

Helga Satzinger *

Women do physiology, men do chemistry: Epistemological problems and a gendered division of labour in sex hormone research, 1920–40s

IN 1939 ADOLF BUTENANDT (1903–1995) was awarded the Nobel prize for his work on sex hormones. Behind Butenandt there was a substantial group of both men and women who all contributed to his success, crystallising the substances which, according to their origin in organisms and standardised effects on animals, were identified as male or female hormones.

This paper will show how Butenandt organised the work on hormones in his laboratory. By analysing the contributions of women, and in particular his wife Erika Butenandt (1906–1995) it will demonstrate that the gendered organisation of scientific work embodied a gendered conceptualisation of sex hormones. Serious epistemological problems ensued, hampering the process involved in understanding the physiology of these substances. Women's contribution to this field of research was substantial, however their social position in research reflects the conceptual cosmos that organised the research into sex hormones.

* Wellcome Trust Centre for the History of Medicine at UCL, London, United Kingdom; email: h.satzinger@ucl.ac.uk.