

## **Alice in Demographyland: How it Looks From the Other Side of the Looking Glass**

**Susan A. McDaniel**  
Department of Sociology  
University of Alberta  
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

The challenges are many in reflecting on women in demography in Canada in the 1990's. On the one hand, so much is known about women in academia and the hurdles that still need to be overcome — institutionally and intellectually. So much more research exists in the area than it did only a decade ago. An apt title for reflections from this point of view might be "Yet Another Reflection on Women in Academe: This Time It's Demography." Yet "scholarship is the recognition of ignorance, the awareness not of what we know, but of *how* we know and what we do not know" (Neusner, 1984: 30). This is a quote from a delightful book by Jacob Neusner entitled, *Grading Your Professor and Other Unexpected Advice*. Given Neusner's often forgotten or overlooked truth, the first title to come to mind seemed too humdrum, too resigned to ignorance, too self-satisfied.

Although a considerable body of research exists on women in academia, it is clear that knowledge does not translate directly or immediately into change in universities, or in the public service, as the preceding papers have shown. Despite gains, the number of women in demography in Canada remains small, as DeWit's paper shows. Women have been underrepresented in both the past and present public service and continue to face challenges both institutional and attitudinal, as the papers by Wargon and by Hagey reveal.

In this paper, a glimpse of some of the challenges posed to academic women demographers is offered. As the title of the paper suggests, "Alice's" look from the other side of the looking glass may not be every woman's, but hopefully in sharing reflections on (1) challenges to women in academia generally, and (2) the gender challenge to demography in particular, the door can be opened for further discussion, research and change.

Scholars have always had an ambiguous position in society, and still do. On the one hand, they are respected for their knowledge, often esoteric

and greater than that of the general public. Sometimes this knowledge is *even* useful to the wider society. On the other hand, scholars are regarded with suspicion, seen as eccentric, arrogant and made the brunt of jokes. A National Film Board film called "Knowing Women," reveals that even though Canada can claim the first woman in the British Empire to have graduated with a university degree, from Mount Saint Allison University in New Brunswick, scholarly women in Canada have not had an easy time of it. There has been the persistent fear that terrible things happen to women with higher education: they become "barren" (presumably, according to nineteenth-century beliefs, because non-renewable bodily energy available goes to brains rather than to reproductive systems); or, give birth to monsters; or, perhaps worst of all, *become* monsters — kind of hermaphroditic she/he beasts! Possession of esoteric knowledge, if ambiguous for men, for women is a liability or at least more of a liability than it is for men. Witches and shamans are but two examples of "knowing women" — while some shamans are highly respected in their cultures, they are often set apart as different; and, we all know what happened and happens to witches. Universities, the seats of knowledge and knowledge production were, and still are in large degree, male bastions, which intellectually reproduce by a kind of parthogenesis (or unisexual reproduction), male professor to male graduate student, who then grows up and "reproduces" in a similar fashion. Occasionally, a female results from this odd reproductive process, but not often, and when she does, she is said by some to think like a man. This is meant as a compliment, but it tends to distance the recipient from the males in her field, since no matter how fine a male mind she is seen to have, she cannot be a male. And, it distances her from other women because part of her professional identity, if this supposed compliment is taken seriously, involves not being like other women. Thankfully, this is taken less seriously by women now than in the past.

Universities, if we allow ourselves to stand apart from them, are very strange and contradictory places indeed. We are said to inhabit an "ivory tower", whatever that is. And, at the same time and in contrast, we are thought to be at the "cutting edge" of new knowledge (or at least we used to be until we recently discovered that we are less useful in this respect than we thought according to governments that are "voting" against higher education with their purses!) Many of the images of knowledge production are striking indeed: we push back the frontiers of knowledge; we master complex problems, or nature *herself*; we flex our muscles, or cut our teeth on the tough problems; we are objective, distant, dispassionate,

unemotional, and rational; in academic debates, we score good points, we crush the opposition; and we have to defend theses! All of these images are so prevalent that we are immune to their masculine, almost macho, character. Looked at from a distance, it appears almost like Rambo in academic garb!

But language is not all that is strange about academic life. In spring, as among other species, some of the strangest rituals are performed. We don long, flowing black robes, adorned with bursts of colour and topped with ridiculous hats, and we march behind an ornamental mace amid much pomp and circumstance. At many universities, there are thrones (or elaborate chairs that appear to be thrones) before which students, who would never dream of doing such a thing in regular life, kneel before a chancellor or a university president, have their hands clasped in his or hers, to be awarded a certificate of graduation. All this may seem a touch anachronistic but endearing, with no real meaning. Yet, I cannot help wondering sometimes at convocation ceremonies if all these rituals, when combined with the search for untainted truth, is not somewhat similar to monastic life. In monasteries, celibacy is thought to be a dimension of the higher purpose of truth-seeking (or, at least, in some monasteries some of the time). Granted that in academia, this higher purpose may be different than in a monastery, and granted that it seldom reaches fruition (or non-fruition in the literal sense), nonetheless, there are parallels. Males, with their eyes on lofty ideas, see themselves as dragged down by the more worldly concerns of women. Among these, concerns about gender in academe. An unfortunate result is that women come to be seen as incapable or disinclined toward lofty intellectual pursuits, with women's presence in academe seen as either a distraction to men, or as a "watering down" of standards or the status of the field. This takes various forms such as a professor saying that he wanted his daughters to go into a field with some prestige like engineering or physics, fields which are significantly male-dominated and male-defined. Or the statement, "If Einstein had had a nagging wife, he never would have done what he did." The irony here is the recent serious scholarly debate, in light of new archival evidence about whether Einstein would have done what he did at all, if it had not been for his first wife's preparatory theoretical work, for which he turned over to her, in totality, his Nobel Prize winnings. Another form is the one mentioned by Mary Wollstonecraft, the 18th century author, that for both sexes, the very highest performance is incompatible with domestic responsibilities. This incompatibility has been resolved by celibacy and childlessness for many women of achievement; and for many men, by

getting women to look after the domestic realm for them. So, here is a paradox: in academia, unlike the monastery, men keep their eyes (supposedly) on lofty ideas, while it is women who remain celibate. It is not surprising that women may feel alienated in academe.

Even when women *do* achieve success in their fields, recognition is elusive and hard-won. Quoting eminent sociologist Jessie Bernard, "A scientist, when asked to name the top ten people in the field, listed the names of ten men. When the names of several outstanding women were mentioned, he replied that they were among the top ten, he just had *never thought* of them" (Bernard, 1973: 780). But, this is not the end of it. In different studies, identical articles (Goldberg, 1968), identical lectures (Bernard, 1964), identical curriculum vitae (Fidell, 1970), were evaluated more harshly when thought to be a woman's than when thought to be a man's. And in 1985, it was found that male students consistently rate female professors less favourably than male professors (*New York Times*, 9 June 1985). It would seem that "the male body lends credence to assertions, while the female body takes it away" (Ellman in Smith, 1975: 362).

Jill Vickers, a prominent Canadian political scientist, describes the alienation of women in academia as "ontological exile", scholars whose presence challenges the tenets of the discourse and the structure of the system. She describes how she harnessed this sense of exile and alienation as a source of creativity rather than intellectual paralysis, which she reports she felt previously (Vickers, 1982). For all too many creative women, their alienation cannot be turned on itself and leads rather to what Hannah Arendt called "inner emigration", a term she used to describe the withdrawal of many Germans during the Hitler years into a kind of "interior life." What this translates into for many women is dropping out of graduate programs, or of research, and lowered self-esteem. The loss is everyone's.

What about the gender challenge to demography? So far, I have mentioned reproduction (of the unisexual kind in academe), alienation as paralysis (a kind of morbidity, if not mortality), and emigration (of the spirit) — all the mainstays of demography. Yet, more needs to be said and much more needs to be done. Only a few of the remaining challenges will be discussed here.

The content of a discipline interacts with the structure and culture of academe, although this happens subtly and without us being fully aware of

it. It is this interaction which has placed physics in the position of the pre-eminent science, for example. Why? The methods of physics are clear, and although disputed vigorously within the discipline, seen as indisputable from the outside. It is objective, controlling of nature, with its scientific paradigm solidly in place. By contrast, social scientists are seen as positively woolly-minded, constantly bickering over paradigm, over the theoretical versus the empirical, over what we are really up to as disciplines. This hierarchical positioning of disciplines has led to the accusation that social scientists suffer from "physics envy." Being a touch reluctant to psychoanalyze disciplines, I will stick to issues closer to the surface.

The social sciences, too, have a hierarchy. It seems that those social sciences most wedded to quantitative analyses, to empiricism, to positivism, to distancing of researcher from respondent, to the reliance on a consistent paradigm (even if implicit) have higher status. In part, these are the disciplines that fit best with the questions asked by society too, and they tend to be better funded. Psychology and economics, for different reasons, are better situated in the status and rewards hierarchy of social sciences than are sociology and anthropology, for example. Psychology is much more seriously funded than are other social sciences, including economics, with many psychologists working on the science and engineering model of continuous career-long funding, provided productivity remains high. Demography, although the funding is far less substantial and more erratic, tends more toward the research model of psychology and economics than it does toward that of sociology or anthropology, an irony since many academic demographers are situated in sociology departments.

What are the implications of this for the gender challenges to demography? Briefly, first there is less questioning of the paradigm or model which guides our research in demography — the unspoken assumptions remain unspoken, and thus undebated and unquestioned. Second, and related, there is less attention to the respondent as context-bound, as an acting, and acted upon human as much as a member of a social category. Third, the very maleness of demography, not only the presence, proportionately of fewer women than in many of the other social sciences such as sociology and anthropology, but the masculine character of the enterprise, tends to result in questions important to men being addressed rather than those important to women (which, not incidentally, can be important to both women and men). And fourth, in a far from

definitive list, our relative isolation or insulation from the dramatic changes occurring in neighbouring disciplines, perhaps related to the hierarchy mentioned earlier, has meant that we have been somewhat slower than other social sciences to adjust our approaches. This has had the unfortunate consequence of frustrating and alienating some very bright young people, particularly women, who might have made important contributions. They tend, simply put, "to take up other trades."

In conclusion, I am not willing, or able, to prescribe what should be done, but in this brief look behind the looking glass of gender, anomalies are apparent and may be indications, as Thomas Kuhn suggests, that changes *are* occurring, perhaps even a paradigm shift. To know fully, to understand, and to explain social phenomena, facts are insufficient. The context for our facts cannot be omitted or distorted; and context must include gender in all its complexity. "Until we know the assumptions in which we are drenched, we cannot know ourselves" (Oakley, 1984: 2). In many ways, gender is a prism through which we see ourselves and society, but then we must reconstruct the prismatic image to read its meaning, to see its Alice in Wonderland aspects.

Perhaps Nellie McClung, one of five Alberta women who fought for the vote for women said it most simply and best, "The even chance for everyone is the plain and simple meaning of life" (McClung, 1915). Providing an even chance to women in academia, in demography, and by demography is a far from simple challenge. This special session on women in demography and the theme of the 1991 Learned Societies' meetings, "Women in Universities" is a positive and vital step in the right direction.

#### *Acknowledgements*

Thanks to Kevin McQuillan, organizer of the special session on Women in Demography for inviting me to participate; to Tom Burch for including the session in the program of the 1991 meetings of the Canadian Population Society; to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for their financial support of this session; to the two anonymous reviewers; and to Wayne McVey, Editor of Canadian Studies in Population, for helpful suggestions.

*Alice in Demographyland: How it Looks From the Other Side of the  
Looking Glass*

*References*

- Bernard, J. 1964. *Academic Women*. New York, NY: New American Library.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1973. My four revolutions: an autobiographical history of the ASA. *American Journal of Sociology* 78(4): 773-791.
- Fidell, L.S. 1970. Empirical verification of sex discrimination in hiring practices in psychology. *American Psychologist* 25: 1094-1098.
- Goldberg, P.A. 1968. Are women prejudiced against women? *Transaction* 5 (April): 28-30.
- McClung, N. 1915. In *Times Like These*. Reprinted 1972, Toronto, ON: University of Toronto.
- Neusner, J. 1984. *Grading Your Professors and Other Unexpected Advice*. Boston, MA: Beacon.
- New York Times*, 9 June 1985.
- Oakley, A. 1984. *Taking it Like a Woman*. London, England: Jonathan Cape.
- Smith, Dorothy. 1975. An analysis of ideological structures and how women are excluded: consideration for academic women. *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 12(4): 353-369.
- Vickers, J.M. 1982. *Memoirs of an Ontological Exile: The Methodological Rebellions of Feminist Research*. In Angela Miles and Geraldine Finn (eds.), *Feminism in Canada from Pressure to Politics*. Montreal, PQ: Black Rose.

Received October, 1991; revised July, 1992.





## **BOOK REVIEWS**

**Women and Well Being**, edited by Vanaja Dhruvarajan. Montreal and Kingston: Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women and McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990. xxi, 237 pp. \$34.95 cloth, \$17.95 paper.

**Sharon McIrvin Abu-Laban**  
*University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada*

This collection, edited by Vanaja Dhruvarajan, is comprised of twenty papers (four written in French) selected from presentations given at the Eleventh Annual Conference of the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAOW) held in Winnipeg in 1987. Most of the papers are published for the first time. The volume takes a feminist, multidisciplinary perspective and focuses on a variety of issues brought together under the broad designation of women's well-being. Women are traditionally seen as the primary nurturers and caregivers working to facilitate the well-being of family members, particularly men, children and elders. Concerns about the physical, mental and social health of women themselves are recent, as noted by Monique Bégin, one of the contributors to the book and past federal Minister of National Health and Welfare (1977-1984). For example, in 1970 the landmark Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women ignored such health issues in its assessments of the lot of Canadian women. Much has changed in the ensuing decades. Issues of "justice" such as equal pay and access to education and job opportunities have broadened, going beyond even the traditional medical definitions of good health to concerns encompassing prevention and health promotion, as well as more inclusive, holistic approaches to assessing the quality ("well-being") of women's lives.

The contributors to this volume are both community and academically based and they possess a wealth of practical experience as well as a diversity of academic specializations including Sociology, Women's Studies, Political Science, Anthropology, Social Work, English and French Literature.

The editor, Vanaja Dhruvarajan offers a short overview of the various chapters that serves as the book's introduction. The chapters are grouped under four main themes: women's health, work, minority status and knowledge. The first section focuses on papers looking at issues of mental