selection processes, even where they may appear neutral, men and women actually experience these processes differently, and in fact there is an ongoing prevalence for informal recruitment (Halford and Leonard,



2001; Barrett and Barrett, 2011; Van Den Brink and Benschop, 2012; Aiston and Jung, 2015; Davies *et al.*, 2016). This is problematic because informal elements of recruitment and selection are deeply imbued with issues around perceived fairness and equality; also, according to Acker (2006, p. 450), ‘hiring through social networks is one of the ways in which gender and racial inequalities are maintained in organisations’, and it is here where the role of gendered micro-politics comes to the fore. There is much empirical evidence in the literature to suggest that informal practices continue to undermine formal recruitment and selection processes (Evans, 1995; Husu, 2000; Van den Brink *et al.*, 2010), and it is argued that processes of recruitment and selection are organisational activities where there is the greatest scope for particular individuals to subvert formal practices by practicing forms of ‘hustling’.

It is here where the crucial linkage between gender inequality, gendered micro-politics and the hustle can be made, in that it has been found that the aforementioned pressures which arise as a result of research evaluation, for example, are driving increasingly individualised ways of working, which are also related to notions of the unencumbered worker, who is disproportionately male (Huppatz *et al.*, 2019).

### **Recruitment and academic networking**

The existence of gendered patterns of recruitment, selection and hiring is a well-developed theme in the literature and it is evident, both empirically and theoretically, worldwide, even though many countries, including the UK, have legislation in place to combat gendered discrimination and gendered perceptions of hiring (Acker, 2006, p. 449). This is outlined in the Equality Act 2010, and in certain recruitment and selection guidelines and equality and diversity policies in UK universities, such as the ECU Gender Equality Charter Mark (ECU, 2016). Whilst there is legislation in place, there is much empirical evidence to suggest that informal practices persist (Evans, 1995; Husu, 2000; Van den Brink *et al.*, 2010) and contribute to ongoing issues surrounding transparency (Van den Brink *et al.*, 2010), exacerbated and enabled by gendered micro-politics and informal networks.

#### *Gendered academic networks*

Examples of networking practices identified most prominently in the literature, and in this research, include maintaining (useful) contacts, nurturing networks, socialising for mutual benefit, forming alliances, negotiating and sharing useful information, or withholding certain information (Van Den Brink and Benschop, 2012, p. 4). Networks form an integral part of academic life, but gendered networks undermine equality and diversity policies in universities.

Gendered micro-politics have been found in this study to be a way of forging important bonds that link the expression of gendered power, informal networks, organisational inequalities and women’s lived experiences of academia. The following quote demonstrates this, and 18 participants from a range of departments explicitly discussed this idea:

*You look at things like certain types of admin role where some of those very big jobs, like senior tutor type jobs, dealing with large pastoral type jobs, still tend to flow to women and they're very time consuming, but then I can think of men and women who've been treated very advantageously, let's say, and that's all about personal networks. (Key Respondent, Participant 41)*

Overarchingly, the literature identifies that networks play a role in supporting individual organisational power. This becomes increasingly pertinent when gendered norms in organisations are considered, as well as the interactions between individual and organisational structures (Acker, 1990).

### *Gendered informal networks*

How we think about what constitutes men's and women's work plays a fundamental role in the subordination of women both in the workplace and in wider society (Alveson and Due Billing, 2009, p. 49). It has been found in this research that negotiations play an important role in the allocation of workload, even where workload models are utilised, and that informal agreements and network hustling play an integral role in this. In an increasingly managerial context, which is reinforced by informal practices, the hustle is further necessitated because of ongoing vertical gender segregation.

### **Methodology – discovering women's experiences of the REF**

This exploratory empirical case study, made up of 80 qualitative life histories, led to interviews across the humanities and social sciences in an anonymous UK university. It adopted an interpretivist epistemology.

### *Sample and case study outline*

The purposive sample covered a range of female academics, from early career researchers to professors, and covered a range of ages and experiences, as well as key respondents who included heads of school, research directors and REF managers; notably, these were often male. The sample size of 80 participants, including key respondents, included around 40% of all the women in the faculty. Women from every academic grade and a wide age range (27 to 67), spanning early, mid and late career stages, were interviewed (though it is of note that career development was investigated across the grades, and was not solely age dependent). The broad range of ages and academic grades further added to the robustness of the empirical findings of this research and its wider generalisability.

The university in England where the research was conducted is one of the leading universities in the UK for research evaluation outcomes and is a member of the Russell Group; it is further notable that the gender pay gap is also around 16% larger (UCU, 2016) than at other institutions in the UK. Overall, there are vertical gender segregation issues in most of the departments of the case study university, as well as in its managerial positions. Women across the whole university are over-represented in administrative roles and are more likely to be on fixed-term contracts than men; these are also patterns which can be seen across the university sector in the UK. The

case university was chosen both because of its breadth of departments in the humanities and social sciences, as well as its status as clearly representative of a Russell Group university, both in terms of its distinguishing characteristics and the gender balance of its academic staff. The purposive sampling strategy that was employed alongside Yin's (2009) case study chain of evidence also ensured that the sample was representative in terms of department and faculty-level gender representation in both a structured and traceable manner.

Furthermore, the findings of this research have relevance to the international research community, where there has been a shift towards mobilising modes of research evaluation. Fletcher's (2007, p. 284) work also asserts that 'more rich data need to be gathered through more local studies and compared at national and international level to increase knowledge about barriers to equal opportunities for women academics in the research economy and the means to overcome such barriers'; a need to which this research contributes. There is scope for the findings of this study to inform both government and university research policies at the national and international level, in countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Portugal and Italy, all of which currently have formal exercises of research evaluation.

### *Mobilising a life-histories approach*

Given the aims of the study, a life-histories approach using semi-structured interviews was implemented, as this encouraged participants to look back over the course of their careers (Miller, 2000) and discuss how, or indeed whether, research evaluation had affected their careers and career trajectories. A life-histories approach aided the researcher in understanding how organisational careers are developed and maintained over time, which further fits with the research objectives of this study. The aim of this approach was to glean information on 'the entire biography of each respondent' (Bryman and Bell, 2007, p. 729). Maxwell and Miller (2008), however, argue that a distinction must be made between age and life-course effects, and that there are different experiences in different cohorts, meaning that experiences will be situated within a particular time frame and historical context, in this case REF 2014, although the findings are pertinent to research evaluation more broadly.

Universities are conceptualised here as organisations, as social constructs situated in a cultural, historical and ultimately gendered context. Overall, the rationale for using an exploratory case study approach was because this approach fits well with the aim of studying women's experiences in the context of the university, and for providing a wide range of insights into their situation structurally, strategically (through the key respondents) and experientially. Biographical data also served to further contextualise the findings of the interviews and provided scope for a secondary analysis of their career trajectories.

Empirical insight was sought into the potential effects of academics coming from legal practice to academia and their subsequent potential attitudes towards research evaluation. It was of note that in the law department, there were a significant number of academics coming from practice. There are substantial disciplinary differences between the humanities and social sciences and STEMM subjects, which are beyond the scope of this study.



Thematic analysis supported the clear and ordered categorisation of the data and ran alongside the initial first-level analysis, and also enabled the development and identification of themes closely linked to the facets of Acker's (2006) inequality regimes in its deductive codes, and the emergent themes in its inductive elements. This is also in line with the interpretivist epistemology which underpins this research. Elements of the coding framework were derived from the themes and key orienting concepts previously outlined, as well as aspects that emerged in the data during the transcriptions. Further deductive codes were derived from Acker's (2006) inequality regimes framework, Bradley's (1999) theoretical notion of power, and from notes that were taken during the first-level analysis which occurred during transcriptions. It is essential to theoretically link together this primary analytical framework by demonstrating that the coding framework is informed deductively by their key concepts. Furthermore, Boyatzis (1998, p. 1) argues that 'observation precedes understanding. Recognizing an important moment (seeing) precedes encoding it (seeing it as something), which in turn precedes interpretation'. [However, overall, the emphasis is 'on the flexible and pragmatic use of coding – the assumption that the frequency of a code in a particular text corresponds to its salience simply cannot be made' (King, 2004, as cited in Cassell and Symon, 2004, p. 256).]

NVivo was utilised in order to allow for categorisation of the data, as well as to run queries within the different departments' data sets; and it further supported the interpretation of findings in a systematic and theoretically underpinned manner.

## **Secondary data**

Access was also gained to confidential professorial review data, pay gap information and workforce diversity data, including gender statistics from the case university HR director. This allowed for further contextualisation of the findings from the main interviews and provided empirical insight into the organisational mechanisms of control and compliance and the processes that produce inequalities.

## **Limitations and reflections**

It is important in any research to acknowledge not only its strengths and contributions but also its limitations. The main limitation of this research is that it is based on one case study university, and so the extent to which generalisability can be claimed may potentially be reduced. However, this study has taken into account the voices of 80 women and key respondents across the humanities and social sciences in an anonymous, research-intensive case study university in England, which, it is argued, is representative of other universities in the UK, thus outweighing the potential limitations of the sample due to the richness of the responses. The case study approach allowed for a lot of detail to be collected to further contextualise interviews, including for policy documentation and REF dry run data to be obtained. It is also of note that, in contrast, the recent Stern Review of the REF 2014 (Stern, 2016) only included 40 interviews with a disparate range of academics, and also made only three somewhat ineffective comments on gender. Furthermore, anecdotally, whenever the author has presented this research at different universities, research directors have admitted that

the results are very similar to those at their own universities and that the recommendations and findings could benefit their institutions, thereby again demonstrating the wider generalisability of the research.

A notable aspect to consider, particularly within a gender study, is that some additional information may have been volunteered by the respondents because the interviewer was also female. However, the reflexive approach taken in this research has allowed for a deeper understanding of the importance of ethics in research, as well as the potential effects that very personal research questions may have on participants. The awareness of this in itself is a valuable and important aspect of gender research in management, and also negates any bias that may have arisen from researching other academics and from being an ‘insider’.

### **Findings and discussion: Gendered micro-politics and networks**

It has been found that there is a close relationship between gender, gendered power and micro-politics, and women’s lived experiences of research evaluation, all bound by the central role that (gendered) networks play in UK universities. The notion of gendered micro-politics is loosely entwined with gendered informal networks, which this study found to be integral not only to the culture of the case study university, but more widely in academia. In particular, the central role and prevalence of informal networks, interactions and practices—‘the knowledge hustle’—in academia is notable, and there is a large body of literature, both empirical and theoretical, which attests to this (Heward, 1996; McPherson *et al.*, 2001; Krefting, 2003; Bradley *et al.*, 2007; Fletcher, 2007; Roos, 2008; Van den Brink *et al.*, 2010; Woodward and Woodward, 2012; Savigny, 2014; Ang *et al.*, 2015; Berger *et al.*, 2015). It is also of note that Thanacoody *et al.* (2006), in their comparative study of female academics’ career progression in Australia and Mauritius, found that in both contexts women were habitually not only excluded from informal networks but also often ignored, and most problematically excluded ‘from having access to relevant information or decision-making networks within the organisation’ (p. 540). This is significant because the importance of inclusion in informal networks increases at the top of the hierarchy, where trust plays an important role, sometimes superseding performance (Thanacoody *et al.*, 2006).

#### *The importance of the hustle: Relationships in academia*

As we have seen, gendered micro-politics and gendered academic networks are prevalent and serve to uphold vertical gender segregation in the academy through informal networks. Informal networks play a dominant role in maintaining existing inequalities in organisations (Acker, 2006), with Morley (2005b) demonstrating that they reinforce and also further construct gendered power relations (p. 26) in the contemporary university context (Clarke and Knights, 2015; De Coster & Zanoni, 2018; Huppertz *et al.*, 2019).

The primary aim of networking relationships for some individuals is thus for career benefit. Increasingly, the importance of networking, for women in particular, has grown with the responsibility for their continuing employability, which, it is claimed,

has shifted from the organisation to the individual (Acker & Armenti, 2004; De Coster & Zanoni, 2018). This has been occurring alongside the individualisation of academic work, though the role and importance of being part of a wider network cannot be underestimated, as the following quote indicates:

*When you look at how people progress, I think that the expectations increase, the standard that's expected of you increases if you are coming from one of these disadvantaged groups and it becomes harder, and also, I think the Head of Department's support is important. And if the Head of Department is a white male, this would have an impact on who he supports, who he gets along well with, because we know that white men, there is something called homophily, so white men have better relationships with other white men, and so on. (Senior Lecturer, Participant 32)*

### *Promotions, recruitment and selection*

Having access to and insight into how the promotion processes may function outside the formal boundaries can be linked to the information which an individual may gain from informal networks, thus demonstrating the importance of networks for gaining inside knowledge into how processes 'really work' in practice, a key component of 'the hustle'. The conceptual framework developed in this article can cast light upon this common gap between policy and practice, thereby providing an organisation with insights into the tacit practices that undermine its formal processes. This may be evidenced by the experience of an early career researcher, who spoke about feeling isolated because of not understanding how promotion processes work in her department, and what role internal politics and informal practices play, as the following quote demonstrates:

*I got some good advice initially with regards to publishing and all that, and research, but then I think there was a sense of being isolated in some way, because I didn't have any research network, and I had to figure out most things by myself, and it took me a very long time to do that. And then the whole struggle of applying for promotion without getting it began, and me trying to figure out, you know, what really needs to be done, comparing it with the official advice I was getting, so this is when the whole entangling of politics started for me, but I never had a mentor or anyone who'd unpack that for me. (Lecturer, Participant 20)*

Moreover, the importance of networks for recruitment and selection overall was highlighted by a key respondent:

*I think networks are really important in general, so for example a lot of appointments that we've made in the last few years are people we've known and we think highly of and probably encouraged to apply and that kind of thing, and then I think that networks also help with promotion for things like, so when the university sends out to get references, if you're well known and if people like your work and all that kind of thing, and if you've reciprocated and given references, or given, supported another department in some way, then I think that that matters. (Key Respondent, Participant 80)*

Recruitment and selection processes were also found to be key factors in both the visibility and legitimacy of inequalities and their proliferation. The findings demonstrate that recruitment and selection processes, although highly formalised, bureaucratised and monitored for potential inequalities, are still decidedly opaque and open

to gaming and manipulation, thereby contributing to the inequalities highlighted by the study.

The following example clearly illustrates that there are strong linkages between the visibility of inequality, the transparency of processes and the presence of gendered elements in recruitment and selection:

*I don't think they are very transparent and they never have been. With the previous Head of Department, it was, no, they're not transparent and there's always been – it's quite remarkable, actually, how there's, you know, when the new Head of Department came and I was involved in his appointment, I thought things would change, and to begin with I think there was quite, sort of, open recruitment and selection processes, but you know, within a year there was a lack of transparency again, I don't know where people came from.*

*And so that manifested itself quite obviously, you know, and it's always been more manifest more recently, and it's always been men... because I was director of research, I was supposed to have quite a lot of involvement in all positions, and I was practically excluded. (Professor, Participant 28)*

Whilst vertical gender segregation is visible, and generally perceived, both institutionally and by individual academics, not to be legitimate, the informal aspects which contribute to vertical gender segregation are very much ingrained in the organisational culture overall.

#### *'Informalising' the formal: Workload allocation and the hustle*

It was found that the allocation and organisation of work through the use of workload models indicated that there is ongoing, informal decision-making surrounding the allocation of work, and that this has affected the adoption of workload models. Workload models were found to be implemented inconsistently, partially, or not at all in the different departments, creating a space for 'off-model' negotiations and opportunities to exploit gaps between formal policy and practice, thus serving as potentially fruitful arenas for 'the hustle'. Such non-uniform implementation may lead to the creation of different levels of inequality in different departments, thus demonstrating that women's lived experiences can vary significantly even within the same university. Whilst workload models may offer opportunities for the fair organisation of academic work, this was not evident in this study, in that the overarching feelings of the respondents surrounding the use of workload models expressed the concern that the models did not allow enough flexibility. In terms of formal application, the following quote demonstrates how the workload model is applied and also the belief in its equitable functioning:

*Very crude. Basically, we just apply a teaching hours metric, so everybody has the same allocation of academic advisees; everybody is expected to do the same number of teaching contact hours; and everybody is expected to do a certain amount of administration, be that committee service or exam board duties or whatever it may be; and everybody has the same marking load for exams, roughly speaking, as well. So, it's pretty egalitarian. (Key Respondent, Participant 44)*

Critically though, as evidenced by later quotes, informal negotiations appear to play a role in workload model-driven work allocation, potentially being a subversion

of formal practice, with the relationship with the heads of department playing an integral role, as the following quotes suggest:

*Workload helps a lot to ensure that everybody is doing similar amounts of research, but what happens generally is that there are negotiations going on afterwards and people may negotiate better deals after, kind of, the whole workload model is circulated and so on. So, it is still going on, but there are at least some safeguards.*

*I think the people who are closer to the Head of Department are generally, and I think the people who are closer, the sort of people who are closer to the Head of Department actually are male. (Senior Lecturer, Participant 31)*

*Research is not allocated, as we said, which is important because it's completely in our hands, and there, gender may play a role because if your workload is about your teaching and administration and these are the first things that you have to... in the first instance if this is what you have to do, you may leave your research behind. It would have been better if it was more clear for everybody and for women, especially when they are taking care of children, then you know, the research is in there in their workload and a part of what they have to do every week. (Senior Lecturer, Participant 38)*

The findings, however, indicated that there is still some informal decision-making surrounding the allocation and organisation of work through the use of workload models in some departments, and that this has affected their adoption, primarily because of notions about the autonomy of work and because of their perceived effects upon the flexibility of work.

However, in some cases, the application of a workload model that treats everyone the same might actually contribute to gender inequality, in that external circumstances are not accounted for; not only are workload models in this instance not used properly, but they embody gendered inequalities. The following two quotes are indicative of these issues:

*In terms of work, they're more likely to negotiate on the workload model, and it's a case... I mean, I do have a model in my head. So, I know how much teaching I would expect of somebody who's exclusive to teaching and how much I would expect of, you know, somebody who was doing teaching and research, and, you know, it is negotiated. It's negotiated at recruitment stage; it's negotiated through appraisal through the appraisal system. So, we do have mechanisms for negotiations, but I have an open-door policy as well, so people can negotiate with me, but I generally say, well, we have a process for that, so this is what I think you should do. (Research Director, Participant 70)*

A further example of perceptions of gendered approaches to negotiations is demonstrated in the following quote:

*My experience over the years is that men will go... and they will go and negotiate behind the scenes and say, 'I'll leave', and be really arrogant about it, whereas women are, you know, classic, you know? I'm sure you know more about this research than me, you know, classic research... don't put themselves forward, don't threaten to leave, don't go and say, I'm so valuable you've got to keep me. I didn't even know that's what you did. (Professor, Participant 51)*

This is indicative of the tensions between what is perceived to be fair and what may actually contribute to gender inequality in the university. The previous quote



demonstrates the assumption that because her 'door' is open to everyone, individuals will then come forward and negotiate. However, it has been found in other departments of the university that this may well be a gendered issue, and that some women are more reticent and, therefore, less likely to negotiate.

It is apparent that mechanisms such as workload models, which are in place to ensure a 'fair' workload as demonstrated in the previous quote, are however open to manipulation, gaming and negotiation and, therefore, by implication, provide fruitful opportunity for 'the hustle' and for inequitable outcomes. It is important to note here that the same allocation for everyone may appear egalitarian in the first instance, and indeed is perceived as so by the participant, but rather it is argued here from the wider findings. These indicate that the level of awareness of inequalities differed not only across departments, but also between individuals, and varied with the position/grade of the individual, and also how they applied workload models for example. Additionally, the seminal work of Acker (2006, p. 452) contends that the visibility of inequalities appeared to vary with the position of the individual, in that their personal circumstances and experiences of inequality shaped their views of inequality and its visibility. It is here that there are differences in people's lived experiences of organisational practices and processes, and scope for hustling.

Moreover, the application of a generic workload allocation metric, whilst initially appearing to be fair in formal terms, is informally gamed, as well as being implemented and applied differently across departments. Perceptions of the fairness of the workload model also therefore depend on how and by whom it is applied, and in turn, how an individual may be advantaged and benefit from its application, which is not only an opportunity for the 'hustle' to occur, but also thereby undermines its very purpose.

### **Theorisation of inequality and gendered power interactions**

Gendered power is conceptualised here as an important aspect of organisational inequalities, mobilised through gendered micro-politics (Bradley, 1999; Acker, 2006) contributing to, and developing, current understandings of the concepts of gendered organisations, inequality regimes and gendered politics. Gendered micro-politics are an expression of the hybridised nature of inequality, gendered power and organisational lived experience, which is demonstrated through the development of the theoretical framework in Figure 1.

This figure demonstrates the core theoretical contribution of this article: how inequality regimes and gendered power interact and are mutually reinforced through informal processes, providing a theoretical framework for application in a range of organisations where women are under-represented and/or marginalised. This opens up a contemporary theoretical space which is empirically grounded in the findings of this research, which can be used to aid organisations to understand and analyse how gendered power plays out in their organisation, casting light on informal practices and processes as accelerants of gender inequality.

The framework theorises and demonstrates how inequality regimes and gendered power interact and are mutually reinforced through informal processes. The framework also considers the internal and external contextual dynamics and outlines the

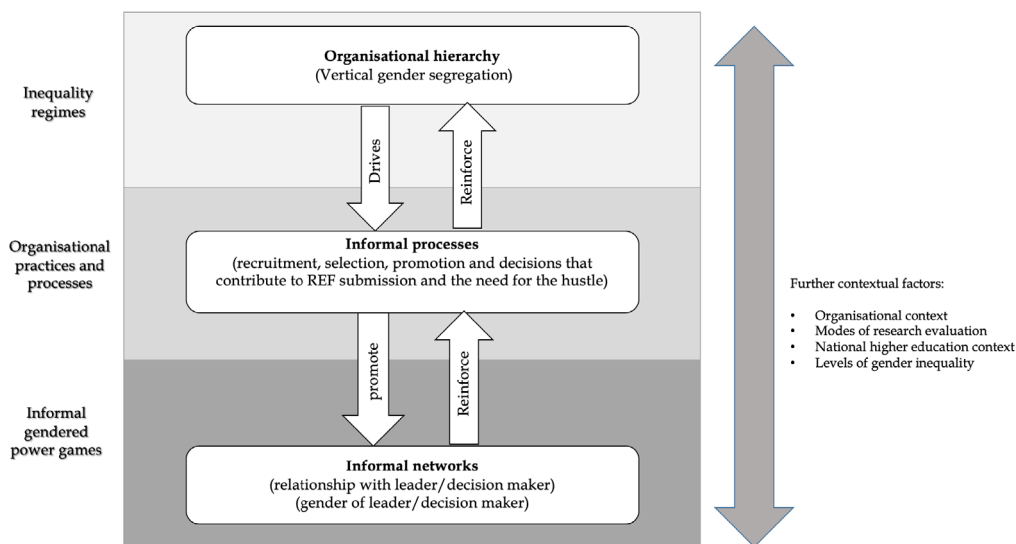


Figure 1. Framework of inequality and gendered power interactions [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

multifaceted nature of ‘the hustle’; hence it is not a singular or linear process. The usefulness of this theoretical contribution is made clear by the empirical findings which indicate that research evaluation in the UK actively contributes to the continuance of gender inequality regimes, and that gendered power dynamics are most commonly played out through informal practices and processes and gendered networking. This framework may also be practically applied in a variety of international and institutional contexts, in that it allows for different contextual factors to be analysed, such as modes of research evaluation and levels of gender inequality. The framework serves as a tool to enable organisations to better understand how men maintain power and how power dynamics affect organisational structures, and to recognise women’s lived experiences of inequality; this will in turn provide opportunities for them to make effective change. It is here where this article further contributes to international educational research and to contemporary debates surrounding new research evaluation.

In the current context of uncertainty around requirements and expectations for REF 2021, it is clear from the findings that the role of informal networks is a key and recurrent theme. Networking relationships may be defined as: ‘individuals’ attempts to develop and maintain relationships with others who have the potential to assist them in their work or career’ (Forret & Dougherty, 2004, p. 420); hence the primary aim of networking relationships for some individuals is for career benefit. Consequently, by implication, the gendered nature of micro-politics is amplified.

Bradley’s (1999) resource-based theory of power has allowed for the exposure of how the multiple facets of power contribute to, and structure, gender relations within organisations, and in turn how these influence the policies and practices of research evaluation and its surrounding practices. This article enhances current understanding of the linkages between organisational hierarchy, inequality regimes and power play,

where the latter refers to informal power games, such as gendered informal networks, homo-social reproduction (Kanter, 1977; De Coster & Zanoni, 2018) and homophily (Ibarra, 1993) in contemporary academia. It is by bringing together Bradley's (1999) theory of resource-based power with Acker's (2006) theory of inequality regimes that an improved understanding of the combined role of organisational hierarchy and gendered power in an academic context is enabled. Gendered micro-politics, informal networks (Ibarra, 1993) and power play interact and serve to maintain, reinforce and further entrench gender inequality in the academy. The theory that has been presented provides a practical tool for enhancing organisational understanding of how hierarchies, practices and processes drive and reinforce gender inequality in the academy today.

## Conclusions

Informal networks and gendered micro-politics are playing an increasingly important, pronounced and ongoing role in women's lived experiences not only of research evaluation but also of their academic careers. Oftentimes this has negative consequences for women's inclusion in REF and their experiences of recruitment, selection and promotion. This is evidently gendered because of women's ongoing disproportionate caring responsibilities and their experience of vertical gender segregation and gendered networks, all of which serve to perpetuate the status quo that supports the male unencumbered scholar, particularly in a context which values speed and quantity of publishing for the purposes of evaluation (Huppertz *et al.*, 2019, p. 14).

This research contributes to current understandings of the role of informal networks and inequality regimes in theorising the mobilisation of gendered power within organisational inequality regimes through informal networks, otherwise known as 'the hustle'.

The central contribution to the extant literature is to advance current theoretical understandings of how inequality regimes and gendered power interact and are mutually reinforced through informal processes, thereby demonstrating how men maintain power, and how power dynamics affect contemporary British universities in the context of increasing evaluation. There is much scope for future research into this fascinating and important area, particularly as the REF is set to continue in 2020 and because of the systemic gender inequality which remains in the academy. It would benefit existing scholarly knowledge to further study female academics' lived experiences of research evaluation in different types of institutions. This would also provide a rich arena for exploring the ongoing tensions between teaching and research, and for considering potential future strategic interactions between the REF and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). This in turn would help us assess how this may affect the (gendered) 'knowledge hustle'.

## Final comments

Gendered expectations still impact and serve to reproduce dominant and subordinate statuses of men and women in the academy. The subversion of formal practices and

processes through the deployment of gendered power and gendered informal networks contributes to the ongoing maintenance and entrenching of inequality regimes.

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## **Data availability**

Research data are not shared.

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