Feeling like a fish in water or like a fish out of water? A female academic career and experience in North Europe

Agnieszka Bron
Stockholm University
Sweden
agniesz@edu.su.se

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present an autobiographical account on the prospects and process of academic career in Nordic countries, and specifically in Sweden. The method used is biographical, or self-ethnographic, dealing with life transitions including struggles and experiences when making the career. The point of departure is the final step in the academic career, i.e. Professorship, and reconstruction of the life events backwards, both as diachronic, a moment in time, as well as synchronic, over time dimensions. This includes research initiation, PhD writing, Postdoc experience, habilitation, and struggling to get a position of a senior lecturer and finally a professor. Involvement in various projects and international networking are presented. Biographical work and learning are used to understand how a woman researcher is navigating in a difficult male dominated terrain, including both negative and positive experiences.

Keywords: higher education, female professors, floating, biographical work, biographical learning

In Sweden, both men and women have to retire and cannot work any longer after they have reached the age of 67, and the same rule applies to university staff. After having held a position of Chair in Education at Stockholm University for 19 years, I retired in 2016. However, being a Professor, I could be re-employed by Vice-chancellor as I had external research funds. At the time of my retirement, I was still responsible for the Swedish part of the European research project EMPLOY. As I still have curiosity and strength to continue my work and together with my colleagues, Camilla Thunborg and Ali Osman, we received a grant

for a new Swedish research project, *Examining 'spatial pockets of (in-) equalities - Enhancing young adults' educational and life careers in rural and suburb areas*, for three years, I am pleased to be able to continue working. Nevertheless, my road to become Professor was neither easy nor straightforward.

Much of my research has been focused on biographical learning and I find this opportunity to write my account appealing as it allows me to reflect on my own biographical work. Looking back, I can recall that I had to go through many struggles, as well as to cope with difficult situations, “floating” a lot and, most of all, dealing with my identity transformation. My assets were an academic background, i.e. by coming from a Professor’s family, being well educated and getting support from gatekeepers. But among my disadvantages I can include gender, looking too young for my age, and coming to Sweden from Poland, an East European country which “obviously” was not at the same economic and cultural level as other Western European countries, which I often heard from some of the colleagues. To balance the benefits and disadvantages was not easy, and perhaps what kept me going was my deep research curiosity.

What I would like to present in this account is my own life story by looking retrospectively at problems and solutions that other women can encounter while being involved in research that traditionally is a male dominating area. The moments of defeats gave me strength to fight back and to show others and myself that I am able to make a change. Thus, I hope my experience might help both women and men in Academia to reflect on their own careers and the struggles they deal with.

The HE system in Sweden as far as employment is concerned differs both from the Polish and the North American systems. When in 1980’s I came to Sweden there were two tracks one followed to get a position at the University: by becoming a teacher or by becoming a researcher. They are still the same. The first track included three hierarchical/vertical positions – a lecturer (first degree- having BA or BS degree), a senior lecturer (having a PhD degree) and professor (having an Associate Professor competencies – habilitation). These positions, if vacant, were possible to be applied for in competitions with others, which was usually very tough, especially for foreigners, as the Swedish language, and experiences of teaching at the Swedish universities were required, and what is more, the number of such positions was very limited. The second track was, and still is, to join the Academy by applying for a research grant provided that the university (department, chair) would hire you.

Thus, before applying for the grant an established contact with the institution was needed. Applying for such a research grant was possible for the persons being in the first track, and in this way they could lower their teaching load. I had experiences of both tracks and all the struggles they involved.

Today I have been living in Sweden for more than half of my life, so now Sweden has become my new country. But how did it happen that I ended up here in the first place? My “Nordic” career started very early in my life and, quite astonishing to myself, and finished with finally settling in one of the Nordic countries. Everything began with Denmark, and my Danish adventure. After graduating from the Stefan Batory secondary school in Warsaw, I was accepted to study at the Faculty of Psychology and Education at Warsaw University. At that time, I was not sure what special field I would choose. However already during summer holidays, after my first year of study, I was able to visit Denmark. The invitation came from Folmer Wisti, who was the Director of *Det Danske selskab*, today the Danish Culture Institute¹. Folmer was a friend of my father, and was between the wars a Danish lecturer at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow. I spent a week in Copenhagen, and then Folmer sent me to the folk high school (FHS, adult education residential institution) in Ry at Jutland. I was a student there and met the idea of FHS in reality, which seemed so fascinating to me that I started careful observations and interviews with the students, and this is how I become a social science researcher. But I was not skilled enough and when I returned to Warsaw I was wanted to learn about research methodology. Already then I made a decision concerning my research, and found a Polish FHS in which eventually I did my research (FHS at Wiekszyce). Then I came back to Ry to continue my investigation. My Master thesis was a comparative study of these two folk high schools. Being still fascinated with Denmark, I returned several times, and collected material to the book about the father of FHS, historian and theologian – N.F.S. Grundtvig. The book was published in Poland already when I left the country (Bron-Wojciechowska, 1986), but I felt it was my tribute to the Danish people.

¹ “Danish Cultural Institute was founded in 1940 at the initiative of a group of 34 outstanding Danish personalities from the world of culture, business, education and science. The Institute emanated as a counter-reaction to the dominating political environment in Europe in the 1930s and is based on the beliefs that collaboration, mutual understanding and cultural dialogue are of outmost importance and can arise from cultural engagement and exchange”.

“In the beginning founder Folmer Wisti named the institute ‘The Danish Society’. The aim was – the same as today – to encourage international understanding through exchange of cultural values, ideas and experiences and also to inform the world about Denmark. The first international branches were established in Poland and the UK in 1947 and in 1989 the name was changed to the Danish Cultural Institute”.

Thinking of the time when I was studying at the university and writing the MA thesis, I can recall it as quite a happy time. The problems started when I graduated and began my career as a researcher. In the beginning, I was employed at the Institute of Educational Research (IER), and then, when my father retired in 1975, I got a position at Warsaw University. In both places my expertise was in adult education. At the University, I started teaching when I was 26, and I can remember that my first seminar with part-time students was very demanding. One of the mature students could not accept that I was his teacher, as it was difficult to for him imagine how such a young person and a woman could contribute anything to his development.

My PhD dealt with quite a big quantitative study based on 32 case studies of popular universities in three regions of Poland, but also in-depth accounts of participants. My supervisor could not help me with either statistical or methodological issues. When I went for the final consultation with my supervisor, who previously was also my boss at the IER, and I was pregnant then and therefore perhaps more vulnerable, he insulted me as a woman and an PhD applicant with awful remarks about my pregnancy and being a female. I talked with my University boss, Professor Tadeusz Wujek about the incident. Today my testimony could easily be called #metoo. At that time, I considered to report my supervisor to the Disciplinary Commission at the University. This did not happen, as the Dean Professor Stefan Woloszyn, did not want to make any fuss, and allow a PhD candidate to withdraw officially from the supervisor. Professor Wujek took the responsibility as a new supervisor but I had to rewrite the thesis so that the former supervisor would not make any accusation to the authorship (sic!). While taking care of my little son, I was rewriting and reinterpreting the data. I got my degree delayed by one year than expected. Finally, it became a very good thesis. This was not the first time my former supervisor insulted women (and men as well) in front of others at the seminars, by making fun of them in an extremely unpleasant way. Unfortunately, he still does it, and nobody dares to stop him. I am absolutely certain that we as female researchers, need to have a zero tolerance for such unacceptable behaviour and abuse.

Sweden, on the other hand, seems to be a perfect place for female researchers. Here, one can find the best legislation and policy of equality and gender equity at the labour market, and in general (Bron-Wojciechowska, 1995a). When it comes to practice, however, there is still much to be done to achieve all the brilliant goals. Both based on my researcher and experience I can see many obstacles for women in making academic career, both socially and

culturally. Female students constitute the majority at the Swedish universities, but as one goes higher in hierarchy, starting with the pull of senior lectures, the number of women diminishes. There are still very few female professors compared with men. The salaries for women are lower, despite the fact they have the same positions as men generally, and in academia specifically, although there are some attempts now to change the situation. Being a female researcher myself I have been concerned with the questions of how PhD students, both men and women, can cope with inequalities in their research and what prospects they have to get a degree and a place in the academia. These questions became crucial in the project we were running in 1992-95 *Women and Men in Research Settings. Careers, Cultures and Interaction*, sponsored by the Swedish Work Environment Fund. It included research teams from three disciplines at Uppsala University (psychology, education and socio-linguistic). My role was to collect biographical narratives from female and male PhD students from three departments (natural science, humanities and social sciences). Although at these departments the number of students as far as gender was concerned were equal, the conditions and prospects for female PhD students and graduates were not as optimistic as for their male colleagues. What is more, none of the departments had a female professor at that time (Bron-Wojciechowska, 1995b).

Up to 1995 the chances of female researchers to become professors were almost impossible. Thus, very soon after our project was finished, in 1995 the government launched a reform aiming at enhancing women's opportunities to be upgraded from Associate Professor to Professor, with no competition, but only by being evaluated by three professors. This reform, however, did not help female researchers much as there were still more male applicants to be upgraded. Thus, they were still disadvantaged. The number of professors increased but as far as women are concerned it was only one percent growth per year, and thus between 1995 - 2003 the proportion of female professors increased by seven percent, making 15 % among professors in general. In 2016 the proportion of women grew up, and we had 1 390 female professors in the whole country which made 27 percent of the whole cohort (UKÄ, 2017; UKÄ. 2015, 2017). Interestingly, the first female professor in Sweden, and Europe, was Sonja Kovalevsky (1850–1891), a mathematician. She came to Stockholm 1884 to lecture, as in Russia she was not allowed to teach being a woman. In 1889 she got a call to the Stockholm University College, but she experienced disapproval by the committee to become a professor as she was a woman, as well as suspected and accused of being a socialist.

Eventually she received her professorship and was very highly appreciated by her students and colleagues, and acquired an international reputation (see, SU Department of Mathematics, <https://www.math.su.se/english>). She was not only a mathematician but also a humanist and a writer. One of Sonja Kovalevsky's short texts, published in Warsaw in 1903, was about the Swedish folk high schools (*Uniwersytet chlopski w Szwecji*).

Let me now return to my Swedish career. How was it possible for me to get a Professorship? Did I really stand any chance? Today I can say that by looking at the statistics, I did not. Was it then just good luck or my own, personal, individual effort? To explain, I need to go back to the beginning.

In 1981, being then a young PhD, I had an opportunity to apply for the Postdoc stipend in the USA through the Fulbright programme. Several applicants from Warsaw University were interviewed, but I won, as I had a clear plan for research in USA. I was lucky that my husband said "you should go, I will stay with our three-year-old son". He got his PhD one year later than me, and while working at one of the Research Institutes in Warsaw, he could take care of our son when I was away. I also got support to become a Fulbright scholar from my father who wanted me very much to take this opportunity. The plan was to do research on formal and non-formal education of trade union members and eventually find out how we could help 'The Solidarnosc' with its union work and with educating workers. In North America I was at SUNY at Stony Brook, and then a visiting professor at OISE in Toronto. Having been involved actively in the Solidarnosc movement in the USA, after 13th December 1981, there was not much chance to be able to return to Poland. As in 1982 my husband, by chance, came to Sweden, it was the country to which we could defect. He was invited for a short study visit by adult education research group run by Kjell Rubensson at the Stockholm School of Education. The decision to stay abroad was extremely difficult on different levels – socially and politically but also personally. Our son was in Warsaw, and we did not know while making the decision that we were going to wait for seeing him again so long. Already in New York, and later in Toronto I started a legal procedure to get him back. It turned out, however, that he was not allowed to leave Poland immediately and eventually he came to Sweden after seven months of not being with both of us, and fourteen months without his mother, but finally, the reunion was possible.

In Sweden in September 1982 my husband and I applied for to the UNESCO conference

in Paris, and got the visa, but one week before our departure we went to the Polish consulate in Stockholm to discuss how to get our son back. We got stuck there, our passports, as a property of the State, were taken from us. Just like that, unexpectedly, to our horror, we became stateless. Now, the only hope was to get aliens' passports through the Swedish immigration office. We also had to buy new flight tickets. Eventually, we managed to arrive in Paris one day later, and there we found out that my first (former) supervisor was officially representing Poland, while we were doing this unofficially. I remember receiving a huge, standing ovation from friends who were there.

1982 was not my first time in Sweden. I visited Sweden before in the 1970's, by attending conferences and staying at the Nordic Academy where Björn Höjer was a director. Björn and other Swedish adult educators visited me in Warsaw at the IER on several occasions. But I had never been in Stockholm before. This beautiful city seemed so cold, unfriendly and strange. I could not remember the name of the streets I went through. Attending the Swedish course seemed not important and actually funny – why should I learn this weird language when I already knew English? And why do I need to meet Poles who were so extremely xenophobic? I was definitely on my way to floating.

Looking back, even though I experienced difficult time in my research career as a woman, nevertheless, a great many important persons were helping me as gatekeepers and supporters. Especially, Kjell Rubensson was significant – the first professor in Adult Education in Sweden and the holder of the only chair in Linköping University. I met Kjell in 1973, and then 1982 in Canada when he was a visiting professor in Vancouver. I was going to Vancouver invited by Jindra Kulich, who once visited my father in Warsaw and we had a chance to meet then. Jindra became a dear friend who took care of me at the time of uncertainty, my identity struggles and floating while waiting to move to Sweden, whilst he went through the similar process, when defected from Czechoslovakia in 1948. The next significant other was professor Urban Dahllöf from Uppsala University whose interest was in international and comparative higher education (Dahllöf, 1977). My husband and I were so lucky we could get acquainted with Urban who became a mentor and later a friend, and he encouraged us to write research applications and search for grants at the Swedish Research Council. The trust in us that we could do it, and offering the location for the research project at Uppsala University, given that we would get funding, was very encouraging. There was a

huge competition for research funding as well, but we took a chance. In the USA, I collected the data, which was the starting point for my research application. The idea was to make comparative studies on mature students' access to post-secondary education in four countries: the USA, former Yugoslavia, Poland and West Germany. Having to write the application within three months was very difficult and stressful, and afterwards we had to wait and see, if we would get the funding. The D-day came in May 1983 with the news that both of us, my husband and I, were successful in getting our projects granted and the prospects of moving to Uppsala became very exciting. At that moment, the new research career began, as well as the transition to academic life. Urban's wife, Tordis Dahllöf, an ethnologist, introduced us to the Swedish culture, history and landscape. She was a true listener and discussion partner in my research, and her and Urban's house was always open to foreign intellectuals.

Coming from Toronto to Stockholm, the only treasure I had with me was my PhD. Could this open the door for the career at the Swedish universities? At that time, there were still very few PhD holders in Sweden, but I was not aware of that.

At the end of 1989 the book *Workers and Post-Secondary Education. A Cross Polity Perspective* was completed (Bron-Wojciechowska, 1989), and I was ready to apply for the Associate Professor competencies, which I was awarded successfully in 1990. I submitted for evaluation all my research achievements and ten best publications.

We knew at that point that external funds could only support us as researchers, giving us a temporary contract. To get a foot into Academy, it would be to seek a permanent position. However, this is where the problem started. I applied for several positions at Linköping University when there was an opening, as they were focusing on applicants with adult education competencies. My Polish (ten years), American and Canadian experiences in teaching, and some seminars at Uppsala with PhD students did not count when it came to evaluation of my pedagogical skills to become a senior lecturer. Through Kjell Rubenson and his PhD student *Ingvar Törnqvist*, who was the Vice-Chancellor of Jönköping University Collage, I received information that there was a vacancy for a part-time senior lecturer position in Education for a year. I applied and got it in 1986, and this is how my commuting period from Uppsala began. As it turned out, one year was enough experience to show in my CV when applying for a permanent job. In 1987, I was given a senior lecturer position in adult education in Linköping University. My task was to teach candidates for folk high school

teachers. I commuted from my home in Uppsala while I also continued my research at Uppsala University.

In 1986, I got a new project in Uppsala on the Polish immigrants, and being already a senior lecturer in Linköping the idea triggered my own identity's struggles as an immigrant to this country. Florian Znaniecki's biography just fell into my hands, and I was astonished how many similarities to my own emigration problems as an intellectual he himself had encountered (Dulczewski 1984; Szacki 1986). They were definitely close to my own experiences. At the same time, my interest in biographical method and symbolic interactionism started. I also read Thomas and Znaniecki's two-volume book – *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* in English, which I later read in Polish, that inspired me in searching for biographical methodology. The Chicago school of sociology and social pragmatism with GH Mead became my theoretical perspective and interest.

In Linköping a new problem came up. I had been a lecturer before, and taught at some courses for PhD students in both Canada and Uppsala, but teaching in Swedish was much more difficult. Meetings with my students triggered a need to find a better teaching method – which became a biographical one (Bron-Wojciechowska 1992). This struggle in teaching contributed, in turn, to the new sensitizing concept that I developed both theoretically and empirically, i.e. floating. Floating means a deep feeling of being paralyzed by events or experiences that a person cannot cope psychologically, emotionally and/or socially. It involves either being stuck and unable to move backwards or forwards. I experienced floating myself and in the interviews with Polish immigrants to Sweden as well, as I started to collect the data. In a project *Changes in an Adult's Life Situation as Reason for Learning: The Case of Immigrants' Life Situation in Sweden* (1986-1990) I could confirm and develop the concept (Bron 2000, 2005, 2007). The experiences of floating can be shorter or longer, but might even last for several years, as research results have shown. When recognised through self-reflection it triggers a process of learning. The concept of floating helps to elucidate biographical learning. Biographical learning that includes changes in identity because of new experiences, new knowledge and reflection. I recall the time in Linköping as an insecure lecturer having difficulties in meeting with students, who were accusing me of being too academic and posh. As a result, I became humbled and got an understanding about class mobility that mature students faced and found difficult to cope with.

In the projects to come which focused on HE students I could make the concept

connected more to identity forming and transforming as well as to the theory of biographical learning which I developed with my colleague Camilla Thunborg (Bron & Thunborg, 2017).

During my time in Sweden, I developed an international research interest, and not only because of comparative studies. Attending conferences, presenting papers and publishing numerous articles and texts became a habit, like being something natural. In 1991, Berry Hake from Leiden University invited several researchers in adult education to start a new European research society in adult education. I was one of those who were invited, so I became a member of the interim board of ESREA (European Society on Research of Education of Adults) at the same year. Barry became a General Secretary, and in 1993, a proper steering committee was elected, of which I was the only woman. Kjell Rubensson became President. I was re-elected several times and in 2006 I finally resigned from being the steering committee member. From the very beginning I became involved in several research networks: set up The Active Democratic Citizenship Network together with English and Polish colleagues, John Field became the first convener, and very soon, I took the lead and carried it out until 2006. I contributed to Biographical Research and Life History Network from the beginning, working together with Pierre Dominicé and Peter Alheit its convener, and with some other colleagues, we started up Gender Network again. I also was involved in Access network, and Older learners' network mostly as a participant. This engagement contributed to working with researchers internationally and eventually to several European research projects.

Getting back to my academic career in Sweden, being now employed as a senior lecturer in Linköping and as an Associate Professor in Uppsala, I decided it was now the right time to apply for a professorship. In 1992 the possibility opened up, when the position in Adult Education after Kjell Rubensson was vacant and several researchers applied. Unfortunately, I did not get it, and came only on the third place. At that time, there were very few professors all together, and among them only 8 percent women. In fact, I was the only woman who had applied.

As I failed in 1993 to become Professor in Adult Education, I began to look for the senior lecturer position in Education somewhere else. Such an opportunity arose so I applied for the post at Stockholm University. Once more, there were very many applicants, but this time, I was successful and my commuting distance from Uppsala shortened to 45 minutes. I was happy to move to Stockholm University, to a very small Department involved with

educational research without any focus on school or teacher education, and in this regard very similar to Uppsala Department.

At the Stockholm Department, we had only one professor position. In bigger departments, like in Uppsala, there were four. Most professor positions were held by men. In Stockholm, just before I got my senior lecture position, in 1992 the Chair went to Birgitta Qvarsell, an educationist dealing with children's culture, and interested among other issues in Korczak's pedagogical ideas. Making such a career was possible only by waiting for a Chair to be vacant and in competitions with other applicants for the post. The department had a very good reputation and financial stability. Already from the beginning Birgitta Qvarsell had an idea to acquire a new Chair in Education by lobbying for it at the Faculty and in Vice-chancellor office. In 1995 she was successful and we got a new position which many candidates applied for. I sent my application as well, and I waited patiently. Meanwhile, two of senior lecturers were appointed to share this new position, as adjunct professor temporary, for the time being, until the Chair position would be filled, thus being part-time. I knew what it felt like to be at this position as I was one of those who were sharing it. Unfortunately, I could not share this good news with my father who had passed away a year earlier.

Waiting for the real appointment took time, so when a call from Germany for the Chair in International Adult Education at Bochum University came in 1996, I became curious and decided to try. To my surprise I was shortlisted, came to Bochum to give a test lecture and was interviewed. Among the 10 shortlisted candidates, I was the best – a female, a Pole, and coming from Sweden. The next step was just to wait. Eventually, I got to know that the Ministry of Science and Higher Education in North Rein Westphalia, who appoints professors, was not happy with the Faculty board decision to recommend only two candidates for approval and not three as it was customary. The Faculty dealt with the issue and insisted that there were only two suitable candidates.

Meanwhile, in Sweden, I was also waiting, first for the decision of the experts, then for the Faculty decision, as being shortlisted and to receive the first place. However, a male colleague who was ranked the second was not happy with the outcome and challenged the decision to the Independent Council. I had to respond and to prove that I was the best candidate and the whole procedure took another 6 months. This was a hard time for me as some of the staff at the Department put up the challenge text of my colleague with his accusations in the lunchroom so everybody could see what he wrote. It felt really strange.

In the meantime, a question from Bochum arrived whether I was willing to take the position, and I felt I had no other any choice but just to say 'yes'. A week later a decision from Stockholm came that I did win. I agreed to take the position, but decide to take a leave of absence to go to Bochum in order to find out what it was like there. It took three years to be back to Stockholm again. In this way, I got a good insight to the culture of the German academic system. There I built up the Chair in International Adult Education with my staff, publishing among others four volumes of Bochum Studies in International Adult Education (2000-2003)². Being a woman and foreigner in Bochum might need its special story but let me leave it for another occasion.

After coming back from Bochum I could start building my career at Stockholm University as the Chair of Education, and I did. I also expanded my experiences to serve as an adjunct professor at the National Defense University for six years, as an addition to my post. Meanwhile, the Stockholm Department became larger (as teacher training college merged with Stockholm University) and we got new professors both female and male.

During my whole career I was involved in research projects, both in Sweden and other European countries. It started with the project on non-traditional students' access to HE in Sweden, which was followed by the European project on the same theme, and continued with several more. The two last projects RANLHE (Access and Retention: Experiences of Non-traditional Learners in Higher Education) and EMPLOY (Enhancing the employability for non-traditional students after higher education) generated enough empirical biographical data that we were able to theorise and come up with the theory of biographical work (Bron & Thunborg, 2016; Bron & Thunborg, 2017).

In my scientific career, I have managed to build research contacts also with other Nordic countries, from Denmark, collaborating with researchers from Roskilde University, but most of all with Professor Marianne Horsdal from the University of Southern Denmark in Odense. This cooperation with Marianne developed into a long lasting friendship. I also had good contacts with researchers in Finland, professors Ari Antikainen and Anja Heikkinen.

Feeling like fish in water, when looking back in my professional life, was directly linked to my social background, in a way with a privileged academic position that I did not think about much. I did not reflect in terms of gender, or having unpleasant attitude, either. Personal culture, in the meaning of good behaviour, was extremely important for me. Any

² I was really proud to publish articles of such sociologists as Bauman, Sztompka, Alexander and Glaser as well as very well-known adult educationist.

deviation from the norm was difficult to comprehend. I expected people in Academy to be genuinely good and clever. Only when it did not work, unexpectedly, my astonishment was so enormous that I felt like fish out of water. These struggles gave me strength or ability to achieve as much as I could and never give up. As my own story has shown, I got support from very many fine male scholars and friends. Yet, I still wonder, how we, as female researchers, can become more visible, and not being ignored by our male colleagues, how we can trust our knowledge and experience, and how we can make our careers equal. These are still some vital questions to be addressed and dealt with.

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