

“Along the abyss...?”

Career progress of female professors in university medicine

Claudia Froböse*, Bärbel Miemietz*

* Equal Opportunities Office at Hannover Medical School, Research Project „The Way to the Top - 50 Years of High Profile Careers of Women at Hannover Medical School“

Introduction

Using biographical interviews, the career progressions of female professors in university medicine were examined and reconstructed, focusing on underlying conditions and individual decisions. The goal of the analysis was to show how career-identities of female professors develop:

- Which individual and structural circumstances play a role?
- Which obstacles must be overcome?
- How are problems of reconciling family and career solved?
- In which ways do successful women act as role models for young female doctors and scientists?
- What impulses can be used to develop new equal opportunities instruments specifically for the field of university medicine?

Thirteen biographical interviews and four expert-interviews were conducted. Experts were chosen on the basis of long-time experience with personnel management and/or work in the field of equal opportunities. The biographical interviews were conducted with three generations of female scientists.

Methods

According to Dausien (2014), the examination of underlying conditions and decisions in one's curriculum vitae necessitates a largely qualitative research design in which three factors are important:

- “Biography” as an “individual life-story in a social context”
- “Interaction” between interviewee and interviewer and
- “cultural patterns and social rules” of telling one's biography in a social setting

Methodologically, narrative interviews in the tradition of Schütze (1983) were chosen. Of central importance to this method is that the interviewee has the opportunity to let his/her story unfold on its own.

The analysis of the interviews was based on the qualitative content-analysis approach of Mayring (2010). The method prescribes a mixture of standardized and qualitative approaches and allows to systematically reduce the material down to core concepts without losing focus on the interviewee's original statements.

Results

Top careers in university medicine require achievements on (formal) medical and scientific qualification levels, for example a medical specialist profession certificate and habilitation. Furthermore, networks as well as experience abroad are essential. Besides there must exist some space for a private life.

The respondents took the necessary steps and overcame barriers that stood in the way. They attribute an astoundingly large amount of success to coincidence: “I began without any real intentions or motives [...] But I didn't really have to fight my way through [...] My career has really been a pleasure. Yes. A coincidence. A lot of coincidences” (B4: 31). They relate as well, that they have „put in a lot of work” (B6: 21), have “reflected” (B9: 15) on their career and done the necessary work. In the end, they “struck” (B2: 15) at the right moment.

Some female professors emphasize the role of university committees and networking in their career development:

“I kind of landed unintentionally in the [committee 3 ...]. //Mhm//. To be honest it's a lot of work, but it helps obviously. It helps [...] because they are always in contact with their colleagues //mhm//, the colleagues call, they get them involved in these, I don't know if you're aware of this, get them involved in these informal ways [...]” (B2: 180).

The interviewed professors often faced competition within their own departments and rarely received support but often cooperated with other departments at the university or with institutions in other cities:

“... I'm pretty good at that, I mean with other institutions [...]. I think here [...] the internal competition [...] ruins a lot //mhm// and that wasn't the experience I had [in foreign country 2]. [A]lthough there is a lot of competition for funding it's very dynamic whereas here it's very hierarchal and then one eventually gets to the point where only very few can progress any further and the competition is extreme” (B11: 62).

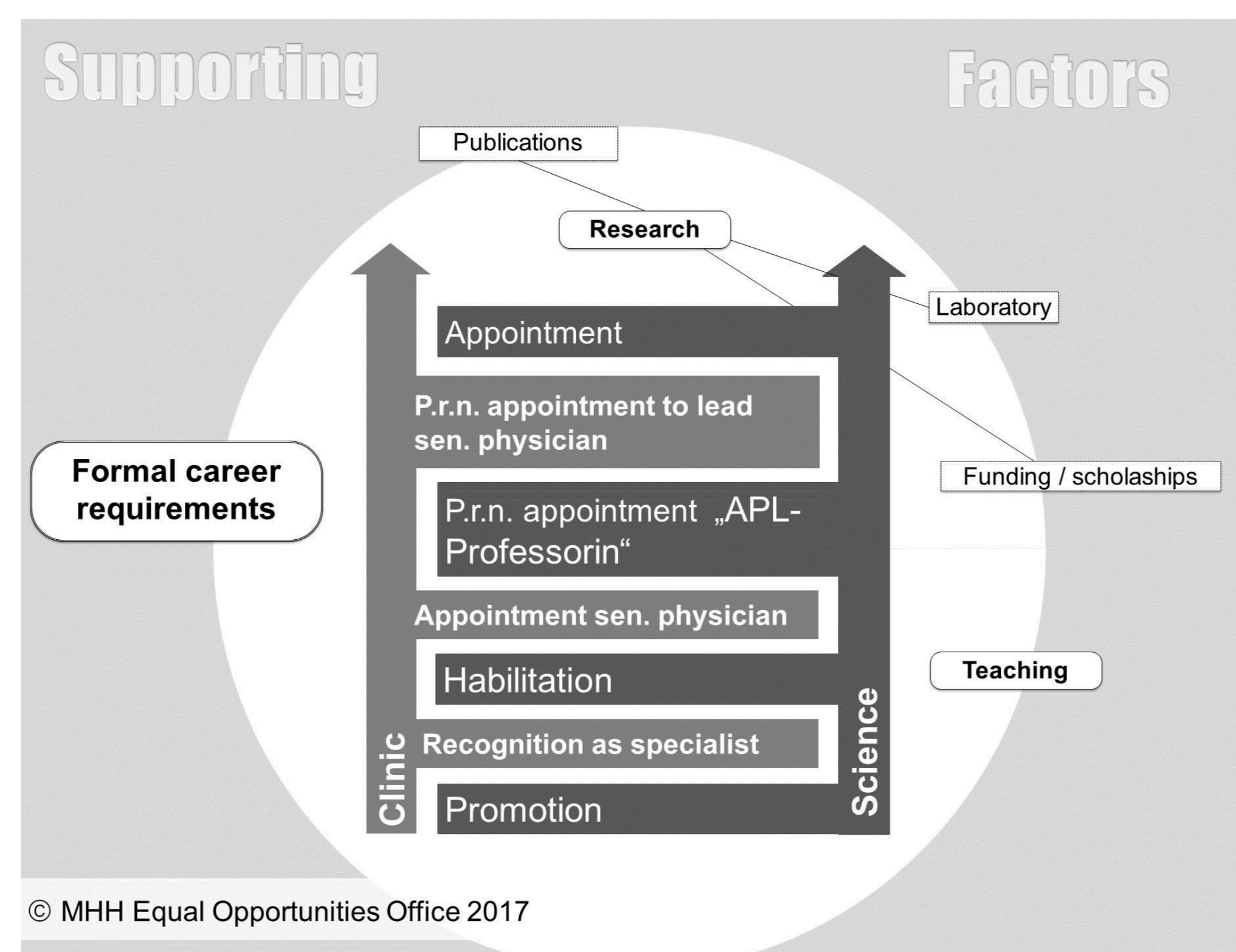


Figure 1: Careers in medical schools – Qualification levels and requirements

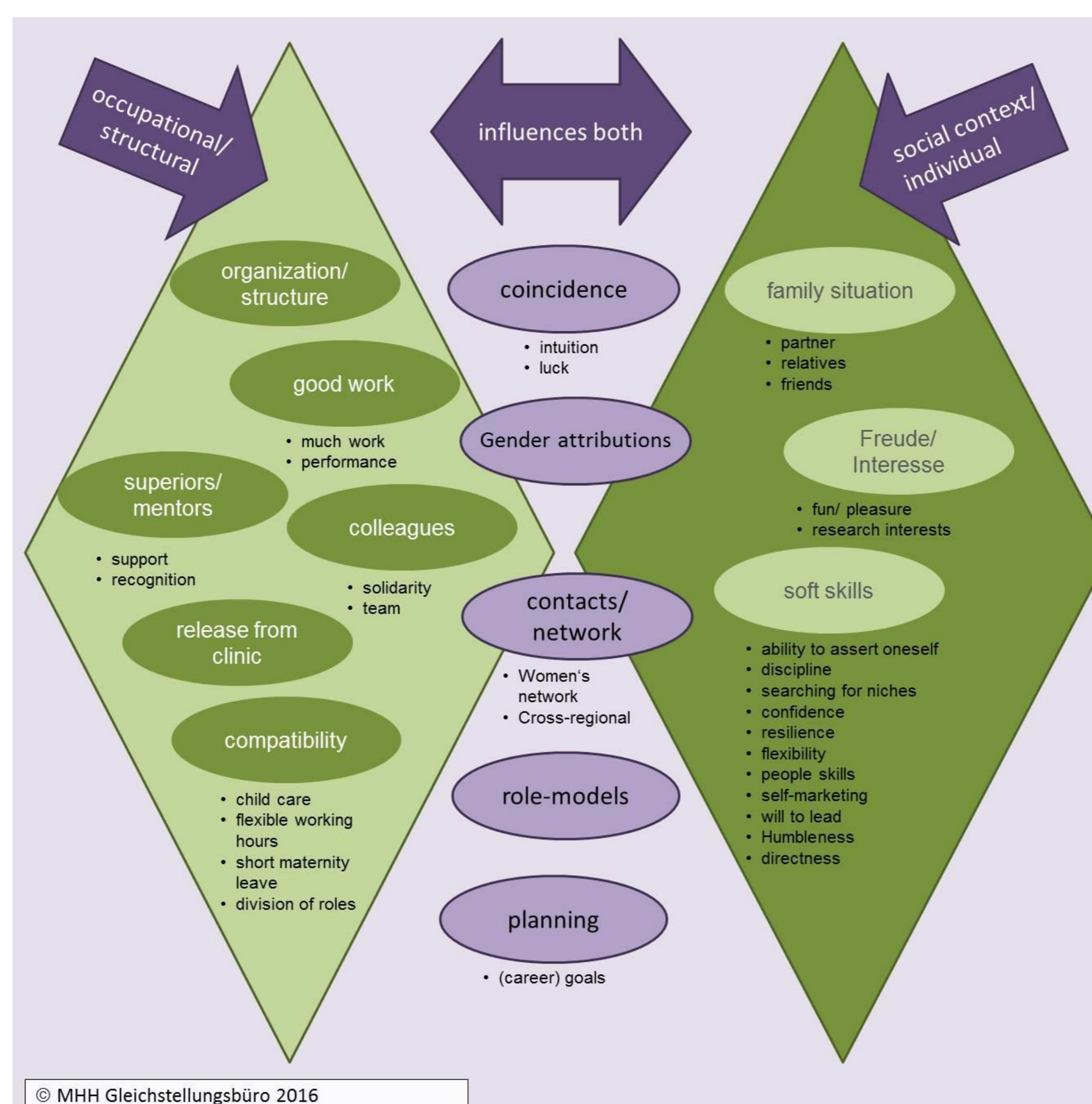


Figure 2: Factors that influence careers

They mention as well that the use of subject-niches has helped them in their career: “And in that area, in that sheltered niche, there was no competition for me” (B8: 61).

All the interviewed professors rate their careers as a success. “That's right, because that is [...] what I always wished for [...]. So actually I have gotten to exactly where I wanted to be, and actually even a little bit further, because [...] I wanted a professorship- that's what I had envisioned, that that would make me happy. And [...] I realized that it's actually more multifaceted than I had imagined” (B13: 18).

Conclusions

The interviews show that female scientists in university medicine have trouble breaking through the “glass ceiling”. The examined career-biographies thereby reflect social conditions (Dausien 2004). All three generations mention barriers which seem to barely have changed at all. The list of social, individual or psychological causes for the exclusion of women from the upper rungs of university medicine is long. The interviewees have a lack of female role models and complain of competition between both their male and female colleagues. The category gender is still an important factor in the structure of the working world and professional careers. Many women are relegated to the second row in terms of career positions in science. Special programs and measures to support the careers of women are still necessary.

Outlook

The importance of “coincidence” and “planning” in the careers of female scientists should be looked at more closely. Furthermore, the career development of men should be examined as well. One question is how attitudes and emotions, for example happiness and recognition, influence career development. Last but not least it seems important to look closely at power structures.

“Well, once in a while a woman will manage to get to the top [...], but there is an awful lot of resistance and I think that women, [...] who are trying to get to the top [...] need political support from other women and also from men who are aware of the difficulties, who also suffer under authoritarian systems, definitely” (B8:71).

Literature

Froböse, Claudia; Miemietz, Bärbel (2017): „Ein Weg am Abgrund?“ - Berufsverläufe von Professorinnen am Beispiel eines Hochschulmedizinstandortes. In: Onnen, Corinna; Rode-Breymann, Susanne (Hg.): Zum Selbstverständnis der Gender Studies. Methoden – Methodologien – theoretische Diskussionen und empirische Übersetzungen. Verlag Barbara Budrich/Budrich UniPress (im Druck).

Contact:

Hannover Medical School
Equal Opportunities Officer - OE 0013
Carl-Neuberg-Straße 1, 30625 Hannover
E-Mail: gleichstellung@mh-hannover.de