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GENDER AND THE DISCIPLINE OF GEOGRAPHY

Case studies of relational networks of support in Western academia

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Introduction

Networks can be thought of in a variety of ways, for example: as rail or road maps; made up of key nodes and links; the dendritic pattern of a family tree; or a spider's web, centred on a single focal point and entity. However, in reality these sets of connections and relations (in the widest sense) are often much more irregular than the diagrams suggest. The iconic topological map of the London Tube is an example par excellence of an irregular network represented in simplified form. The public map represents the ‘need to know’ information for users and gives the impression that only the public stations and their connecting tracks exist, and that these are all on the same level and broadly equidistant. In fact, the underground train lines are a complex system of multilayered tracks, with maintenance-only and disused tunnels and an irregular pattern of stations. Simply travelling on the Tube, moving between the different lines via multiple escalators and stairs, quickly belies the apparent simplicity of the public map.

Nonetheless, even if they are more irregular, dynamic and contingent than at first glance, human networks are ultimately about connections, relationality and – to continue the London Tube analogy – getting to your destination, wherever that may be. For the purposes of this chapter, networks are understood as associations of academics linked through common interests, goals and needs, within and beyond the discipline of geography and the institutions they are affiliated to. Spatialities, including these networks, can be place-based or virtual; they are embodied and experiential, with emotional-affective dimensions shaped in part by intersectional identity attributes, such as alma mater, subdiscipline, gender, race-ethnicity, socioeconomic class and sexuality (Maddrell et al. 2016). Within the social sciences, networks have typically been studied as sets of interactions through the lens of actor network theory, but this approach has been criticized for its lack of attention to the power relations and politics inherent within networks. Therefore, understanding the mechanisms of gendered networks requires a feminist analysis of power relations (Quinlan 2012).

Here, we explore the nature and practice of networks, sensitive to their gendered power relations. Such networks can be inclusionary or exclusionary, both of which will be discussed below. The chapter moves from reflections on historic and contemporary networks and their
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gendered implications for the discipline of geography, to a discussion of how networks can be deployed to enhance (or hinder) gender equality within geography. The chapter is grounded in the specific geographies of our experience and research, principally through studying and working in the UK, Western Europe and the US, as well as engaging with wider personal and formal international networks, such as the International Geographical Union (IGU) and the international journal *Gender, Place and Culture (GPC)*. Indeed, it was through *GPC* that we authors first encountered each other (as editor and author), followed by meeting in person at an IGU Gender Commission conference. The term ‘Western’ has been adopted here as a flag of convenience to represent these largely Anglophone confluences of contexts and experiences, but with a conscious awareness of its limitations.

**Historic examples of support networks for women in British geography**

Various histories of geography as a scholarly endeavour have highlighted disparities in gendered access to geographical knowledge, institutions, opportunities to publish, employment, and so on, in both the US and the UK (Bell and McEwan 1996; Domosh and Morin 2003; Maddrell 1997, 2009). Geographical societies are key examples of networks that have been central to bringing people together to learn about, engage in and promote geographical knowledge. In the case of UK geography’s founding institution, the Royal Geographical Society, from its foundation in 1830 until 1913 women were barred from full membership, with the exception of a cohort of 22 who were admitted during a brief window from 1892 to 1893. The Society’s council agreed to admit women in 1892, but this was challenged by those who thought the presence of women as anything other than occasional guests would undermine the status of the subject, still in its infancy in universities, and feminize the homosocial space that facilitated particular types of masculine networking seen as antithetical to women’s interests and capabilities: political, commercial and exploratory (Bell and McEwan 1996; Blunt 1994; Maddrell 2007, 2009).

Despite this exclusionary tactic in the institutional hub of British geography, women were central to the establishment of the modern discipline of geography in British universities during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. They were vital to boosting first the attendance of initial lecture courses and then the registered student numbers when the first accredited courses in geography were established (the diploma in geography at the University of Oxford in 1902, and first-degree courses at Liverpool University and University College Aberystwyth, both in 1917). These early courses catered primarily for schoolteachers, as did the associated summer schools, and both accredited courses and short summer schools were grounded in physical geography, regional and field studies. A number of leading early twentieth-century male geographers appointed women to posts in these new geography departments (e.g. Halford Mackinder, A.J. Herbertson, H.J. Fleure and L.W. Lyde) (Maddrell 2009). Successful women students were recruited as junior staff (typically teaching practical classes before being given responsibility for lectures and fieldwork). For instance, at the University of Oxford, Nora MacNunn was appointed as a demonstrator then lecturer (1906–1935) and Eva Taylor as a research assistant to A.J. Herbertson. Taylor went on to become the first UK female Professor of Geography (1930, University of London). Oxford, as a key hub for the establishment of geography as a university subject in the UK, was a central node in the national geographical community network through its open-access summer schools and field courses, as well as its formal taught programme and alumni.

Fieldwork is widely recognized as structuring social relations, as well as developing geographical knowledge and skills, and a number of important fieldwork networks arose,
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particularly through the summer schools and related activities which were organized for mixed groups of women and men students/teachers in the early 1900s. During the first half of the twentieth century, university summer-school activities were curtailed as more accredited courses were established and faculty staff time became more stretched. This prompted more geographers to turn to the sociological Le Play Society field group, fieldtrips organized by the Geographical Association (GA) (largely catering for schoolteachers) and, later, the Geographical Field Group (GFG). These trips demanded varying levels of physical fitness and geographical field skills, and were attended by women, men and married couples.

Vignette of a networker

Joan Fuller, who lectured in geography at the University of Nottingham from 1942 to 1967, was a networker par excellence. She built on her school-teaching experience prior to her appointment to the university by establishing links with the university’s Institute of Education and by chairing the Nottingham branch of the GA. After completing four years of temporary appointment during the war years, she was formally appointed as a lecturer on a permanent contract in 1946. Later, she initiated the departmental newsletter for staff and alumni that she produced annually for 11 years, drawing on student news sent to her in Christmas cards. Her last was produced in 1969, shortly after retirement. The newsletter represented a record of staff’s and alumni’s professional and personal activities, circulating information about appointments, marriages, births, and so on. This newsletter can be seen as a form of emotional labour that maintained and perpetuated the network of connection between staff and past students – something which would be the envy of many alumni officers today.

Fuller also played a central role in mid-century field-study networks. She had participated in the Le Play Society field study student group led by her head of department, K. C. Edwards, then continued with the GFG from 1946 onwards. During the 1950s and 1960s, Fuller led two British and at least six foreign field courses under the auspices of the GFG. A full half of all GFG courses were run by women during this period (Maddrell 2009; Wheeler 1967). The field courses were numerically dominated by women participants (e.g. Fuller’s 1957 trip to the Jura, Switzerland, included 15 women and three men). Travelling and working as a group for a shared purpose was both supportive and efficient, with combined skills facilitating a detailed and rigorous geographical study of a particular locality, at home or abroad. While there was an overall leader, these trips were very communitarian, with sub-team leaders, e.g. for geomorphological or economic geography data collection. Ultimately, a collaborative report would be co-produced and circulated throughout the whole group membership, informing many an evening’s reading, geography class and public lecture. These international field courses were largely populated by graduates, likely to be teachers and junior lecturers, as well as those working in other occupations, and can be seen as a form of serious leisure (Rojek 2000) and continuous professional development. They were reportedly favoured by women because they offered opportunities for like-minded people to travel and undertake demanding international study as part of a supportive group. The example of the GFG also highlights the role and disciplinary legacy of women academics whose influence on their peers was significant yet often intangible – not something that could be measured by publications. The next section turns to another ‘GFG’ in British geography.
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From the Women and Geography Study Group to the Gender and Feminist Geography Research Group debate in RGS–IBG 2012–2013

As geography became an established discipline within the British university system in the twentieth century, it was professionalized and masculinized, with women teachers and researchers in the minority, and only four women had been appointed to the promoted post of professor by 1970 (Maddrell 2009). It is in this context that the Women and Geography Study Group (WGSG) was established, and it was formally recognized by the Institute of British Geographers (IBG) in 1982. At a time when the academy was experienced by many women as a patriarchal hegemony (Leigh McDowell 1990), the group’s stated aims welcomed women and men from the geographical community in order to provide ‘a forum for geographers interested in gender issues’, as well as ‘a network for women in a male dominated discipline’ (Wyse 2013). These aims were pursued via conference sessions, collaborative publications, reading weekends and social events, each element contributing to the development of feminist geography scholarship, networks and women’s sense of belonging within the academic community of geographers. The group’s activities continued after the merger of the IBG with the Royal Geographical Society in 1994.

The WGSG’s work helped to counter and mitigate patriarchal networks within geography, for example offering a space that recognized and valued feminist scholarship through organizing academic retreats, dedicated workshops, conference sessions and related publications, as well as functioning as an alternative forum for social interaction and the sort of informal mentoring accessed by some male graduates through masculine academic networks (e.g. social sporting activities with senior male colleagues [Maddrell et al. 2016, 53]). Historically, credentials have played a vital role in validating women’s presence, work and influence within the discipline (e.g. the attainment of degrees and publications in recognized journals). The establishment of the WGSG within the UK’s professional body for academic geography, not uncontested, was vital to creating a professional, metaphorical and epistemological space for women, gender studies and feminist analysis. Publications were also significant in materializing a tangible network of validated scholarship on which other feminist geographers could build, including joint publications by founder members and pivotal collective publications published under the group’s name (e.g. WGSG 1984, 1997). However, despite publications, conference sessions, effective advocacy, and so on, the WGSG’s name, stated aims of gender-inclusive membership, focus on researching and teaching gender issues, and providing a network for women were, for some, conflictual in practice. For example, by 2012, a growing number of British geographers were researching masculinities, sexualities and wider gender issues, but new researchers were not necessarily engaging with the WGSG and only four men were affiliated to the group. This prompted a debate about the group’s name and purpose, summarized in a set of short pieces published in Area, including those favouring a more inclusive name (Brickell et al. 2013), those in support of the existing name (Browne et al. 2013), those who could see useful points across both sides of the debate (Evans et al. 2013), and men who did/did not feel excluded by the WGSG’s name (Hopkins and Jackson 2013).

Such debates are not unique, similar debates have occurred in other feminist networks, particularly around the dialectics and praxis of challenging exclusively male networks while maintaining explicit or implicit women-only networks. Ultimately, the WGSG became the GFG (Gender and Feminist Geography) Research Group in 2013, when the group also convened a host of ‘100+’ activities at RGS–IBG’s annual conference to mark the centenary of women’s formal membership in the RGS. This is not the place to revisit those debates in detail, but it highlights the value of geography’s feminist networks’ ongoing commitment to being reflexive about what is taken as axiomatic and who is explicitly/implicitly included,
excluded or privileged within their own activities – and the associated implications. Likewise, within the day-to-day arena of universities as workplaces, those who organize departmental committees, faculty social events, and national or international conferences have an obligation to reflect on the ethos, ‘spirit’ and implicit cultures of the shifting networks of inclusion-exclusion, power and opportunity thereby created, as explored below in relation to early-career support networks.

**Current networks of support for early-career women in geography**

Professional networks in geography remain fundamental, currently, to counteract, mitigate and guide early-career geographers, particularly women, through the increasing neoliberalization of the academic job market (Oberhauser and Caretta 2019). In fact, female PhDs in geography who have received their doctorate since the 2000s are faced with a job market very different from that of their predecessors (Pitt and Mewburn 2016; Thwaites and Pressland 2017). Numerous authors (Bosanquet 2017; Caretta et al. 2018; González Ramos and Vergés Bosch 2013; Strauss 2013) have spoken about the ongoing neoliberalization of academia and its gendered consequences. Most research-led universities in the Global North are increasingly assuming managerial leadership patterns, whereby productivity is held to be the highest consideration (Martínez Alemán 2014). In this context, tenure-required productivity is typically measured in terms of: 1) the number of peer-reviewed articles published in high impact-factor journals; 2) the value of external research grants acquired; and, in some cases, 3) the average grade received on students’ evaluation of teaching. Faculty and researchers are held to account against this scale each year and are given a grade themselves, ranging from unsatisfactory/poor to excellent. Having a few years of poor student feedback has been shown to lead to academics being laid off (Moosa 2018; SIGJ2 Writing Collective 2012; Taylor and Lahad 2018).

Precarity of employment is a key issue. Contingent/adjunct/postdoctoral appointments have increased exponentially in recent decades. For instance, ‘while the total number of college instructors in the United States has more than doubled since 1980 from 675,000 to 1.4 million, the total number of tenure track faculty only increased by 22 percent’ (Griffey 2016, np). Thus, for those in temporary research or teaching positions, unable to ensure a constant inflow of external grants essentially to acquire the funds to self-employ themselves in the long term, secure employment is a chimera. In this context, geographical mobility and flexibility are key to enable them to take up positions (Archer 2008; González Ramos and Vergés Bosch 2013; Pitt and Mewburn 2016; Thwaites and Pressland 2017), possibly including successive annual or short-notice moves to short-term/soft-funded posts in geographically disparate locations (Caretta et al. 2018; Thwaites and Pressland 2017).

These changes to employment practices in the neoliberalized university sector have increased job precarity, notably – but not only – for early-career scholars, with gendered implications (Maddrell et al. 2016; Strauss 2013). Women are often ill-placed to compete in this highly precarious and temporary job market, for several reasons. First, there is evidence of an intrinsic bias against women in science hiring (Moss–Racusin et al. 2012), which impacts on geography posts. Secondly, women’s reproductive age tends to be closely aligned with the time when they acquire their PhD and/or they enter the job market, resulting in family responsibilities that may not be easily reconcilable with a flexible and geographically mobile career (González Ramos and Vergés Bosch 2013). Finally, in keeping with gendered social roles, women tend to do more service and teaching than their male colleagues, neither of which are given the same recognition in the hiring process as publishing and securing grants, thereby placing them at a disadvantage
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(Flaherty 2017; Maddrell 2009). Geography is no stranger to these ongoing challenges to gender equality, and women, as in other disciplines, are under-represented in appointments in all stages of career compared to their male counterparts (Caretta and Webster 2016; Maddrell et al. 2016; Mott and Cockayne 2017).

For these reasons, mentoring and networks of support by peers and senior colleagues are crucial in keeping women in academia and on a path to tenure (Darwin and Palmer 2009; Macoun and Miller 2014; Mountz et al. 2016; Mullings et al. 2016; Oberhauser and Caretta 2019). In recent decades, circles of feminist geographers have been strong and consistent advocates for women’s retention in our discipline by challenging the normalization of productivity metrics as the main indicator of academic success (Domosh 2015; Kobayashi 2006; Maddrell et al. 2016; Mountz et al. 2016; Mullings et al. 2016; Winkler 2000).

Numerous initiatives and networks have emerged internationally and locally to support early-career women geographers. In fact, multiple sources of support are needed in current times to enter and stay in academia, remain motivated and to continue on a career trajectory that does not necessarily look any brighter or less precarious in the longer term (e.g. an analysis of male and female representation in senior UK geography posts showed an approximately four-to-one gender discrepancy in 2010 (Maddrell et al. 2016)). Multiple-source ‘mosaic’ mentoring, as it is defined in the literature (de Janasz and Sullivan 2004), can provide effective support not only for early-career scholars but potentially for those at all career stages who would benefit from guidance, peer support, peer-monitored targets, mentoring and more on a range of fronts: from research strategies, effective teaching and service roles, to balancing work and personal life.

Formal mentoring, that is, when a junior faculty member is paired up with a mentor through an institutional scheme, is something that few women in geography can count upon. Often it is the purview of big research universities, where the tenure-track system is still considered an asset to the institution (de Janasz and Sullivan 2004). In the case of the UK, some departments and universities are now developing mentoring schemes when competing for national accreditation for gender equality through the Athena Swan award, which is a prerequisite for key research fund applications. However, mentoring schemes can represent little more than cynical institutional lip service to improving gender equality and, in fact, may reinforce the exploitation of women’s ‘service’ roles if such schemes fail to resource and recognize mentors’ and mentees’ time within their workload and evaluations of service, continuous professional development and leadership. In some US schemes, junior faculty members receive funding to work with a senior mentor, for a fixed period, often at the beginning of their tenure-track period, to
strategize about the best course of action to attain tenure by ticking all the boxes for research, service and teaching (Berk et al. 2005; Oberhauser and Caretta 2019).

Mentoring is not an essentialist feminine attribute: men can make good mentors (as shown in the discussion of the historical examples earlier in this chapter); and not all women make good mentors. Nonetheless, this type of mentoring relationship has been shown to be particularly effective in developing female faculty members’ productivity and self-confidence, especially if the mentor is also a woman (Allen and Eby 2004). In this sense, there is an added value in having a mentor whom the mentee can relate to, and who can provide insights into how to balance a similar successful career trajectory with a personal life, including possibly having children (Bosanquet 2017).

Mentoring circles are another format of peer support. They include women in different phases of their career, ranging from PhD candidates to tenured faculty, who meet regularly in groups to discuss the personal and systemic challenges that they face in their daily work life (Darwin and Palmer 2009; Macoun and Miller 2014; Mullings et al. 2016). There are different ways in which these circles can be structured and function. They can be as informal as a weekly support lunch group or as formal as a series of seminars around gendered strategies to succeed through tenure. These groups are a way to hold their members accountable, with weekly check-ins on work-related goals and tasks to be accomplished before the next meeting. Additionally, they provide support as a forum to share strategies to facilitate a work–life balance, especially pre-tenure. These groups are deemed to be especially beneficial if members vary in career stage, as they create a sense of community among women within a discipline regardless of age, career stage, and so on. On the one hand, PhD candidates become aware early on of the long-term challenges they will face if they stay in academia (Berg 2015); on the other hand, senior tenured faculty members, often in positions of power, can remain in touch with the struggles of contingent and junior faculty members, and be their advocates and role models for rising to the higher ranks in the university. While formal and informal mentoring arrangements are very much dependent on the consistency and initiative of both mentor and mentee, the advantage of a mentoring circle is that it generally does not require much preparation by the participants, and its leadership, and logistical matters can be shared (Mountz et al. 2016).

E-mentoring is becoming increasingly popular (Headlam- Wells, Gosland and Craig 2005; Single and Single 2005). This mode of mentoring does not simply include long-distance informal relationships but incorporates a mentoring circle on an online platform and, at times, involves a weekly phone call. An example is the US National Center for Faculty Diversity and Success, which pays for a semester-long group of four junior faculty members, across disciplines, to be coached by a mentor. This programme, called the Faculty Success Program, is a mentoring circle whereby a mentor leads a group of mentees, but it is also an ‘accountability’ group among mentees, who register their writing time and their goals on an online platform (Facultydiversity.org). Although this programme might be perceived as quite impersonal and, given its time and logistical constraints, may not consolidate mentoring relationships, it still provides mentees with a valuable set of time-management tools and productivity strategies, which will facilitate meeting the targets required in neoliberal academia.

**Conclusion**

Historical and contemporary studies highlight the barriers faced by, and opportunities for, women in the academy. Barriers are particularly acute at present, in the context of the neoliberalization of the university sector in many Global North ‘Western’ countries, particularly those experiencing reduced external funding or increased staff-student ratios as a result of economic recession or...
other shifts in funding streams. While these pressures are not unique to women, they can have a disproportionate effect on women within the academy, especially those in precarious early-career positions, as well as for those of all genders with caring responsibilities for dependents (Maddrell et al. 2016). This chapter has demonstrated ways in which geographers are using existing formal and informal feminist and other professional networks in order to counter disadvantage and an uneven playing field in employment and career opportunities. However, not all women are equally disadvantaged, nor all men equally advantaged. The research on networks indicates the need for networks to be responsive to specific contingent needs and the dynamic shifting complexities of their constituents, including multifaceted discrimination that reflects intersectional identity, for instance women of colour, those requiring flexible working hours in order to meet caring responsibilities or religious obligations, and so on.

Feminist geographical networks are frequently grounded in and dependent upon generous leadership, yet activities such as mentoring or skills-sharing do not necessarily have to reinscribe the senior–junior hierarchies or narrow assumptions concerning gender issues or who is or is not a feminist. This chapter has highlighted professional enrichment through participation in networks, and how mentoring and networks of support by both peers and senior colleagues have been crucial in keeping women in geography and on a path to secure employment and mid-career progression. These networks have opened up spaces for mutual support and collaborations, often across countries, building solidarity among feminist geographers at different stages of their career, counteracting and mitigating the personal consequences of an entrenched neoliberal system of knowledge production. While not a panacea, at their best these genuinely collaborative networks can do much more. Participation in networks can provide opportunities to practise leadership as well as to gain support; they can act as a seedbed for innovation, as well as collaborative research projects and publications; they can act as a space to establish a collective voice and influence; they can reach beyond international boundaries and the academy to become sites of effective praxis, contributing to work to address wider inequalities.

**Key readings**


**References**


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Mott, C., and D. Cockayne. 2017. “Citation Matters: Mobilizing the Politics of Citation Toward a Practice of ‘Conscientious Engagement.’” Gender, Place & Culture 24 (7): 954–973. https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2017.1339022.


