



Introduction: Knowledge Making, Everyday Life, and Gendered Scientific/Scholarly Personae

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Abstract

Building on the growing literature on academic households and creative couples, this special issue aims to contribute to these discussions by taking a closer look at the connection between knowledge production, everyday life, and scientific and scholarly personae. This introductory article explains the concept of persona as a mediating link between individual biographies and social institutions and contextualizes the issue of academic and non-academic support for scientists and scholars. The chapter also introduces the five articles in the special issue that examine and discuss the lives and collaborative work of creative individuals from the late 19th to the late 20th century.

Keywords: knowledge, everyday life, scientific and scholarly persona, gender

The social constructivist turn in the late 1970s and early 1980s changed the ways in which we think about science and scholarship and about who engages in their making. Pushing the boundaries of what the history of science and scholarship is, historians have since then moved away from histories based on great men narratives to explore the crafts of science and scholarship, their practices, places, and social relations.¹ A rich literature has explored science and scholarship as a collective activity and the contribution of women, household, family, marriage and intimate relationships to knowledge making. A common denominator in this literature is the ambition to move away from preconceived notions of what science and scholarship are, from what is considered recognized knowledge, and to look instead at what people do when they create knowledge, how they define themselves and how they relate to and interact with academic institutions and knowledge communities within, and outside, their own fields of knowledge.²

In line with this growing body of literature, the aim of this special issue is to contribute to these discussions by focussing more closely on the link between knowledge making, everyday life and the scientific or scholarly persona. In discussions on how science and scholarship work, the concept of the scientific or scholarly persona has proved useful. The persona concept comes from social anthropology and has been developed by historians of science and scholarship to understand the ways in which science and scholarship is performed and embodied.³ The term ties in with discussions on relational identity construction where imitation and adaptation play a vital role in social interaction. It creates a mediating link between individual biographies and the history of social (scientific/scholarly) institutions and draws attention to how social and cultural categories interact with individual lives.⁴ Drawing on the image of the mask in Greek theatre, the concept conveys both the general intelligibility of particular characters and the limited number of models for individual careers available in a particular context, profession, discipline, or milieu.⁵

Researchers were slow to focus more attention on the gendered character of the scientific or scholarly persona, although some did point out its affinity to feminist theories on the construction of gendered identities, which have been elaborated since the 1980s.⁶ That said, the persona concept appears to be a useful tool in understanding the gender regimes of academic life. The concept helps to reveal implicit and explicit norms and templates of certain academic communities and allows us to analyse otherwise hidden forms of inclusion and exclusion. It also allows us to demonstrate how gendered scientific or scholarly personae are 'formative of both the individual scientist and the discipline to which they belong.'⁷

Following on from this perspective, we want to dig deeper into the connections between women's struggles for equal inclusion in academic professions in the late 19th

and early 20th centuries and transformations of the scientific/scholarly persona. Work that has been done on pioneering women scholars who have overcome institutional and other hurdles, and on academic couples, demonstrates the considerable contribution of family members to scholarly work. Building on this, we employ the concept of the scholarly household to explore more closely the everyday contexts, domestic and otherwise, that enable scientific and scholarly work to be carried out.⁸

This focus on (scholarly and non-scholarly) support raises questions on who gives and on who receives this assistance. Firstly, if one considers the crucial but mostly invisible help many male scholars have long received (and still receive) from their wives, secretaries, and assistants, the question arises as to what kind of support has been given to educated women, who have been searching for a place in academia since the late 19th century? Whatever the individual arrangements, the gender inequalities in this regard are evident. The questions of how, by whom and to whom domestic, secretarial and other support was (and is) provided therefore have high heuristic value for the analysis of gender regimes in academia in European countries and North America in the 19th and 20th centuries. Tying in with research on the lives and work of early modern scholars, an increasing number of whom led secular, family-oriented lives, this concept helps us to understand how 19th and 20th century academics must also be analysed in the context of the familial and para-familial environments that supported them.⁹

Secondly, the various implications of increasing opportunities for women to attain higher education deserve closer examination. Understandably, research on women's participation in academic knowledge production has long focused either on the achievements of outstanding women or on institutional barriers and misogynist mentalities. However, there is more to learn. For example, it would be worthwhile to examine less obvious ways in which academic knowledge production has benefited from the increasing numbers of women partaking in higher education. Among these benefits we should also count the steady supply of scientifically and/or scholarly well-educated female partners, wives and secretaries for male academics. Even if these women did not develop their own academic careers, their contributions to knowledge production in direct and indirect ways should not be underestimated. That said, a greater diversity of personae can be expected alongside the image of the elite, male, white, scientist/scholar committed to an academic institution. The articles in this special issue therefore focus on personae other than the hegemonic ones and examine their gendered nature, in particular.

Among the ways to shape an academic persona, auto/biographical practices play a significant role. Together with strategies such as rhetoric, performance and embodiment, the creation of a consistent biographical narrative is a crucial element of

a successful academic career. Résumés, anecdotes, autobiographies, wives' and daughters' domestic memoirs, eulogies and biographies intersect and interact in the creation of academic personae. All these kinds of texts both draw from pre-existing meta-biographies of 'the scientist/scholar' but also transform the model through their interpretations.¹⁰ While the relevance of biographical narratives for the careers and afterlife of male scientists/scholars is well documented, auto/biographical practices of women in academia – autobiographical and biographical texts by women scientists/scholars, secretaries, wives, and others – have not yet received the same attention.¹¹ However, valuable information can be expected here on how scientific/scholarly personae have changed and diversified as academia has gradually opened to women.

Focusing on several European countries and the United States, the articles in this special issue address questions on knowledge, gender and auto/biography from different perspectives. By bringing together autobiographical, biographical and social and cultural perspectives, they shed light on how everyday life and daily chores are reflected in the concept of scientific/scholarly personae. Through scientific/scholarly trajectories of individuals and couples, the five articles reflect different ways in which individuals, male and female, constructed scientific and scholarly personae in constant negotiation and interaction with different contexts – cultural, institutional, disciplinary and geographical – during the late 19th and the 20th centuries. The three of us who initiated and edited this special issue – Johanna Gehmacher, Kirsti Niskanen and Katharina Prager – met at the IABA conference 'Knowing the Self: Auto/Biographical Narratives and the History of Knowledge' in Madrid in 2019. We participated in a session titled 'When Does the Genius Do the Chores?' and our discussions prompted questions that are raised in the case studies of this cluster: What types of relationship arrangements promoted academic careers, what types impeded them, and how is this reflected upon in auto/biographical materials? How did individuals, women and men, who strived for inclusion in the academic world position themselves autobiographically, how did they use different fictional and non-fictional genres to legitimise their aspirations? How are failure and success in academia treated in life narratives? And how are auto/biographical representations used as counter-narratives, helping people to fashion themselves as academics and/or position a new discipline in the academic sphere while at the same time questioning the cultural template or model of the academic?

The articles in this special issue demonstrate both the productivity of auto/biographical sources and the merits of the persona concept in examining the social support systems – personal and family relationships and the organization of everyday life – without which knowledge creation would not have been possible.

The cluster begins with Donald Opitz's discussion of Eleanor (usually called Nora) Sidgwick's work to advance women's opportunities in mathematics and science in late 19th and early 20th century England and of her efforts to fashion a scientific persona for women based on her own experiences of upper-class family relationships and 'country science'. Nora Sidgwick was the long-time principal of the famous Newnham College, founded in 1871 as the second women's college in Cambridge. As such, she impacted the advancement of women in science in major ways. A gifted mathematician herself, she publicly advocated women's admission to university examinations and degrees together with her husband Henry Sidgwick. She was experienced in running a large household from her own responsibilities at her family's manor house and adapted this knowledge to housekeeping, overseeing the curriculum, teaching, managing staff and hosting social events at Newnham. In the process, she created a space and an atmosphere that fostered and encouraged learning within the collegiate community. Though she never formally graduated herself, she continued to conduct research alongside her administrative duties at Newnham – including research as a private assistant in her brother-in-law's experimental physics laboratory in Cambridge. Donald Opitz examines autobiographical recollections scattered throughout essays, letters and speeches by Nora Sidgwick. He also analyses a biographical sketch about her mother as a concealed autobiographical text and argues that both in her auto/biographical writing and through her practical scientific work Nora Sidgwick 'occupied and promoted a persona for educated women that embraced an efficient form of gentlewomanly domesticity, one that could only be enhanced by women's scientific and mathematical training.'

While Sidgwick represents a first generation of elite British women who pursued higher education for themselves and helped younger women to do the same, the subsequent articles deal with later generations of European-born academics, all of whom led transnational lives for different reasons.¹² Kirsti Niskanen analyses an unpublished biography by Astri Runnström, wife of the renowned Swedish zoologist John Runnström. After their marriage in 1917, Astri Runnström, a primary school teacher without a scientific education, helped in various ways with the research being conducted by her husband, who became a professor at Stockholm University in 1932. She followed him to marine biology stations in countries around the world (including Italy, the UK, and the United States), where they often stayed for lengthy periods (sometimes years) to work together on urchin biology. Even after the birth of their two children, whom they left in the care of family members and others when they were away, the couple continued travelling and working together. Analysing Astri Runnström's biography of her husband, Niskanen shows how both partners benefited from the collaboration. In her, John had a trusted assistant who shared his interests

and his life and supported him in many respects while Astri experienced their joint work in science and travelling as emancipating. However, when John died in 1971, she abruptly and completely lost her connection to academia and realised that her place in that world was provided to her solely by her husband. As Kirsti Niskanen argues, Astri Runnström used her biography of her late husband to create a 'joint scientific persona' for which marriage figures as an 'epistemic relationship'. In her in-depth analysis of this extremely valuable unpublished source, Niskanen thus illustrates a wide-spread form of marital cooperation in 20th century science but also shows how this particular way of living and working sets limits on the ambitions of women.

The texts by Niskanen and Opitz focus on gendered experiences in the sciences whereas the next three studies are concerned with the conditions under which women forged their academic careers and with the formation of new disciplines in the humanities, the social sciences, and in scientific mediation. The eldest of the protagonists in these articles is the Danzig-born women's rights activist Käthe Schirmacher, one of the first German women to receive a doctorate in Romanic languages in Zurich in 1895. Johanna Gehmacher cites her case to demonstrate the difficulties early European women academics encountered when building a professional career based on their academic education. She argues that Schirmacher, who would never attain the professorship she aspired to, not only had to deal with misogynist academic institutions and continuously readjust her life-plans, but also had to be particularly creative to secure domestic and secretarial support for her work as a public intellectual and freelance writer of academic and other texts. Living with female partners who assisted her in everyday life as well as in her writing, she made a living doing journalistic work and lecturing in many European countries. As Gehmacher points out, Käthe Schirmacher spent many years of her life abroad and, in her autofictional and autobiographical texts and in her personal life, strove to create a new female persona that did not yet fully exist at the time. She, therefore, found herself constantly having to revise her professional identity – as a scholar, as a novelist, as a political and sociological analyst, as a politician – in order to find a place that she could occupy as a learned woman and that would allow her to earn a living.

With Christopher Burke's and Günther Sandner's biographical account of Marie Reidemeister and Otto Neurath, we return to the topic of marital cooperation, though in a more unconventional and liberal form. Roughly of the same generation as the Runnströms, Neurath and his third wife Marie Reidemeister-Neurath had lives marked by political commitment and exile. Reidemeister, who had studied mathematics and physics but was also a trained illustrator, created the Vienna Method of Pictorial Statistics (later known as Isotype) for the Vienna Social and Economic Museum together with the graphic artist Gerd Arntz and the political philosopher and

sociologist Otto Neurath, the senior member of the group. The initiator of the museum was the political thinker Neurath, an Austro-Marxist committed to adult education and to the dissemination of scientific knowledge on the economy and society to a broad public. As Burke and Sandner point out, Neurath had working relationships with each of his three wives (the writer Anna Schapire, who died in 1911 and the mathematician Olga Hahn, who died in 1937). They cite Jordi Cat who described Neurath's marriages as 'a lifelong pattern of serial integration of intellectual and erotic bonds.'¹³ They also point to mutual support in these relationships, especially with regard to Olga Hahn, who had been blind since the age of twenty-two and needed daily assistance. After the civil war in Austria in 1934, Reidemeister emigrated to The Hague with Hahn and Neurath. After Hahn's death, Neurath and Reidemeister escaped to Great Britain in the face of the German invasion in the Netherlands and married there. They then founded the Isotype Institute in Oxford, which Reidemeister directed alone following Neurath's death from a stroke in 1945. She moved the institute to London and successfully led it for 25 years, focusing on writing and designing educational books for young readers and developing educational projects in West Africa. In their article, Burke and Sandner firstly outline the everyday practices and networks of the group around Otto Neurath, in which personal relations constantly intermingled with political and academic work. Secondly, they analyse how Reidemeister became a crucial player in shaping the fame of the Vienna Method of Pictorial Statistics/Isotype by publishing Neurath's works as well as writing two memoirs and reinterpreting his role in intellectual history. In so doing, they argue, Reidemeister 'calmly' recorded 'facts that establish her as a pioneer of information design'.

Katharina Prager writes about another emigrant from Vienna, the historian Gerda Lerner. Born in 1920, she represents the third generation in this special issue. Lerner fled the National Socialist occupation and seizure of power in Austria as a young woman in 1938 and became a pioneer and leading figure in the new field of women's history in the United States later in her life. In her examination of Lerner's autobiographical performances and representations, Prager traces the ways in which the author 'controlled her image through autobiographical writing' and 'kept on "editing"' her persona. Comparing three major autobiographical texts by the *grande dame* of women's history, she argues that Lerner long kept 'private' and 'professional' spheres of her life strictly separate, thus repeating a dichotomy that feminists (and, incidentally, Lerner herself) otherwise heavily criticised. By referring to Per Wisselgren's description of academia as 'gender coded machinery', Prager analyses Lerner's strategy of developing these parallel private and professional identities as a conscious act reflecting her illusionless assessment of the academic field which she

wanted to enter as a woman in the 1970s.¹⁴ It was only later in life after achieving recognition and fame that Lerner wrote an autobiography that recounted her struggles as a refugee and her commitment to communist activism during the 1950s and provided at least a glimpse into her housekeeping arrangements as a wife and mother. Katharina Prager analyses Lerner's life-long autobiographical practices as a way of 'crafting and performing her scholarly persona' that enabled the integration of contradictory cultural vocabularies but that was also marked by certain taboos around her political activism, her own feminist consciousness or the care she gave her dying husband. Her doing the chores was probably the biggest taboo of all.

The five studies in this special issue show from different angles the often-close intertwining of knowledge production and various forms of support work in academic households. They also demonstrate how, in a time of change and growing participation by women in academic education, hegemonic academic personae contributed to keeping women from being equally included in the academic field.

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Notes

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¹² On the concept of transnational lives, see Gehmacher, Johanna, Katharina Prager and Klara Löffler, 'Leben in Bewegung. Interdependenzen zwischen Biografie, Migration und Geschlecht', in: *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaften* 29:3 (2018) 7–16.

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