Introduction

Universities present themselves as meritocratic. In Scully’s (1997, 413) terms a meritocratic system is “a social system in which merit or talent is the basis for sorting people into positions and distributing rewards”. However, studies increasingly question that supposed meritocracy (van Den Brink and Benschop, 2012; O’Connor and O’Hagan, 2015; Nielsen, 2016). Nielsen (2016) argues that meritocracy is little more than a “rationalized myth” which ignores the gendered structures and practices in universities. This article suggests that much of this gendering occurs through informal structures, with micropolitics being the concept used to refer to this.

Universities have a clearly defined formal structure formed by a set of elements, systematically organized to achieve certain goals; but at the same time, they also have an informal structure formed by multiple substructures, as many informal groups exist within the organization (Infestas, 1993). The informal structure is revealed though the daily practices, relationships and behaviours of members of the institution (White, 1986; Infestas, 1993; Morley, 2000; Benschop, 2009). Only in that way, can we discover “power operating in structures of thinking and behaviour that previously seemed devoid of power relations” (White, 1986, 421). This has been referred to as micropolitics. In Morley’s (2000, 233) terms, micropolitics “is about relationships rather than about structures; about knowledge rather than about information; about skills rather than about positions; about talk rather than about paper”. Blase (1991) suggests that micropolitics is about inclusion as well as exclusion. It is:

About power and how people use it to influence others and to protect themselves. It is about conflict and how people compete with each other to get what they want. It is about co-operation and how people build support among themselves to achieve their ends (p.1).

Micropolitics has been seen as involving “intrigue, subterfuge and a rackety underworld of scams and plots” (MacKenzie-Davey, 2008, 667). It is characterized by coalitions,
alliances, political and personal strategic actions and also by tensions and power imbalances. It consists of power relationships that act in subtle and sophisticated ways and that are reflected in the everyday practices of organizations (Morley, 2000).

In universities micropolitics occur in a gendered context. Universities are male dominated organizations internationally: “gender inequalities in academia appear to be persistent and global phenomena” (Husu, 2001, 172; see also O’Connor, 2014). They are also horizontally segregated in terms of (gendered) disciplines. There is substantial evidence of the difficulties of eliminating gender bias both from objective measures and subjective evaluations although increased transparency is helpful (Foschi, 2006). Micropolitics is reflected in and reinforced by interactional gendered practices (Wharton, 2012; Risman and Davis, 2013; O’Connor et al., 2015b).

In this article we are concerned with looking at the extent to which micropolitics is a reality in case studies of two contrasting university systems: a collegial Spanish university and a managerial Irish university, and with the extent to which it is perceived as impacting on women’s careers in these different contexts.

Context

Women now constitute roughly two fifths of those at the lower academic staff levels in both the Irish and Spanish public university system (forty-three per cent and thirty-nine per cent respectively). In both countries only roughly one fifth of those at professoriate level are women (nineteen per cent and twenty-one per cent respectively). While the proportion of women at full professor level in the Irish case study is higher than the national average (thirty-one per cent versus nineteen per cent: HEA 2016), the proportion in the Spanish case study is virtually identical to the national average (almost twenty-one per cent in both cases: MECD 2015).

On the other hand, there are clear differences in the university systems in the two countries. The Spanish system is characterized by collegiality, the traditional model in universities involving governance “by a community of scholars, as opposed to a central managerial authority” (Meek, 2002, 254). In the Spanish university, governance, decision making, control and coordination bodies (Governing Body, University Senate, Social Council, Faculty Boards, Department Council, etc.) involve representation of the whole university community, that is, teaching and research staff, administrative and service staff
and students. The Governing Body is headed by the Rector of the university. It decides what new vacancies will be created in each department (i.e. how many and their level). New vacancies need not be advertised. An academic hierarchy exists consisting of lecturer; senior lecturer; associate professor and full professor. The general criteria that boards use to evaluate applications for vacancies at each level are determined by this representative body. The Departmental Council is responsible for deciding the specific profile of the vacancy and choosing the board which will evaluate the applications, although these decisions must be ratified by Governing Body. On each board there is a union representative from the biggest trade union at the university whose function it is to ensure that the selection procedure is done according to the rules and procedures. With the possible exception of this element, in the Spanish collegial system relationships with colleagues in general and departmental colleagues in particular are vital, and thus it is a particularly fertile ground for micropolitics.

The Irish system is mainly characterized by a managerial system. In the Irish university, the President is appointed by Governing Authority and he in turn appoints the Vice Presidents, and Faculty Deans. Although representative bodies exist (such as Academic Council, Governing Authority; Faculty Management Committee; Faculty Board, etc.) executive power is concentrated in the President, with the executive team he chooses being largely advisory. Governing Authority has the power to appoint and if necessary to dismiss the President. On a day-to-day basis, particularly as regards appointments and promotions, Governing Authority simply endorses the recommendations made to it by interview boards, and ultimately by the President.

The case study university is a “new university” having achieved university status in the last century. The academic hierarchy is similar to the Spanish one. In the case study university, decisions as regards the overall allocation of posts between faculties are made by a sub-committee of executive committee chaired by the Vice President Academic and Registrar, who has been appointed by the President. The Deans, who are also appointed by the President, are responsible for ensuring that recruitment advertisements and the criteria to evaluate applicants are drafted. In practice this is typically done by the relevant Head of Department, who also identifies the recruitment panel and the evaluative criteria. The Head of Department is ultimately appointed by the Dean. Since open recruitment occurs largely only at the very beginning of the academic career and at full professorial level, the range of appointments over which the Head of Department has control is limited. Movement between the lecturer and associate professor level inclusive is
ultimately determined by large promotion committees (11-14 members) with very limited representation from any one department. Depending on the level of the position, these boards, similar to all appointment boards, are chaired either by the President or the Vice President Academic and Registrar. Applicants are evaluated on a range of indicators across the areas of research, teaching and service (XXXX). Hence, there is an attempt to ensure that the impact of personal contacts, particularly at departmental level, is limited.

The Irish and Spanish universities thus constitute two contrasting systems within which to explore the importance of micropolitics.

**Methodology**

The research in the Irish and Spanish universities was conducted as part of wider research projects on higher education, focusing particularly on gender. In both cases the research design involved organisational case studies. Case study research facilitates investigating a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, and it offers the opportunity to understand a phenomenon in depth. The disadvantage of case study research is that it is difficult to generalize findings beyond these specific organizational contexts.

The studies were undertaken separately. The data is not entirely comparable since the Irish data, unlike the Spanish one, was specifically concerned with women’s underrepresentation in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) undertaken as part of a wider cross national study. The Spanish research was concerned with career trajectories, work-life balance, and gender differences in work and career paths. Both studies were concerned with the position of women in academia and both studies included men and women, and used a broadly similar methodology. Hence it seemed worthwhile to attempt a comparative analysis with some methodological caveats.

The Irish data in this article emerged from two sources of interviews: firstly research on the career trajectories of those at different levels of the hierarchy in STEM, and secondly research on constructions of excellence. The former involved twenty-nine people, (eighteen men and eleven women) selected by random sampling from those at early, mid and senior levels, using an on-line, random sequence generator. The second source drew on interviews with a purposive sample of fourteen respondents (seven men and seven women) involved in evaluative activities either as candidates or as board members. Micropolitics was not a specific focus but emerged spontaneously in the Irish
study in responses to a variety of questions e.g. “Has gender affected your career progression in a positive or negative way?”; “When you look back over your career what do you see as the critical points?”. The total number of respondents included in this article from the Irish study was forty-three respondents (twenty-five women and eighteen men). There were no refusals.

The Spanish data is derived from forty-three in-depth interviews (twenty-two women and twenty-one men) with academics at early; middle and senior levels. As in the Irish case, micropolitics was not a specific focus but emerged spontaneously in answers to questions such as: “What have been the most decisive moments in your career?”, “What people or things have encouraged you, or conversely, discouraged you in your career?”, “Is there any difference in the careers of men and women in the university?”.

A critical realist approach (Scambler, 2001) was adopted in both studies. It denies that we can have any objective or certain knowledge of the world, and accepts the possibility of alternative valid accounts of phenomena (Maxwell, 2012). Thus, the focus is on respondents’ perceptions. Interviews facilitate an understanding of the depth and complexity of people’s accounts. In both studies the methodology was processual and reflexive, in the grounded theory tradition. Pseudonyms are used and in the interests of confidentiality, identifying information (such as position) are not included. Hence, respondents are only identified as from the Irish or Spanish university (IE and ES); as man/woman; and with a unique identifier number (00) in each case study context.

Qualitative research aims to produce rounded and contextual understandings on the basis of rich, nuanced and detailed data. In both studies interviews averaged one hour and were tape recorded and transcribed. The Spanish study analysed the interviews using the computer software program Atlas.ti to systemize, code, compare and explore the data. To ensure the coding process was completed, it was conducted in two phases. In the first one, based on deduction, the coding frame was made using a list of categories and codes derived from a review of literature. The second coding was inductive with new codes not previously contemplated being added. Concepts related to micropolitics emerged in this second part of the process. In the Irish study content analysis was used to analyse the interview data because it is a systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories based on explicit rules of coding (Weber, 1990). Each unit of analysis was a word or piece of text from the interview transcripts. These were sorted into emergent categories and themes, and then into meaningful clusters for analysis. A coding map was developed, linking codes to categories, clusters and
themes. Content analysis thus facilitated analysing the data in the transcripts in a systematic fashion. Micropolitics also emerged in the data analysis in the Irish context.

**Micropolitics: a reality?**

The similarities in the two universities as regards the existence and importance of micropolitics is striking. In the Irish study the respondent below suggests that power is an inevitable part of organizational life:

> Because an organisation is made up of people [it] gets captured by people with their own agendas. Whether that’s the President sort of saying well I’m going to push medicine and education and health sciences and this and that and whether it’s the perceived or real rivalries between different departments in our faculty for instance and there’s a sort of ongoing battle you know for resources and supremacy…. Yeah so that’s, that’s the problem always with organisations really. It’s all politics (IE, woman, 40).

Spanish respondents were even more likely than their Irish counterparts to refer overtly to the impact of micropolitics on the recruitment of staff, and to see this as serving a protective purpose for the in-group:

> In our university the best, the most qualified person will not always be who is going to get promoted… Moreover I think promoting people not so good as others sometimes has the strategic purpose of creating a group that do not outshine our group or creating an easily manipulated group (ES, man, 30).

Owen-Smith and Powell (2008, 616) noted that informal relationships are both “the pipes through which resources circulate and the prisms that observers use to make sense of action”. Hence, two subtopics were identified within micropolitics: those related to career related experiences focusing particularly on sponsorship; and those around the evaluation of candidates focusing particularly on double standards used to favor particular candidates (whether on the basis of gender or ‘inbreeding’). These are analytical distinctions and they are all seen as part of the single phenomenon of micropolitics.

**Micropolitics related to career experiences: sponsors**
Universities can be seen as bureaucratic and hierarchical organizations in Weberian (1947) terms, insofar as access to and movement between positions is purportedly based on gender neutral objective criteria. However, this focus on the explicit official written rules that apply to the conduct of all members of the organization ignores the informal structure and culture which emerges in and around it.

We focus particularly on sponsors i.e. powerful others who use their influence to advocate and create opportunities for their protégés (Ibarra et al., 2010) since this is an important career accelerator (Cameron and Blackburd, 1981; van den Brink and Benschop, 2012). The existence of such relationships can be seen as reflecting “aspirational networking” (Benschop, 2009), that is, networks that facilitate the careers of those who are part of these powerful networks and inhibiting the careers of those who are not.

In the Spanish university the procedures to achieve promotion underline the importance of informal relationships with powerful others at departmental level. The interviewees from that university agree that the absence of such ties, regardless of the type of system, can block the career of someone brilliant and encourage the career of people less brilliant: “I have known many systems of promotion, they have changed with the passage of the time, but they have always depended on that [informal ties] and now too” (ES, man, 33). The Irish respondents referred to the strategy of “paying forward” i.e. doing favours for those in authority, on the assumption that these acts of loyalty and helpfulness will be repaid and will facilitate their appointment/promotion:

And in the promotion game you always need somebody on the other side of the fence…. It’s a promotion competition. If you’ve nobody on the other side of the table fighting your case, you’ve no chance…You arrange [that].., through [favours], you know. Well, no you may just have a feeling that, you know, Johnny will support or Mary will support…Because you’ve been doing stuff [with them] and you know they’re signing off on project applications or they know a bit about your publication record, or you’ve gone and presented to industry or some [other activity], you know and when they pick up the phone and ask you to do something, you do it. And you do it not just once you might do it fifty times. So, when your application goes in you’d expect them to support you. So, they do reward [your work] (IE, man, 23).

Both the respondents in the Spanish and Irish universities noted the importance of these relationships with power holders whom they recognized would be sitting on recruitment or promotion boards. Thus although it was recognized that it was necessary to meet the relevant criteria, they were also very aware of the importance of having a sponsor,
someone to speak up for them in that context, and (in the Spanish case) of the importance of the influence that person had within the wider university context:

It depended on one hand, obviously, on the qualifications of the candidate, but it also depended in part on the influence that your immediate superior had in the university… on the relationship you had, your boss had within the University, that certainly (ES, man, 27).

The micropolitics involved in choosing a sufficiently powerful sponsor were particularly clearly articulated by the Spanish respondents. As they saw it, this person could help their protégé to be promoted in their academic career or to achieve a job in the university, by effectively acting as a sponsor (Ibarra et al., 2010) and creating opportunities for them:

The academic career is very difficult to be neutral. Once you enter college you need someone to bet on you. Even if you are good at research, you need one person in the high rankings of university, preferably full Professors, who bet on you and accept to be your supervisor… You can aspire to defend a doctoral thesis and have a PhD degree but to make an academic career, apart from your work and effort, you need to be helped by someone, someone who knocks on doors to open them. If nobody helps you, you do not go a step alone on that staircase. This is a career that is made with the help of another person (ES, woman, 9).

Several times the word “godfather” appeared in the Spanish study referring to sponsors i.e. those who had a very strong influence on creating career opportunities for their protégé. This figure often is the PhD supervisor. Other people in formal positions also can have a strong influence on a career because they can help in different ways, for instance, in research, in achieving a management position, or as the following quote shows, in publishing in an important journal –the assumption being that in each of these situations (and despite the ostensibly objective peer review system) personal contacts are crucial: “What do you need? Publish one article in a good journal? I will see who I know in that journal…” (ES, man, 29).

Are men and women equally favoured?

It is a paradox that although women are widely seen as more likely than men to have close friendship ties (O’Connor, 2002), they are also seen as less likely to have the strong informal connections involved in aspirational networking and sponsorship. This may reflect, at least in part, the male dominated character of the university (Hultin, 2003) combined with homosociability or homophilia (Benschop, 2009; Grummell et al., 2009;
van den Brink and Benschop, 2012) i.e. the preference for people like oneself. Bagilhole and Goode (2001, 161) identified the existence of what they called an “in-built patriarchal support system” which was available to men in male dominated structures in a way that was not available to women. For Benschop (2009, 222) the ‘intertwined processes of networking and gendering are micro-political processes: they reproduce and constitute power in action in everyday organizational life”. Thus a focus on micropolitics enables us to see the way in which gendered structures are reproduced through everyday social practices (of course variation can also occur within genders).

Many studies show that men are more likely to be encouraged to apply for positions, despite the myth of individual achievement (Bagilhole and Goode, 2001; Husu, 2001; Kantola, 2009; van den Brink and Benschop, 2012). As the following quote shows, if a person has to choose someone to work with them, for example, in a management team, they will choose people whom they trust and trust people whom they know. Trust involves a subjective element, often reflecting previous interactions or contacts (ETAN report, 2000) and these are typically gendered:

Here, at the University, you are in contact with many people… your circle, you get along well with more boys than girls, because, because you are a boy. It is the same as girls. Then, maybe when it comes to choosing the Head of the Department, you are in contact with people who you know that are going to work well, you know them (ES, man, 26).

As in to van den Brink and Benschop (2012), this is especially relevant in accessing professorships:

Traditionally, there have never been women in higher positions and as these have always been in the hands of men, when they have to choose a position by voting or when there is a position as a chair, all these boards are composed mostly of men, then men... I think they form a more homogenous club than women, and if there are men, if most of them are men, they will always support a man (ES, woman, 8).

Irish respondents occasionally noted that gendered ties might be reflected in gender variation in the support for male and female candidates in appointment or promotional contexts:

Guys tend to group together. They tend to form teams. It’s something that’s, I think it’s natural in guys to do that…and in the process of doing that, if you’re not on the team, you’re outside the team. And there could be, not a, not if you like an overt gender bias, but there could be an implicit one on that basis (IE, man, 2).
Both Irish and Spanish women respondents emphasise that spending time outside work with colleagues or superiors is positive for the career: “All that playing golf at the weekends, it certainly does help… networking, networking on the golf course” (IE, woman 1). They note that the lower participation of women in such leisure spaces had implications for the development of their careers because important decisions are made in these social spaces:

To compete with men, one has to use the same weapons as men: you have to be at the drink hour, at the coffee hour, at the beer hour. No! I finish work, see you colleagues! I have to go to bathe children, read them stories. At this time that you go to bathe children is when they distribute power positions (ES, woman, 9).

Not all men have or indeed want to engage in aspirational networking (O’Connor et al., 2015a). However, women experienced being directly and indirectly excluded from male dominated aspirational networks and having less time to spend on such networking, the net effect of which they saw as impacting on their career progression: Guys tend to group together. They tend to form teams. It’s something that’s, I think it’s natural in guys to do that…and in the process of doing that, if you’re not on the team, you’re outside the team. And there could be, not a, not if you like an overt gender bias, but there could be an implicit one on that basis (IE, man, 2).

“Not networking hard enough, not going to conferences enough, those are all the obstacles. And spending too much time with my family…” (IE, woman, 40). In the Spanish case, the men interviewed reflect a broad awareness of the influence of sponsors but they do not refer to benefiting men versus women, but some people against others. Women are generally less aware of the impact of micropolitics on their academic career, but when they point out examples of it, they relate to how men are benefited relative to women.

A further complication may be that in this context where patriarchal sponsorship is the norm, many women may lower their expectations and be grateful for emotional support, rather than sponsorship: effectively settling for survival rather than advancement. Thus for example, in the Irish university, one woman reported that the director of the research centre is supportive: “I don’t think there is any barrier, because there is huge support from my director as well, so if you want to participate in activities, he’s very happy to let you participate” (IE, woman, 26). Being allowed to participate is not the
same as having professional opportunities created for you. However, there were occasional examples in the Irish university of sponsorship of women by men in positions of authority:

[The] director of the centre, definitely he’s kind of helping me not just in the career progression but also with proposals and publications and just the research in general, in terms of guiding me, …you know how to write funding proposals, how to network, you know all of that, you know [how to] chair meetings (IE, woman, 19).

There are also occasional examples of this in the Spanish case. Thus a woman explains that a full professor helped her by providing opportunities for ten years, until she decided to apply for a management vacancy without his consent. Since that act of self-assertion, his actions have been unhelpful to her career:

“For ten years he gave me opportunities that my colleagues did not have. I benefited and I appreciate that. I am very grateful to everyone who helped me. Now, at the time that this changes... the dark side of the force falls on me” (ES, women, 16)

In the Spanish study there was an example of how a woman was discouraged from applying for the position of full professor by some powerful members of her department, and this action was justified on the grounds that a male candidate who had just divorced and wanted to change his place of residence needed the promotion more:

I was discouraged from doing it [by colleagues who occupied powerful positions] because the candidate, the person who achieved the chair was a colleague of my age, he was an associate professor in [name of a Spanish city], he has divorced recently and as he found the personal situation very hard, he needed to go out of [that city], and it was necessary to support him (ES, woman, 9).

Valian (2005, 35) argues that each individual event in which a women does not get her due – is not listened to, is not invited to give a presentation, is not credited with an idea – is a molehill: “Mountains are molehills, piled one on top of the other”. It is suggested that, to some extent at least, they reflect the influence of micropolitics in and through the male-dominated structures and that they have gendered effects.

* Micropolitics reflected in double standards in evaluation
Since universities are associated with meritocracy, we assume that selection processes are uninfluenced by the characteristics of the candidates. However, studies have clearly demonstrated the existence of double standards in evaluation, i.e., the application of different criteria depending on the candidate’s gender or their relationship with those making the decision (Foschi, 2006; Wenneras and World, 1997; Ridgeway, 2011; van den Brink and Benschop, 2012; Nielsen, 2016). Wenneras and Wold’s (1997) classic study on the assessments of postdoctoral applications for biomedical research funding showed that although the academic quality of the proposal was important, previous relationship with the members of the committee and the sex of the applicant substantially affected the outcome.

As van den Brink and Benschop (2012, 509) argue “academic evaluations are not simply technical endeavours intended to measure the quality of academics; instead, they are political endeavours that involve negotiations between multiple actors”. Within the Spanish university legislation there are rules governing the procedures for recruitment and selection of people who will occupy the new positions offered. Practices that seek to benefit some people over others are reflected in the composition of the evaluation committee and the application of the rules. There have been suggestions (Izquierdo et al., 2008) that ostensibly objective evaluative criteria were modified to support one candidate, and this was also evident in the Spanish case. In this way, people who are successful are those who are favoured by the members of the committee. For example, if one person has forty publications and the other person has twenty-two publications, the committee can decide that twenty or more publications deserve ten points. In this way, the second person is being helped by the committee and the objective difference between the two candidates on this criterion is eliminated. While recognizing that it occurred in the past, the suggestion is that it has continued to occur: “They take away your half a point and they give it to the other person. And this continues. I think the academic policy will never change. There are always interests of one kind or another” (ES, man, 29). There was awareness that the rules can be interpreted in various ways to favour particular candidates:

I have seen cases where the idea was to give these vacancies to these people and not to others, and they sought the means to do so, and the rule is for that: “You tell me what you want and I change”… I interpret the laws so that this is possible. So in the end, it is always who oversees the committee [who affects the outcome] (ES, man, 23).
In the Irish study the role of the chair was seen as critical: ‘I mean obviously the chair will have [influence] direct the way the meeting goes’ (IE, man, 2). The perception of the evaluative context as one dominated by power, despite its apparent objectivity as reflected in scores also emerged: “So it’s my guess that the scores will bring in who they want to get promoted” (IR, man 4). Guys tend to group together. They tend to form teams. It’s something that’s, I think it’s natural in guys to do that…and in the process of doing that, if you’re not on the team, you’re outside the team. And there could be, not a, not if you like an overt gender bias, but there could be an implicit one on that basis (IE, man, 2).

“Not networking hard enough, not going to conferences enough, those are all the obstacles. And spending too much time with my family…” (IE, woman, 40). A woman in the Irish university described the progression process as flawed “The promotion situation is dire, it’s flawed inside and out” (IE, woman, 28), noting the disparity in the numbers of men and women who were successful. Transparency was important (ETAN 2000) but was perceived not to exist: ‘My experience is that the application of the criteria is not transparent (ES, man, 33).

*Micropolitics in the evaluation of candidates: based on gender and/or inbreeding?*

It is increasingly accepted that in most Western Societies, men and women are differently valued. This has been referred to by Connell (1987) as a male patriarchal dividend; by Thorvaldsdottir (2004) as a male bonus and by Bourdieu (2001, 93) as “a negative symbolic co-efficient” for women. For Ridgeway (2011, 92) “gender is at root a status inequality – an inequality between culturally defined types of people”. Thus stereotypical cultural beliefs do not simply define men and women as different; they implicitly define men as superior to women, and create advantages for men through the undervaluation of women and their skills and performances (Valian, 1999; Montes, 2014; Martín et al., 2015). Furthermore, this differential valuation extends beyond individual men and women, so that male dominated organizations or those that reflect and reinforce men’s priorities and lifestyles are most valued (Thornton, 2013). In Frazer’s (2008, 58) terms, such contexts are characterized by “institutionalized patterns of interpretation and evaluation that constitute one [i.e. women] as comparatively unworthy of respect or esteem”.

Various studies (including van den Brink and Benschop, 2012; O’Connor and O’Hagan, 2015; Nielsen, 2016) demonstrated that both the definition of merit and the practices involved in its assessment in professorial recruitment are highly gendered. Thus
even where positions are publicly advertised, the expertise required is frequently implicitly or explicitly gendered. A survey conducted in Spain by Izquierdo et al. (2008) found that the majority of academic congress attendees felt that the current criteria for evaluating research and teaching were not gender neutral. Men are very aware of how evaluation processes favour some candidates over others; as are women who point out that women are disadvantaged compared to men. The following quote shows the existence of a negative symbolic coefficient (Bourdieu, 2001) that is associated with women in an evaluative context:

It’s not what the woman says or what the man says. It’s the fact that it’s coming from [a man or a woman]. Its gendered…the person listening to it will automatically associate a positive connotation to whatever the man says and a less positive, less, just put it that way, to what the woman says (IE, woman, 8).

The same contributions are interpreted differently if they are ascribed to a man or a woman. Similarly ambition, the desire for power or the desire to create a new research group may be seen as positive in men but not in women (Lara, 2007).

Some of the women interviewed are aware that men are preferred for positions of responsibility and power: “In matters of appointments, I see clearly that there is a preference for a man” (ES, woman, 7). This is because the qualities of men are systematically seen as more valuable in leadership positions. Van den Brink and Benschop (2012) found that while women are required to be “extraordinary” (i.e. sheep with five legs), men are allowed to be “normal”, with their deficiencies being presented as opportunities for improvement. There was a perception in both case studies that men with less objective merit in their curriculum vitae were likely to be appointed as professors:

I know very valuable people, for instance, who have struggled to be professors, very, very valuable people in this Faculty, and, and the chairs were obtained by men. And I know the curriculum of each person, and from the objective point of view, it seems to me an injustice. But a chair is for a person that has seven supports in a board right? or five supports in a board (ES, woman, 7).

Similarly Irish women argue that men with less merits were promoted over women, and that the women had to work harder and longer to achieve success: In the Irish study the role of the chair was seen as critical: ‘I mean obviously the chair will have [influence] direct the way the meeting goes’ (IE, man, 2). The perception of the
evaluative context as one dominated by power, despite its apparent objectivity as reflected in scores also emerged: “So it’s my guess that the scores will bring in who they want to get promoted” (IR, man 4). Guys tend to group together. They tend to form teams. It’s something that’s, I think it’s natural in guys to do that…and in the process of doing that, if you’re not on the team, you’re outside the team. And there could be, not a, not if you like an overt gender bias, but there could be an implicit one on that basis (IE, man, 2).

“Not networking hard enough, not going to conferences enough, those are all the obstacles. And spending too much time with my family…” (IE, woman, 40). A woman in the Irish university described the progression process as flawed “The promotion situation is dire, it’s flawed inside and out” (IE, woman, 28), noting the disparity in the numbers of men and women who were successful. ‘Women will say that. That you have to work longer and harder… to prove yourself better than a man…certainly men got promoted here who certainly were nowhere near [as good as] shall we say the women (IE, woman, 1).

There is increasing evidence (van den Brink, 2010; Nielsen 2016) that a structural process for limiting the field of applicants and hence affecting the outcome exists in many universities. In such contexts a very sizeable minority of professorial positions are not filled through open competition, but through a variety of closed procedures which ensure that effectively only one candidate is considered, and this is particularly likely to occur in disciplines such as science and technology (Nielsen, 2016). Similar strategies include those related to limiting open competitions to those at the very early (lecturer) and very late (i.e. full professorial level) as in the Irish case study.

The Spanish case study illustrates the impact of micropolitics on perpetuating “inbreeding” (Vazquez-Cupeiro and Elston, 2006) within what purports to be an open system. That model is based on social attitudes and unofficial and unwritten rules that each new member of the department should be selected from the members of the internal dominant group, rather than from other internal groups or from outside that university. This favours people who have studied or worked only (or mainly) in the department (Sánchez-Ferrer, 1996). The structural element of this is reflected in the following quote: “We have set up a system where the full professor can create a committee and this is obviously going to choose in-house people who have studied and worked in the university” (ES, man, 23). Thus, this unofficial convention and the organizational culture that has created it, ensures that most academic careers are spent in the same university (Cebreiro and San Segundo, 1998; Vazquez-Cupeiro and Elston, 2006). The most valued
attribute is not excellence as reflected in the curriculum vitae but to “be good colleague” (Sánchez-Ferrer, 1996). Cruz-Castro and Sanz-Menéndez (2010) found evidence of a significant level of inbreeding in the Spanish University system although their results indicated that inbred faculty have the same scientific merit as non-inbred when they are appointed.

Mobility between different institutions has not been considered important in the Spanish university system and this has been widely criticized. However, inbreeding still exists and is reflected in the evaluative criteria:

Choosing the in-house person is bad, obviously, that is inbreeding and should not be. But I also think that if they have been working, have been teaching, that also has to be evaluated. [...] I mean there are very few teachers who are able to say “Look, I will try to help with this, but if you do not fulfil your part, I am not going to make a vacancy for you”. There is also some affection that is created over time “Look, this boy does what he can, he has not got much but we cannot leave him in the street, right?” Because our profession, doing a PhD thesis, after that you are not useful for many things. In a world and society such as ours, the Spanish, so closed-minded, it is not easy to find a job outside after having worked in the university many years. Then, what is it the easiest? Favoring the in-house person (ES, man, 23).

The above quote reveals conflicting attitudes to this system. The respondent criticizes it, but at the same time he justifies it, indicating that the work done by in-house candidates and their selection should be viewed positively (Mora, 2001). The most extreme example of an inbred system occurs when selection boards become mere “public consecration ceremonies” (i.e., when the successful candidate is identifiable before the selection process finishes); or where the selection board supports the candidate who is also supported by the power holders in the department (Nieto, 1984). Cruz-Castro and Sanz-Menéndez (2010, 36) found that the odds of getting tenure were twice as high for men as for their female counterparts (i.e 34 per cent versus 16 per cent). Similarly Vázquez-Cupeiro and Elston (2006) indicate that women’s academic progress is disadvantaged by the inbreeding system. There is no evidence in the Spanish interviews that this system systematically favours men or women: only local candidates.

In the Irish university there was also an awareness of the importance of ties to members of the committee. However, in that study the focus of the research was on recruitment at the early stage and on internal promotion/progression across the three next levels, where no outsiders were effectively allowed to compete. There was occasional evidence of “local logics” (Grummell et al., 2009) reflected in a concern with “the alignment” of
individuals” skills and talents (Chorn, 1991) with the relevant academic unit: “Would they match?” (IE, woman, 7).

In the Irish university the fact that outsiders are overwhelmingly only considered at the very top and bottom of the hierarchy reduced the importance of micropolitics in this area, but gender was important. In the Spanish case there is a clear recognition of the existence and importance of inbreeding.

**Conclusion**

Ideally, when we think of a university, we think of an institution that seeks to recruit the most qualified staff through neutral and objective processes: one where academic merit take precedence. The implicit assumption is that characteristics such as gender or ‘inhouse’ status are irrelevant.

The Irish and Spanish university systems differ in that while the Irish organization is largely managerial, the Spanish model is collegial. Respondents in the two systems refer to the existence and importance of micropolitics around career related experiences and evaluation. Both patterns implicitly undermine the “rationalized myth” (Nielsen, 2016) of excellence as the defining characteristics of universities. This raises fundamental questions about the nature of the university. It also implicitly suggests that structural changes have little impact on interactional cultural realities (O’Connor et al., 2015b).

There is also evidence of the different perception of men and women on how micropolitics affect academic careers. In general, men are more aware of the impact of micropolitics on academic experiences and evaluation processes. In the Irish case, a minority of men recognize that this disadvantages women. In the Spanish case, male respondents are well aware of these processes and how they benefit some people against others, but they do not perceive them as benefitting men over women. A minority of women in both cases had experienced sponsorship from men. Spanish women are less aware than Spanish men of the processes that favour some people over others, because they provide fewer examples and are less rich in detail. However, when they refer to them, they explain that they are used to undervalue women.

Through this article we have highlighted light practices unrelated to the objective assessment of merit. We have found that despite the very different management structures in the two case studies, micropolitics is a reality and has a crucial importance in promoting
or limiting access to academic positions in both contexts. There is empirical evidence that micropolitics is seen as directly and negatively affecting women in the Irish case. More research is necessary in the Spanish case to determine if micropolitics has a negative effect on women’s careers or, conversely, if it affects both sexes equally. All this raises fundamental questions about the limitations of structural changes (from collegiality to managerialism); about the universities’ claims to excellence, based on the quality of their academic staff; and ultimately about the extent to which male dominated bureaucratic organizations can ever be genuinely meritocratic. These are disturbing questions: but they must be asked. They indicate the importance of Nielsen’s (2016) encouragement to undertake qualitative studies to understand the processes through which gender is reproduced in universities.

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