"Things take time" – but how long is that, exactly? Language as a structural barrier contributing to the underrepresentation of women, ethnic, and linguistic minorities in Academia.

Nonne Prisle (1) and Karen Lisa Salamon (2)

(1) University of Oulu, Nano and Molecular Systems Research Unit, Oulu, Finland (nonne.prisle@oulu.fi), (2) Department of Anthropology, University of Copenhagen, Denmark

Although the discourse on diversity in Academia and in particular within the natural sciences has grown significantly in the past decades, intersectionality is still little discussed in relation to the gender equality debate here in Europe.

Intersectionality is a theoretical and cultural-analytic conceptual framework, bringing together the simultaneous consequences of multiple social categorizations such as race, gender, disability, age, and linguistic group, to understand how they create and fuel overlapping and interdependent systems of dis-crimination or disadvantage to given individuals or groups. With this social scientific approach, systems of power such as racial, gendering, pertaining to country of origin and citizenship status cannot be understood in isolation from one another, but must be seen as intersecting to produce unequal material realities and social experiences (Collins & Chepp, 2013:4). This is highly important, given the increasing push towards international mobility for establishing and sustaining academic science careers in Europe today, even beyond obtaining senior faculty positions. As especially women scientists migrate to live and work, compete and succeed in different countries, cultures and linguistic settings, they may find themselves struggling with the effects of multiple unfamiliar systems and structures.

In a series of conversations over the last year, we, a physicist and an anthropologist, explore how theories and frameworks developed in social science relate to systemic pressures and the lived experience of scientists today. We discuss some of the systemic barriers related to diversity in physics and natural sciences, and in particular to the intersectional issues arising when women migrate across borders and cultures to pursue successful academic careers at the highest level. We discuss how language in particular, creates various forms of obstacles for inclusion, equal treatment, and academic success, particularly amongst migrating women scientists. These obstacles may take the form of actual language barriers preventing the transmission of important information and training needed to successfully carry out a job in science. We look at ways in which institutional language norms create intransparencies, and manifest as stereotypes and negative self-images amongst women and minority scientists navigating different settings and discourses in the academic work place.

Focusing on female faculty-level researchers, for whom the pressures leading to underrepresentation are especially pronounced, we present qualitative examples and analyses from predominantly Europe, in the form of excerpts from social scientific interviews, to demonstrate how obstacles play out in real academic careers. Our aim is to clarify social and cultural structures behind the reproduction of the underrepresentation of women, ethnic and linguistic minorities in Academia. Examples of effective practices documented as alleviating obstacles, are also presented.

We thus draw on current theory and discourse on diversity in science careers to inspire a more systematic thinking aiming to change sciences and Academia towards a more even representation of the whole population, benefitting from all talent, including that of women and minorities.

Collins, Patricia Hill, and Valerie Chepp: "Intersectionality." In The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics, Oxford University Press, 2013-03-12.