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BREAKING PATTERNS: HOW OPPORTUNISTIC SPONSORSHIP AND WOMEN'S MORAL COMPASS SHAPE CAREERS OF FEMALE SCIENTISTS

ABSTRACT

Women's careers in science and technology fields persistently lag behind those of male scientists. Scientific career success is believed to largely depend on the ability of individuals and groups to establish networks. This study analyzes women's attitudes towards networks and their perception of how social and professional networks influence their careers. Fifteen life-story narrations and semi-structured interviews of female researchers and students in science and technology allow rich insights into crucial decision points along female career paths. While the first analysis step focuses on the *gestalt* of the narratives to identify life story patterns, the second analysis step provides an in-depth examination of attitudes towards networks. (1) The study unveils different story-telling patterns: Despite the diversity in individual life stories, women narrate their own biographies along the distinction between in-group vs. out-group: *My Story is Quite Usual* views herself as an in-group member and describes her career as the logical consequence of her own merits. The *I am Different* storyteller perceives herself as an out-group member and highlights her token role as a woman in a male-dominated environment. (2) For all women, career sponsors, who grant comprehensive professional support and access to their scientific networks, prove crucial for career advancement. (3) Results show, however, that women hold rather ambivalent or even negative attitudes towards networking, irrespective of life story pattern, their career stage and their own (positive) experiences with sponsorship and networking. The study contributes critical arguments highlighting a dysfunction within scientific networks which tend to further homophile ties. Mentoring programs and sponsorship need to be further discussed from this perspective.

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