human relations
THE TAVISTOCK INSTITUTE

Why women build less effective networks than men: The role of structural exclusion and personal hesitation

human relations
2019, Vol. 72(7) 1234–1261

DOI: 10.1177/0018726718804303
journals.sagepub.com/home/hum
SAGE

Elena Greguletz
EBS Business School, Oestrich-Winkel, Germany

Marjo-Riitta Diehl
EBS Business School, Oestrich-Winkel, Germany

Karin Kreutzer
EBS Business School, Oestrich-Winkel, Germany

Abstract

Studies have shown that women's professional networks are often less powerful and effective than men's in terms of exchanged benefits, yet the motivations that underlie the networking behaviours remain less well understood. Based on an interview study of 37 high-profile female leaders working in large German corporations, we found that not only the extrinsic barrier of structural exclusion from powerful networks, but also the intrinsic barrier of women's hesitations to instrumentalize social ties are key to answering our research question: *Why do women build less effective networks than men*? Our analysis points to the existence of structural exclusion resulting from work–family conflict and homophily. With regard to personal hesitation, we identified two elements that were associated with under-benefiting from networking: moral considerations in social interactions and gendered modesty. Our study makes two important contributions. First, by highlighting personal hesitation as an intrinsic barrier, it extends the understanding of women's motivations for networking based on social exchange theory. Second, based on structural barriers and personal hesitation, it develops a grounded theory model of networking that offers a holistic understanding of

Corresponding author:
Marjo-Riitta Diehl, EBS Business School, Oestrich-Winkel 65375, Germany.
Email: marjo-riitta.diehl@ebs.edu

reasons that, from the perspective of the focal women, contribute to gender inequality in the workplace.

Keywords
career development, gender, networking, reciprocity, social exchange theory

Introduction

Studies show that engaging in networking is crucial for career success (e.g. Forret and Dougherty, 2001, 2004; Wolff and Moser, 2009), as it facilitates access to critical career-building resources such as advice, technical knowledge, strategic insight or emotional support (Casciaro et al., 2014; Whiting and de Janasz, 2004). However, the literature has identified gender differences in the size and quality of professional networking (Hanson, 2000; Moore, 1990; Renzulli et al., 2000; Rothstein et al., 2001), which is defined as 'individuals' attempts to develop and maintain relationships with others who have the potential to assist them in their work or career' (Forret and Dougherty, 2004: 420). Based on this structural view of networking, there is evidence that networking offers less utility for women. For example, Forret and Dougherty (2004: 431) found that 'involvement in networking behavior was more beneficial for the career progress of males than of females'. They go on to argue that women build less effective networks than men with less influential and powerful contacts, and suggest that such ineffectiveness is primarily attributable to women being at a structural disadvantage (Forret and Dougherty, 2004). However, thus far, an in-depth understanding of how and why women are less comfortable with strategically building and leveraging networks is lacking.

This study on women's networks draws on social exchange theory (SET), which describes social interaction as a process of reciprocal exchange occurring between parties (Homans, 1961) and which provides a basis for studying networking (Brass et al., 2004; Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). SET is commonly viewed as one of the most influential conceptual frameworks for understanding behaviour in organizational contexts (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). Based on classical writings on SET (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1961), most scholars conceptualize exchange relationships based on a subjective cost–benefit analysis and based on the comparison of alternative means to achieve a maximization of personal benefit (Goebel et al., 2013). Seminal works on reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960; Westermarck, 1908) also highlight the moral nature of reciprocal obligations whereby over-benefiting is socially undesirable (Uehara, 1995). In keeping with these writings, scholars have argued that 'reciprocity has developed in humans as a moral norm that transcends egoistic motivation' (Deckop et al., 2003: 103). Irrespective of whether the motive to engage in a social exchange relationship is driven by instrumental and moral concerns, the norm of reciprocity obliges individuals to strive for a balance, even when the benefits exchanged are intangible or not explicitly agreed upon or when there is a time lag between receiving and giving (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005; Goebel et al., 2013). In so doing, SET leads us to consider the motivations that underlie the

networking behaviours of certain focal actors, women, that remain less well understood in the literature on networking (Ahuja et al., 2012; Kuwabara et al., 2018).

While networking can thus be conceptualized as the balance of reciprocal giving and receiving, existing research indicates that gender affects network behaviours and network patterns in specific ways, thereby also influencing the effectiveness of networking. Women's networks are argued to be of a more social nature compared to those of men (Brass, 1985; Ibarra, 1992; Vinnicombe and Colwill, 1996), and women have been shown to benefit from fewer but stronger connections than men, who in turn gain an advantage from so-called weak ties with a large number of acquaintances (Burt, 1992; Seibert et al., 2001). The literature on negotiation suggests that women underestimate their worth in discussions on salary and promotions (Barron, 2003; Kulik and Olekalns, 2012) – that is, they appear to doubt the potential value of their contributions or it runs against gender roles to behave with self-advocacy. From these notions of gender-specific differences in networking structures and related behaviours, we examine the following research question: *Why do women build less effective networks than men?* We specifically build on SET and the norm of reciprocity with the aim of understanding the motivations and reasons that underlie women's networking behaviours.

The results of our interview study of 37 high-profile female leaders in Germany reveal two complementary dimensions that help explain the ineffectiveness of women's networks. The first dimension confirms that *structural exclusion* arising from *work–family conflict* and *homophily* acts as a barrier to women's effective networking, especially in terms of accessing networks. Extending previous literature, the second dimension concerns women's *personal hesitation* to instrumentalize their social ties, eventually resulting in lower levels of network effectivity. Such intrinsic hesitation builds on two main drivers: *relational morality*, denoting women's tendencies to avoid over-benefiting through networking, and *gendered modesty*, denoting how women underestimate their own value in professional contexts.

Our findings illustrate the value of SET and specifically the concept of reciprocity in understanding women's motivations and levels of willingness to engage in networking, thereby providing a more nuanced understanding of why women's networking efforts have been found to be less effective than those of their male counterparts. In so doing, we make two important contributions to the existing literature. First, in addition to confirming the existence of structural barriers known to hinder women's networking behaviours, we identify women's personal hesitation in terms of their relational morality and gendered modesty as a complementary explanation. Consequently, we advance the understanding of the motivational reasons underlying women's comparably lower degrees of success in networking in line with SET. Second, we relate these two explanations – structural barriers and personal hesitation – in a grounded theory model to offer a holistic understanding of the dynamics that hinder the realization of gender equality in the workplace from the perspectives of women.

In the following sections, we start with a brief introduction of SET and the norm of reciprocity, and we then move on to discuss networking behaviours from a gender perspective. This is followed by a description of our methodology and findings. We conclude by discussing the theoretical and practical implications of our work.

Theoretical background

Social exchange theory and the concept of reciprocity as theoretical fundamentals of networking

Social networking is essentially based on reciprocal giving and taking, and hence can be described through the lens of SET (Brass et al., 2004; Westphal and Milton, 2000). Social exchanges differ in important ways from strictly economic exchanges. The most crucial distinction lies in the fact that social exchanges entail adhering to unspecific obligations, whereas economic transactions are typically agreed upon contractually (Blau, 1964). In perpetuating the ongoing fulfilment of obligations and strengthening indebtedness, the norm of reciprocity plays an important role in the development of social exchange relationships (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005).

Essentially, the norm of reciprocity forms the basis for the development of trust. According to Gouldner (1960), when one party offers a benefit, an obligation is created, and the recipient is indebted to the donor (i.e. to the person who contributes a benefit or a gift to the exchange relationship) until he/she repays the benefit. The norm of reciprocity thus helps to ensure that individuals who provide favourable treatment to others will eventually be repaid, even if the timing and form of the repayment are not clear. Similarly, those who have received a benefit must be willing to remain indebted until a suitable occasion for repayment emerges. In contrast, a failure to reciprocate a favour, or even reciprocation that is too hastily given, are normally interpreted as a lack of appreciation, and may break social bonds and result in some form of social punishment (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005).

In accordance with classical writings on SET (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1961), subjective cost–benefit analyses and the maximization of personal benefit are powerful drivers of reciprocity. In other words, they point to the calculating, instrumental nature of reciprocity (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005; Goebel et al., 2013). Hence, behaviour in exchange relationships can be predicted by applying the following formula: rewards expected from social exchanges minus costs expected from social exchanges. When the resulting difference is positive, further interaction is encouraged. Such rationally calculated, egoistic forms of benefit maximization form the essence of the prominent utilitarian perspective on social exchange relationships (e.g. networking) held by management scholars (Goebel et al., 2013), also in the context of network studies.

In contrast to the utilitarian perspective, a moral approach to reciprocal relations is not focused on benefit maximization but rather on internalized moral obligations (Goebel et al., 2013). Thus, individuals live up to their obligations to return a favour, not only because they wish to continue receiving benefits but also because they feel morally obliged to do so (Deckop et al., 2003). Furthermore, individuals are typically 'more psychologically and emotionally averse to over-benefiting than under-benefiting from social support interactions' (Uehara, 1995: 483). To avoid becoming 'over-benefiters', people may even be willing to accept lesser rewards than they could expect based on their contributions. In networking contexts, receiving information concerning a promotion opportunity is likely to create a moral obligation to return the favour at some unspecified point of time without instrumental concerns about further exchanges.

Equity theory offers a complementary perspective on social exchange relationships such as those of networking (Uehara, 1995). From this perspective, individuals consider fairness when interacting with others – an idea that goes back to Adams (1963). Such social interactions aim at achieving an equilibrium of value gained between parties in the long run with neither party over- or under-benefiting at the other person's expense (Walster et al., 1978). This balanced view of social exchange thus presents a compromise between extremes of purely egoistic motives and moral considerations observed when engaging in social interactions. Such an equity-driven notion of exchange that combines beneficial reciprocity with moral considerations has emerged as a common means of explaining social exchange behaviour (Uehara, 1995).

Although the norm of reciprocity may be a universally accepted principle (Gouldner, 1960), the degree to which individuals apply principles of reciprocity varies depending on the traits and characteristics of individuals concerned (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). Researchers have, for example, observed different reciprocity (Eisenberger et al., 2004) and exchange orientations (Murstein et al., 1977) that influence the extent to which individuals engage in reciprocity and care to maintain a sense of balance in their exchange relationships. Seminal SET works acknowledge that similarity between exchange partners in terms of gender, nationality, age, and so forth, facilities reciprocation (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1958). In research on networking, the effects of this tendency to bond with similar ones – a concept called homophily – have been studied extensively (Brass et al., 2004). Homosocial reproduction processes suggest that leaders (mainly men) recruit, promote and prefer to work with individuals who are similar to themselves (other men) (Ibarra, 1992; Joecks et al., 2013; Joshi et al., 2011), rendering it challenging for women to enter networks. However, beyond such stable traits and observable characteristics and associated structural challenges, our understanding of what motivates or constrains individuals – the networkers – in their engagement in networking remains limited (Ahuja et al., 2012; Kuwabara et al., 2018).

Networking and career success

Engaging in networking activities by developing and maintaining social bonds with individuals potentially providing career assistance serves as an important means of enhancing professional careers (e.g. Burt, 1992; Cross and Thomas, 2011; Forret and Dougherty, 2001, 2004; Wolff and Moser, 2009). Studies show that networking behaviour (when effective) facilitates access to critical career-building resources such as advice, technical knowledge, strategic insight and emotional support (Casciaro et al., 2014; Whiting and de Janasz, 2004). Forret and Dougherty (2004) identified five forms of networking behaviour, namely maintaining external contacts, socializing, engaging in professional activities, participating in community activities, and enhancing internal visibility. Further, they showed that enhancing one's internal visibility through, for example, engagement in highly visible assignments and engagement in professional activities through the execution of public appearances and speeches have a significantly positive effect on career success (Forret and Dougherty, 2004). The results of Shipilov et al. (2007: 1–2) also reveal a favourable link between professional networking activities and career advancement: 'Greater use of network building behaviours' results in greater

social capital in terms of 'having a larger, more diverse, more externally oriented social network … which leads to faster promotion'. The authors differentiate between organized, structured networking (e.g. joining formal clubs) and informal, unstructured networking; interestingly, only the latter is found to be significantly related to the retrieval of a broader range of social capital and to accelerated promotion (Shipilov et al., 2007).

Despite the benefits of networking for career success, some individuals regularly refuse to proactively and purposefully engage in networking activities – a phenomenon that Kuwabara et al. (2018: 50) have recently coined the 'knowing-doing gap in networking' in their theoretical work on networking. Conflicting feelings and negative attitudes towards networking can be rooted in utility and morality concerns (Piskorski, 2014). Even when individuals recognize the utility of networking, doubts regarding its moral propriety can lead them to oppose an instrumental networking approach (Kuwabara et al., 2018), perhaps to avoid experiencing a feeling of 'moral dirtiness' (Casciaro et al., 2014). Viewing networking as a means of 'using others to get ahead' or of 'befriending not for true friendship but for ulterior reasons' may cause the behaviour to appear unfair or insincere (Kuwabara et al., 2018: 53).

Women's professional networks

As noted above, numerous studies have found that networking benefits women's careers less than men's careers (Forret and Dougherty, 2004; Ibarra, 1997; Rothstein et al., 2001). A significant body of literature confirms the existence of gender differences in structural characteristics of networks and in their links to instrumental benefits for career advancement. Ibarra (1997) argues that weak network ties among diverse social groups and managerial hierarchies are advantageous with regard to their 'instrumental worth' in delivering access to diverse career-enhancing resources. Women, however, tend to prefer maintaining strong ties and a sense of emotional intensity in their relationships (Ibarra, 1997). Hanson's (2000) research also shows that men's and women's networks have different structural characteristics: women's networks tend to be smaller, more localized, and community-minded, whereas men's networks tend to be larger and more economically focused. Consequently, men's networks can be characterized as more utilitarian or instrumental, whereas women's networks are more socially oriented (Brass, 1985; Ibarra, 1992; Vinnicombe and Colwill, 1996).

As a result, women tend to remain excluded from powerful, informal networks (Ibarra et al., 2010; McGuire, 2002; Morrison and Von Glinow, 1990; O'Leary and Ickovics, 1992), which places them at a disadvantage, for instance, in terms of forming alliances and developing access to critical organizational knowledge (Ibarra, 1993). Wellington et al. (2003) further showed that exclusion from powerful networks and limited levels of visibility constitute central barriers to women's career advancement. Scott (1996) found that even when men and women have the same profiles (job title, work history, age etc.), women are less likely to interact with top-level colleagues. Rather, they are more likely to build ties with women of similar hierarchical levels. Hence, women and men regularly belong to distinct organizational networks; women tend to interact with and seek support from network partners who can be characterized as of a 'lower level of status and power' (Rothstein et al., 2001: 4). Consequently, women form less effective developmental

relationships with powerful mentors (Ragins and Cotton, 1991) who could play a crucial role in their career advancement (e.g. Burke, 1984). Overall, men appear to benefit more from informal connections such as mentorships, resulting in more frequent promotions and pay raises (Lyness and Thompson, 2000).

In sum, research results show that men's careers benefit more from social networks than women's, who often face exclusion from powerful social circles and who draw fewer benefits from their existing networks. What we know less about is the specific reasons why women have less success in networking. Therefore, we uncover and analyse the barriers that women face in building effective networks and especially in relation to reciprocal processes of giving and taking, which are central to networking.

Methods

Our inductive study followed the principles of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and was informed by the 'Gioia methodology' (Gioia et al., 2013). The inductive development of theory through the methodical collection and analysis of data is central to grounded theory. The Gioia guide is 'a systematic approach to new concept development' (Gioia et al., 2013: 15) and hence serves as a rigorous means to follow an inductive grounded theory approach. Central to the Gioia methodology is the development of a data structure (Gioia et al., 2013), which we used to visualize our data analysis and to ensure full transparency on the basis and development of this study's results (see Figure 1).

Data collection

We interviewed 37 female leaders who were either on executive boards (14 interviewees) or who occupied top leadership positions (14 interviewees) with large corporations in Germany (almost 1/3 were from DAX and MDAX listed companies that represent the largest publicly traded firms in terms of market capitalization levels). The remaining interviewees (9) were successful entrepreneurs whose backgrounds involved noteworthy positions in management. These interviewees were contacted through the university or through our private networks or, in a secondary phase, via other interviewees' networks (i.e. snowball sampling). All of the interviewees held an academic degree and ranged in age from 31 to 63, with an average of 46.5 years. Of the interviewees, 29 were married or in established relationships and 25 had at least one child (17 interviewees had at least one child who was a minor). On average, the interviewees had 1.3 children, with a considerable range from zero to six children.

The interviews ranged in length from 45 to 90 minutes and were mainly conducted through face-to-face meetings. Eight interviews were conducted by phone. Eight interviews, at the beginning of the interview process, were conducted by two authors. After these joint interview experiences, which helped fine-tune the interview guide and flow of questions, the remaining interviews were split between the two authors. Although the presence of multiple interviewers allows for a follow-up discussion of interpretations, more extensive note-taking, and the exchange of personal understanding, we acknowledge that a single interviewer resulting in a one-on-one conversation may foster a more intimate atmosphere. However, one of the interviewing authors is a young female leader

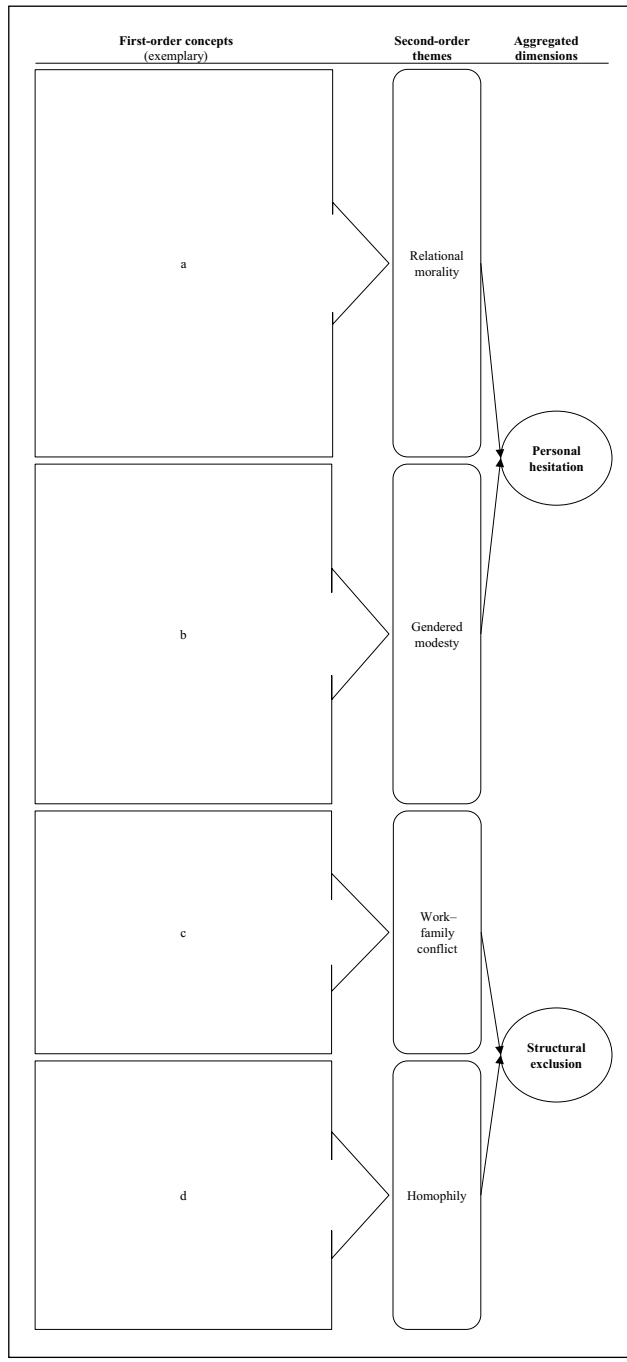

Figure 1. Data coding tree.

(Continued)

Figure 1. (Continued)

a

- Women do not appreciate the instrumental, utilitarian character of networking activities: 'I don't really like the utility definition of networks … It's the exploitation aspect I don't like' (Interviewee 19); 'I don't like the benefit–benefit definition, watching for contacts I could potentially benefit from' (Interviewee 19); 'Women look at networks from a social point of view … They do not ask the question "How does it benefit me?"' (Interviewee 27).
- Women stress the importance of likeability and the relationship-based, communal character of networking activities ('My networks are based on good collaboration and a very honest, authentic relationship' (Interviewee 22); 'Perhaps this is a very female style, but I don't want to have a network with people I don't like' (Interviewee 16); '[In men's networks] it's more a question of quantity than quality' (Interviewee 7); 'I have a … network of people that I really know and that I like and who like me' (Interviewee 8); '[I approach people] without the expectation that I want something from that person, but with the intention to get to know that person' (Interviewee 5); 'I get to know people, there is a mutual liking and empathy, and I'm not making the conversation a sales show from the very beginning … My network of contacts is based on loyalty and trust in the first place' (Interviewee 9)).
- Women refuse to engage in networking activities for solely instrumental purposes: 'I can't see taking up golf for networking purposes only … although I know that there is a lot of 'wheeling and dealing' going on' (Interviewee 16).
- Women tend to connect with subordinates or peers: 'I was always good at networking with my team … I was bad at networking to foster the next step in my career path' (Interviewee 16); 'Every person is interesting … I never cared about a person's title, function or role' (Interviewee 5); 'Women focus too much on homogeneous networks by connecting only with women on the same hierarchy level' (Interviewee 21).
- Women hesitate to ask for a one-sided favor or help – 'I think what would be more typical for me and for a lot of women: "I do it alone", not asking for help' (Interviewee 7) – and stress the importance of their giving to networks: 'I'm not just using networks, but I'm nurturing them and proactively providing information to create a balance' (Interviewee 21); 'I'm regularly opening doors for my former colleagues' (Interviewee 22); 'Men are not used to giving, but to taking … Women, however, are able to give driven by an altruistic nature' (Interviewee 31); 'Don't aim to join networks for reaping benefits immediately, but first to give' (Interviewee 14).

b

- Women excessively question themselves, their abilities, and their value for professional networks: 'Time and again I have self-doubts and think that I'm not fulfilling my tasks sufficiently. I'm always very critical of myself' (Interviewee 13); 'Women ponder much longer whether they have the willingness and ability to occupy a certain position. The degree of self-doubt is much higher among women than among men' (Interviewee 20); 'A stereotypical educational or cultural imprint gives women the feeling of having less value to add to networks' (Interviewee 21); 'At a certain point I was massively questioning myself, something that might be typical of females' (Interviewee 22).
- Women shy away from visible positions in networks: 'Women don't feel comfortable sitting on the stage and … showing themselves there' (Interviewee 8); 'All the women that have a successful career … need to become more visible' (Interviewee 13).
- Successful female leaders advise other women aspiring to a similar career to be more self-confident: 'Don't sell yourself short' (Interviewee 30); 'be visible' (Interviewee 13, Interviewee 5, Interviewee 36); 'market yourself' (Interviewee 20, Interviewee 22); 'don't be too modest' (Interviewee 4); 'communicate your aspirations' (Interviewee 20); 'dare to take the next step' (Interviewee 36).
- Women aspiring a leadership career need to understand that being too reserved inhibits their career progress: 'Beating your own drum is part of the business' (Interviewee 22); 'We women need to be bolder. We need to stand up for a 50/50 chance' (Interviewee 17); 'People need to know that you are ready to take the next step' (Interviewee 36).
- Qualified women are in high demand on the job market, which should serve as a source of self-confidence: 'Walk around with their heads held high and say 'if you don't want me or like me, I'll go somewhere else' … Now is the best time for a woman to get into a leadership position, hence we somehow need to build their self-confidence to do so' (Interviewee 17); 'Our clients request mixed teams, they

(Continued)

Figure 1. (Continued)

want a consulting service that is not limited [to a certain nationality or gender] … Many women don't believe in or recognize their great potential … the female USP' (Interviewee 20).

c

- Women with children face a time conflict: 'I should really pay more attention to networking. Which brings up a problem I know that I have compared to my male colleagues: time. Because I have two kids' (Interviewee 2); 'And that is indeed for me a disadvantage in this boys' world. I don't have the time to do the network nurturing they do, as a matter of fact' (Interviewee 2); 'No, I didn't have such networks. If you are that busy with your job and have two children and a husband to boot, you have your hands full' (Interviewee 31); 'Of course, I show my face at networking events, however, I don't stay for long because otherwise I can't get up with my children early in the morning' (Interviewee 11).
- The work–family conflict is connected to career women in our society: 'All the women that have a successful career and are great mothers and bosses need to become more visible. With that visibility in the media, in society [combining motherhood and a leadership career] would be perceived as more natural and normal. Unfortunately, we are not at that point today' (Interviewee 13).
- Even already the anticipation of a work–family conflict makes women to shy away from continuing their careers and with it from engaging into career networks: '"Now I'm pregnant, now I think about a part-time position." Why? Why have you invested so much in your studies? … What a devastating message is that?' (Interviewee 4); 'If women don't communicate very clearly that they are willing to take up a higher position, people will conclude … "She has a family and children, she doesn't want to take further responsibility"' (Interviewee 36).

d

- Women feel unwelcome in and unsuitable to male-dominated networks: 'The huge disadvantage in the world where I am now is that I don't fit in' (Interviewee 2); 'There were only men, aged between 35 and 45, all German, all with a doctoral degree in the leadership positions' (Interviewee 16); 'It's people who have been there for 25 years now, it's absolutely a closed boys' club' (Interviewee 2); 'The higher one climbs in an organization, the more closed networks exist' (Interviewee 22); 'Women try to be part of a group, try to be liked … and they might adopt behaviors that are not theirs' (Interviewee 8); 'There are male networks you have no chance to join as a woman. I've always left such battlefields' (Interviewee 9); 'I did not feel comfortable … in purely male groups because of conflicting beliefs and ways to communicate' (Interviewee 14); 'I'm facing a conservative male business world where conversations start with small talk around soccer, golf, etc. … I always had issues connecting to such men's topics' (Interviewee 27).
- Men mentor and promote 'mini-mes': 'We have too many male colleagues who promote mirror-images of themselves' (Interviewee 5); 'I prefer to fill a vacant seat with a clone' (Interviewee 16).
- Maintaining homogeneous male networks appears beneficial for men: 'It is just more familiar, more comfortable, less irritating' (Interviewee 23); 'It's not even meant badly to say we are friends, a buddy is much more predictable … he is like me, he thinks the same way, he decides the same way' (Interviewee 16).
- Networking activities are based on typical male interests: 'car races' (Interviewee 4), 'network of motorcyclists' (Interviewee 7), 'table soccer' (Interviewee 7), 'go for a beer' (Interviewee 11), 'play golf' (Interviewee 17), and 'soccer matches' (Interviewee 2).

with small children in the academic sphere (department head), and the other is a female in her late 20s who is on a promising career track herself. We believe that these characteristics helped our interviewees to connect with the interviewers and create an atmosphere in which interviewees openly shared their personal stories, including their experiences of hardship and failure.

The interviews followed an interview guide (available online as supplementary material) focused on seven pre-defined central themes: individual career paths and career transitions; the family–work interface and potential conflicts; personality traits and strengths/weaknesses; leadership styles and role conflicts for females; career networks and gendered networking activities; societal pressures and role expectations placed on

women; and future female leaders and ways to support them. These topics of interest were chosen based on a literature review and through discussions between the authors. Statements relevant to this article's findings were generated from all of the interview themes, with an emphasis on the fifth theme, devoted to the topic of networking. Questions on this theme addressed the interviewees' networks and the roles played by them during their careers (e.g. 'Do you actively seek to maintain and build your networks? How?') as well as differences between female and male networks and resulting issues (e.g. 'How do your networks compare to those of your male colleagues?'). However, we also used relevant statements relating to other themes to inductively develop concepts to discuss in this article. For example, the theme 'the family–work interface and potential conflicts' contributed to the definition of an external barrier, and the theme 'future female leaders and modes of support' revealed a need for training on self-marketing for women, and with this contributing to the definition of intrinsic barriers of gendered modesty. Questions asked on each of the themes are given in the interview guide (available online as supplementary material).

In general, we prepared open-ended questions as a starting point. The interviews were not limited to our predefined questions and remained open to any individual issue raised by an interviewee during the free flow of interview conversations. As a consequence of this semi-standardized approach, the interviews were of a more informal and conversational nature. We particularly asked the participants to discuss concrete experiences and examples of their networking behaviour. This storytelling approach to interviewing allowed us to go beyond platitudes and commonplace information and to focus on experienced behaviours and their consequences. In every interview, we were open to discussing new and unexpected topics brought up by the interviewees.

With the exception of two women, all of the participants gave us permission to record their interviews. For the two exceptions, extensive notes were taken. All of the interviews, most of which were held in German, were transcribed to allow for a detailed analysis. The transcripts followed grammar and spelling conventions of standard written German or, for the few non-German interviews, of American English. The interviewees' and their organizations' anonymity was safeguarded at all times; the confidentiality of our research records was strictly maintained.

The interview process continued until it became clear that additional value in terms of new emerging themes was negligible, that is, theoretical saturation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) was reached. Overall, the data collection phase took place from mid-November 2015 to mid-April 2016. By the end of 2016 we contacted the interviewees by email with the initial results of our study. We received an explicit confirmation of our results from written responses given by four interviewees. The other candidates' missing responses are interpreted as 'silent consent'. One interviewee participated in a face-to-face follow-up session that involved an informal discussion of our research findings, with which she closely identified.

Data analysis

The first step of our in-depth analysis of the transcribed interview data involved open coding using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis program. For this study, statements on

the role of career networks and personal networking activities were of central interest, as were references to gendered networking experiences (positive or negative). The interviews were not guided with the article's central concepts in mind and were developed inductively from data patterns that emerged through the analysis. For this inductive analysis, quotes drawn from the raw data that pointed to the above topics of interest were marked with a simple descriptive phrase or an in-vivo code using the interviewee's language or a combination of both (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). These codes are also referred to as 'first-order concepts' or 'first-order codes' (e.g. Gioia et al., 2010).

This initial coding procedure was executed by the author who had conducted most of the interviews; the other two authors acted as challengers. Interpretations of the data were repeatedly discussed among the three authors, with a particular emphasis on the coding of resulting themes and dimensions. Terminology used was then challenged by academic colleagues through a friendly review and a workshop. The main coder discussed potential contradictions in the data with the other authors. For instance, one interviewee considers herself to be a strong strategic networker who views the morality issue to be a more German than gendered trait. She is half American and is very conscious about networking issues, as she has completed her diploma thesis in that field. Owing to these special circumstances her experience was treated as an exception, and the mentioned cultural influence is recognized as a limitation of our study. Comparing the first-order codes and aggregating those related to one another (i.e. axial coding according to Strauss and Corbin (1998)) led to the development of higher-level second-order themes. Here, the NVivo program was used to monitor emerging concepts and themes by facilitating a convenient reference to similar concepts represented by the interviewees' opinions and experiences and then to merge these into fewer themes.

The first two themes of our coding structure, work–family conflict and homophily, refer to how women are *structurally excluded* from powerful networks developed under conditions of male dominance. In contrast to these extrinsic barriers, the second aggregate dimension, *personal hesitation*, applies an intrinsic perspective based on themes of relational morality and gendered modesty. During the analysis, themes were emergent in nature. In other words, we allowed new themes to emerge or others to merge with any additional data code identified at any stage. The process ended when a 'clear sense of the developing relationships among categories and their related themes' was achieved (Gioia et al., 2010: 8) and when analysing additional interview data did not reveal new relationships. Only at this stage was relevant literature explicitly reviewed on emerging themes and dimensions, as the Gioia methodology suggests that refraining from engaging in a detailed a priori literature review helps prevent the emergence of a prior hypothesis bias (confirmation bias). Figure 1 visualizes our coding tree as a 'graphic representation of how we progressed from raw data to terms and themes in conducting the analyses' (Gioia et al., 2013: 20).

Using the Gioia methodology to develop a data structure helped us develop an in-depth understanding of female leaders' network effectiveness levels from individuals with relevant experience 'to bring qualitative rigor' to the conduct and presentation of inductive research (Gioia et al., 2013: 15).

The trustworthiness of the data collection and analysis method

With regard to data collection methods, Miles and Huberman (1994) list several conditions in which qualitative data generated are 'strong' (i.e. using informal and intimate settings and engaging with respondents through one-on-one interaction). Both of these aspects were reflected in the settings of most of our interviews. Furthermore, Miles and Huberman (1994: 263) point to an 'elite bias' that arises when data from certain informants are over-weighted. A priori, all transcripts and data were equally considered. All of our interviewees are characterized by their highly relevant and impressive leadership experiences (see Appendix 1: List of interviewees); hence, their perspectives proved equally 'valuable' for our study. Rather than using a priori weighting, we looked for patterns and regularities in the entire dataset. As criteria for identifying recurring patterns in the data, we first sought multiple references to the same issue by different interviewees, and we next considered the importance of stories and incidents described by the interviewees.

The corroboration of findings across multiple informants is another important quality criterion noted by Gioia et al. (2010: 8) used 'to mitigate the possibility of problems associated with retrospective accounts'. Furthermore, as mainly one author was placed in charge of coding the raw data, the other two authors assumed critical 'challenger roles' to avoid exclusively relying on the interpretations of a single data analyst. In questioning initial codes, discussing contradictions in the data, and jointly striving for the optimal coding of data themes and final dimensions, the authors strove to meet Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for trustworthy, qualitative research: credibility (i.e. confidence that research results reveal the 'truth'), confirmability (i.e. researcher neutrality) and dependability (i.e. the consistency and repeatability of findings).

Once researchers arrive at their initial findings, member checks serve as 'the most logical source of corroboration' (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 275). We applied a two-pronged approach to receiving feedback from our interviewees that involved sending emails with our initial findings to the whole group of informants and via a face-to-face meeting with one central informant at a later stage. Receiving feedback from interviewees a second time addresses two of the four prerequisites for trustworthiness according to Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility and confirmability. In addition to the mentioned criteria, Lincoln and Guba (1985) point to the transferability (i.e. the ability to apply findings to other contexts) of findings. Miles and Huberman (1994) also refer to this quality criterion as 'external validity', which addresses the issue of to what extent findings can be transferred to other settings. We address this requirement by describing the characteristics of our sample and the data collection process in great detail and by providing a clear indication of the respective interviewee that gave each quoted statement. We however admit that certain specifics of our study sample (gender or nationality) could limit the transferability of the findings (please refer to the section on limitations of the article).

Findings

In the following sections, we describe the two dimensions of *structural exclusion* relating primarily to access to networks and to *personal hesitation* directly influencing

networking behaviour, and we present the corresponding four themes of work–family conflict, homophily, relational morality and gendered modesty.

Structural exclusion as a cause of ineffective networking

Work–family conflict. Our analysis confirms that an important factor causing structural exclusion arises from the conflict that occurs between work and child-rearing household responsibilities, which are still to a large extent assumed by mothers women (Kan et al., 2011; Lyonette and Crompton, 2014). Networking events held in the evening or on the weekend as well as more informal after-work get-togethers are at odds with family and household obligations. This work–family work–household conflict in the context of professional networking emerged as a central theme of the interviews. One executive board member described time constraints imposed on her by her two children: 'And that is indeed for me a disadvantage in this boys' world. I don't have the time to do the network nurturing they do, as a matter of fact' (Interviewee 2). Another interviewee agreed, referring to her earlier career in upper management: 'I didn't have such networks. If you are that busy with your job and have two children and a husband to boot, you have your hands full' (Interviewee 31). From the interviews, it became clear that for women with families the high demands of a leadership career in terms of 'official working hours' are already extremely challenging to meet; however, this challenge intensifies significantly when the pressure to nurture professional networks after hours comes into play. The interviews revealed the interesting and alarming fact that the mere anticipation of a work–family conflict causes women to shy away from continuing their careers and thus from engaging in career networks. According to one interviewee's experience with female colleagues in the banking sector, women with children, in particular, need to 'communicate very clearly that they are willing to take on a higher position' (Interviewee 36). When they fail to do so, people conclude that, owing to her role as a mother, 'she doesn't want to take on more responsibility' (Interviewee 36).

Homophily in professional networking. Our analysis points to homophily as a key reason for why women face difficulties in accessing and engaging in effective networking. The principle of homophily suggests that people prefer to interact with others whom they perceive to be similar to themselves. Such homogeneity eases communication and ensures the predictability of behaviour (Brass, 1985) and can thereby encourage reciprocity (Brass et al., 2004; Westphal and Milton, 2000). In line with this reasoning, the interviewees showed that they felt unwelcome in and unsuited to male-dominated power networks, which has eventually caused them to perceive such networks as exclusive to males: 'The huge disadvantage in the world where I am now is that I don't fit in' (Interviewee 2, executive board member of a DAX 30 company). Another former DAX 30 executive board member also stressed the homogeneous nature of power circles at executive levels: 'There were only men aged between 35 and 45, all German, all with doctoral degrees, in leadership positions' (Interviewee 16). Another factor that inhibits diversity in such networks is rooted in the historical connectedness of the people belonging to the inner circle: 'It's people who have been there for 25 years now … it's absolutely a closed boys' club' (Interviewee 2), one interviewee noted in reference to a DAX 30 company. Some interviewees even noted they experienced formal exclusion from

male-dominated power networks; certain business clubs, for example, officially operate as strictly 'men-only organizations'.

However, our data show that it is not such 'official discrimination' that burdens the careers of female leaders; rather, it involves the often more subtle signs of exclusion, such as the alignment of network activities with stereotypically male interests. The head of human resources of one large non-profit organization provided a good example by recalling how her former boss had 'placed a soccer table in the cafeteria … went there regularly himself' (Interviewee 7) and hence was in regular informal contact with other men who also enjoyed playing table soccer. Other examples of homophily described involved after-work beers among colleagues, convening in corporate boxes of soccer stadiums, or golf outings held on weekends, which were gender-specific activities.

Among the women interviewed, homophily was also viewed as a means of discriminating against women in the context of mentorships and promotions: 'We have too many male colleagues who promote mirror images of themselves' (Interviewee 5); with this statement one top manager of a DAX 30 company drew attention to her experience with men often mentoring and promoting 'mini-mes'. One former DAX 30 executive made a similar observation: For men, 'a buddy is much more predictable' because 'he is like me, he thinks the same way, and he makes decisions the same way' (Interviewee 16). She summarized her experience as follows: men 'prefer to fill a vacant seat with a clone' (Interviewee 16).

Personal hesitation as a cause of ineffective networking

The role of relational morality. Relational morality was identified as another central theme of our analysis. In the interviews, female leaders expressed their discomfort with engaging in professional-instrumental networking events: 'I don't really like the utility definition of networks … It's the exploitation aspect that I don't like' (Interviewee 19), said one general manager from the tourism industry. Additionally, one DAX 30 executive board member had refused to engage in networking activities for solely instrumental reasons: 'I can't see taking up golf for networking purposes only … even though I know that there is a lot of "wheeling and dealing" going on' (Interviewee 16). Another female leader from the banking sector added that she did not enjoy participating in instrumental networking driven by personal benefits and observed a difference from her male colleagues: 'Maybe that's a difference between men and women' (Interviewee 22), she noted. With regard to her own networks, she stressed that they were based on 'strong collaboration' and 'honest and authentic relationships' (Interviewee 22). Other interviewees suggested that men tend to be more driven by egoistic, instrumental motives behind networking, and while placing less emphasis on personal relationships or likeability in regard to professional contacts. For instance, one leader from the nonprofit sector described her networking style as follows: 'Perhaps this is a very "female" style, but I don't want to have a network with people I don't like' (Interviewee 16).

Another interviewee from the insurance sector with an American background hinted at culturally dependent negative moral connotations of networking in Germany. Relying on networking means that 'you need "vitamin B"; you need someone else to make progress' (Interviewee 21). She stated that, as an American, she was 'less repelled' by the

idea of 'giving and taking' and that she 'actively pursues that [kind of networking]' (Interviewee 21). However, she continued by stressing that she is 'not only using the network' for her purposes 'but also nurtures it proactively by providing information' in order to 'create a balance' of give and take (Interviewee 21). Again, this can be interpreted as a moral concern regarding appearing to be over-benefiting from networking. The same concern was expressed by a female entrepreneur who described her high-profile contact as follows: 'It's not that I'm connecting with them on purpose, it just happens' (Interviewee 9).

Another facet found to adversely affect women's network effectiveness is their sense of moral obligation to foster networks with lower-level employees to support and mentor them. The interviewees stressed that especially junior women and female peers must be supported and that they are committed to doing so. 'Every person is interesting … I never cared about a person's title, function or role' (Interviewee 5), one DAX 30 top manager stated. The tendency to connect with lower-level colleagues appeared to be intensified by a need to be liked, implying a compliance with gender stereotypes that require women to be communal, unselfish and caring (e.g. Schein, 2001; Schein et al., 1996; Willemsen, 2002). Tannen (1995) demonstrates the impact of gender-specific socialization applied during childhood on future career paths with her observations of behaviours engaged in work lunches: men eat with the highest-level person possible, whereas women spend that time with peers or lower-level colleagues. In reflecting upon her own behaviour, one top manager from the insurance industry argued that, 'Women look at networks from a social point of view … They do not ask the question "How will this benefit me?"' (Interviewee 27). One former DAX 30 executive board member critically reflected on her past networking behaviours: 'I was always good at networking with my team' (Interviewee 16). However, unlike her efforts to connect with subordinates and peers, she admitted to having experienced issues with connecting with superiors: 'I was bad at networking to foster the next step in my career path' (Interviewee 16). When she took up her position on the executive board, she 'all of a sudden received a tremendous number of contact queries from all sides' (Interviewee 16), which she was not pleased about, as this had clearly occurred as a result of colleagues seeking a rewarding, high-profile contact.

Furthermore, our analysis shows that work–family conflicts are closely related to moral concerns surrounding engaging in professional networking. Interviewees with children told us of their efforts to balance work and family responsibilities. Some revealed their moral concerns about not fulfilling their roles as employees and mothers at the expected levels, and they feared either letting their colleagues down owing to family obligations or neglecting their families because of networking obligations. One top executive from a DAX 30 company with two children said that she needed to 'bear a guilty conscience' alongside her career (Interviewee 17). She explained how this burden was not felt in such a way by her husband, who had also pursued a prestigious career. Another executive board member reported applying a strict rule for meetings with her management team: 'After six there are no meetings … because of my kids' (Interviewee 2). She was in the position of enjoying enough seniority to be able to set such a rule. At lower levels, women with children may feel at a disadvantage for not being able to work longer hours or to engage in professional networking events as opportunities arise. As a consequence, women doubt that they are able to give back and to adhere to norms of

reciprocity. Such fears, in turn, spur a hesitation to engage intensively in networking. This moral concern regarding over-benefiting owing to an inability to return favours also causes women to shy away from networking activities.

The role of gendered modesty. The second intrinsic theme of our analysis is captured by a concept familiar to the gender-focused literature on negotiations: gendered modesty (Barron, 2003; Janoff-Bulman and Wade, 1996; Kulik and Olekalns, 2012). Our analysis shows that our interview partners were constrained by self-doubt and by limited faith in their own abilities to make valuable contributions to their networks. For instance, one participant in a leadership position in the banking sector described how she had arrived at a point at which she fundamentally questioned herself, which she viewed as 'something that might be typical of females' (Interviewee 22). She warned that this can be career-inhibiting, as it is important to 'position yourself positively in the eyes of powerful persons typically part of "old boy networks"' (Interviewee 22). 'Beating your own drum is part of the business' (Interviewee 22), she added. Another interviewee directly pointed to the importance of maintaining a healthy sense of self-worth in the context of networking. She had noticed a lack of self-worth among women throughout her career, which she suggested may be attributed to 'a stereotypical educational or cultural imprint that gives women the feeling of having less … value to add to networks' (Interviewee 21).

Gendered modesty is closely related to a lack of self-confidence. One female top manager related the lower self-confidence levels of women to their lack of visibility at important networking events such as conferences. She noted that, in panel discussions, 'I still don't see enough women' (Interviewee 8). She described female underrepresentation among such speakers as follows: 'Women don't feel comfortable sitting on stage and … showing themselves there' (Interviewee 8). One executive board member from the banking sector observed that men act in a much more goal-oriented and utilitarian way in regard to positioning themselves in networks. They do not hesitate to purposefully approach powerful contacts directly and to 'advertise their greatness' (Interviewee 36).

'We women need to be more self-confident' (Interviewee 17), stated one female leader from a DAX 30 company. She illustrated this need by describing typical reactions of female colleagues to vacant positions advertised in her company. She noted that when women are unable to find an immediate match between any individual job requirement and their qualifications, they become discouraged and do not apply. In contrast, men were said to believe that if 'there is a requirement that I meet, I'll apply' (Interviewee 17). The experiences of other interviewees support the view that 'women tend to be overly self-critical and focus on what they cannot do' (Interviewee 22): 'It has often been my experience that when I have offered a very competent female employee a job, she has reacted negatively by saying "I can't do that, because I've never done it before"' (Interviewee 36). She also commented on how women sabotage their own career efforts with their lack of self-confidence. The same holds for job changes, as women tend to significantly underestimate their value in the job market. Therefore, women are advised to 'walk around with their heads held high and to say "if you don't want me or like me, I'll go somewhere else"' (Interviewee 17). She concluded that 'now is the best time for women to enter leadership positions, and we need to develop their self-confidence to do so' (Interviewee 17). One executive board member from the financial industry noted that

women need the 'self-confidence to dare to take the next step' (Interviewee 36) of their career journeys.

Another theme that arose from our analysis related to specific training programmes designed for females. Companies often offer training and workshops related to female employees' self-image and self-presentation, as such resources help address and improve women's often very poor self-marketing skills, which are crucial for career advancement. One participant described how her employer's training programmes are specifically focused on the needs of talented young female employees: 'We offer a special training programme … that addresses issues related to dealing with power, handling resistance, positioning oneself, self-marketing, etc.' Similarly, issues of self-image and self-presentation were observed as recurring themes; our interview partners offered the following advice to the next generation of female leaders, which offer us insight into their own experiences: 'Be aware of your self-worth' (Interviewee 21), 'market yourself' (Interviewee 20, Interviewee 22), 'communicate your aspirations' (Interviewee 20), 'don't sell yourself short' (Interviewee 30), 'be visible' (Interviewee 13, Interviewee 5, Interviewee 36) and 'don't be too modest!' (Interviewee 4).

In summary, our systematic analysis of our interview data revealed two aggregated dimensions: structural exclusion and personal hesitation. These concepts contribute to the development of a holistic understanding of why women build less effective networks than men. These theoretical contributions, their practical implications and limitations as well as avenues for future research are discussed in the following section.

Discussion

In this study, we set out to examine why women engage in less effective networking behaviour. Using SET as a theoretical lens, our analysis confirms the existence of extrinsic barriers of work–family conflict and homophily that limit women's network formation and undermine their motivation for networking. Our results further show that on one hand women as recipients are careful not to over-benefit and to emphasize the moral aspects of reciprocity; on the other hand, as donors to exchange relationships they run the risk of underestimating and poorly marketing their own contributions in a professional context. With these findings, our study contributes to existing knowledge on structural barriers (extrinsic) and extends the present understanding of networking and personal hesitation (involving relational morality and gendered modesty) as an intrinsic barrier. In so doing we extend the SET-based understanding of networking. Based on these two dimensions of structural barriers and personal hesitation, we develop a grounded theoretical model of networking that offers a holistic understanding of the barriers that from the perspectives of focal women inhibit gender equality at the workplace. We discuss our theoretical and practical contributions in the following section.

Theoretical implications

Extrinsic and intrinsic barriers to effective networking. Our findings concerning structural exclusion (in the form of work–family conflict and homophily) as an extrinsic

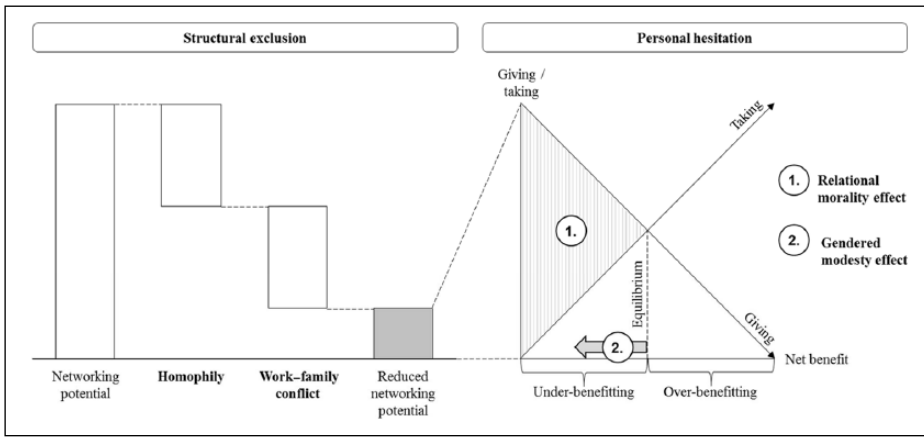

Figure 2. Grounded theory model on women's less effective professional networking compared to men

barrier to effective networking align with and support previous findings on networking and women. For instance, Forret and Dougherty (2001: 300) argue that the gender imbalance in career-enhancing networking activities is likely attributable to 'women having less after-hours socializing time because of child-raising responsibilities'. In their early work on homophily, Lincoln and Miller (1979) argue that social homogeneity renders colleagues' behaviour more predictable and communication with them easier, thus facilitating trusting relationships. Existing evidence indeed indicates that women are oftentimes excluded from informal social circles of powerful males, and are consequently disadvantaged when it comes, for instance, to receiving influential mentoring and social support from colleagues (South et al., 1982) as well as promotions (Brass, 1985). Hence, part of the challenge of building effective networks arises from issues related to accessing potential exchange (networking) partners. Figure 2 (the waterfall bar chart) illustrates how women's networking potential is reduced by barriers of homophily and work–family conflict.

In complementing this structural explanation for networking ineffectiveness, our findings concerning personal hesitation (namely, relational morality and gendered modesty) illustrate the existence of intrinsic barriers to engaging in effective networking behaviour. Therefore, we shed light on women's individual psychological barriers to networking, thereby responding to Kuwabara et al.'s (2018: 60) criticism that researchers neglect 'what people actually believe and feel about networking'. An exception is the work of Ingram and Zou (2008) on 'business friendships', which points to psychological difficulties resulting from the combination of instrumentality and affect in professional social networks. They argue that 'business friendships represent potential threats to the self-concept of friends' when problems related to the reciprocity of instrumental benefits occur (Ingram and Zou, 2008: 167). Casciaro et al. (2014: 705) have further noted that individuals fear 'the contaminating effects of building instrumental ties', creating a 'feeling of dirtiness' in a moral sense.

Our findings regarding women's *relational morality* leading to a hesitation to instrumentalize networks to their own advantage while not knowing whether they are able to return favours align with and extend previous knowledge on networking. As discussed above, Gouldner (1960) draws a fundamental analytic distinction between the utilitarian perspective and the moral perspective of social exchange relationships. The norm of reciprocity morally obliges individuals to reciprocate an exchange partner and leads them to avoid 'over-benefiting' from social interactions. Consequently, the norm of reciprocity serves as a concrete mechanism for maintaining a stable social system such as a network. According to Vinnicombe and Colwill (1996) as well as Hanson (2000), networks are considered more utilitarian by men and more social by women, which specifically suggests the presence of gender-specific approaches to networking. The literature on leadership training also acknowledges that women are likely to feel inauthentic when engaging in activities that serve their personal interests of leadership advancement (Ely et al., 2011).

Our observations on *gendered modesty* specifically lead us to consider the motivations of women as focal actors engaged in networking. Typically, SET scholars emphasize the importance of the donor trusting the recipient and the willingness of the donor to accept the risk of not being paid back as a basis for a social exchange relationship (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). Our results suggest that women as donors underestimate the value of their own contributions and hence hesitate to engage in networking. In terms of such gendered modesty, the literature on negotiation reveals a similar tendency among women to underestimate their worth. A study by Barron (2003) shows that males exhibit more certainty regarding their self-worth than females in negotiation situations, and are more eager to prove their worth to their negotiation partners. In her practitioners' book, Sheryl Sandberg (2013) devotes an entire chapter ('Sit at the table') to the issue of women's lack of self-confidence, and underestimations of their own abilities. In reflecting on her experiences as a top female executive, she notes that 'We consistently underestimate ourselves' (Sandberg, 2013: 31). This practical insight corresponds with the findings of academic studies on women's unfavourable judgements of their own performance. For instance, Heatherington et al. (1993: 739) found that 'females present themselves more modestly than males in achievement situations', even though their actual performance does not differ.

The presence of gendered modesty may also be explained by the existence of stereotypes. Characteristics that foster proactive and instrumental networking for one's own benefit stand in sharp contradiction to female stereotypes, but align with male stereotypes (Bowles et al., 2007; Janoff-Bulman and Wade, 1996: 145). Hence, our findings align with presumed societal expectations of appropriate female behaviour. Such so-called 'backlash effects' for disconfirming gender stereotypes (i.e. 'negative reactions to female agency and authority', Rudman and Phelan, 2008: 61) are discussed in the negotiation literature (e.g. Janoff-Bulman and Wade, 1996) and appear to us to be an intensifier of women's relational morality and modesty issues. Janoff-Bulman and Wade (1996: 143) relate women's 'failure to negotiate' to the 'self-advocacy dilemma'. Female self-promotion is regularly linked to social costs, such as the loss of likeability, because it violates cultural gender stereotypes. Such stereotypical thinking on gender attributes characterizes men as confident, rational and independent, whereas women are considered unselfish,

emotional and subordinate (e.g. Burgess and Borgida, 1999; Heilmann, 2001; Powell et al., 2002). Therefore, women's negotiation behaviour tends to be more modest to fit with the 'powerful norm of modesty … to guide appropriate behaviour' for women (Janoff-Bulman and Wade, 1996: 145). Further, in regard to initiating negotiations over resources such compensation, women are more reluctant to do so because they fear being penalized for being too demanding (Bowles et al., 2007). According to Tannen (1995), such distinct behavioural patterns observed in men and women in professional contexts can be attributed to patterns of childhood socialization. From a young age, girls are rewarded for playing down their achievements, whereas boys are rewarded for boasting about them. Hence, early on, girls internalize the idea that in exhibiting modesty they can become more popular with others.

Grounded theoretical model on networking. The pressure to reciprocate a favour is central to both SET and equity theory, which aim at achieving an 'equilibrium state of benefits' between parties and to the moral approach, which seeks to prevent 'over-benefiting' on the part of each individual. In describing women's engagements in networking on a continuum ranging from purely utilitarian to purely moral, our findings lead us to position women on the moral end. Hence, the *relational morality effect* limits the net benefits that women are likely to gain from professional networking to interactions through which they under-benefit ('giving > taking') or at best through which their inputs are equal to the outputs ('giving = taking'). Conscious considerations regarding a 'fair ratio' between giving and taking in social interactions requires an estimation of the personal value that someone has to offer to social contacts. When, owing to their modesty, women underestimate what they have to offer business contacts or their professional networks overall, they hesitate to establish social ties with people whom they consider to have significantly more to offer in terms of power, knowledge, experience, insider information, and so on. Consequently, the perceived 'fairness equilibrium' in the eyes of women in fact creates a negative delta between taking and giving (Figure 2, depicted as a shift to the left into the shaded triangle where the balance between taking and giving becomes increasingly negative). Hence, it is women's overly modest perceptions of their own value in relation to their network partners' value that distorts their perceived fairness and desirable equilibrium. As a result, networking behaviour is not as advantageous (i.e. effective) for women as it is for men in terms of assisting them in their work and enhancing their careers.

This imbalance becomes even more significant as moral considerations become more dominant, because they function as an intensifier of the gendered modesty effect. If women are morally motivated to be concerned about over-benefiting from social interactions under any given circumstances, they value their potential inputs to network relations even more conservatively and hesitate to receive gifts because of the obligation to reciprocate. However, reinforcement also occurs in the opposite direction: underestimation of self-worth in a network is likely to intensify moral concerns regarding engaging in networking activities. As a consequence of the mutually reinforcing relationship of these two effects, the under-benefiting effect observed under the assumptions of equity theory becomes even more detrimental.

This logic aligns with and provides a possible explanation for the results of previous studies. For instance, Brass (1985), Forret and Dougherty (2004) as well as Ibarra (1992,

1997) show that women enjoy less powerful and effective networks than do men. Scott's (1996: 239) study also shows that 'men generally have more contacts with those at the top than do women, even when they have the same titles, amount of experience, work history and are the same age'. Thus, even if women objectively offer the 'same value' to networks as men, they still connect with less powerful people than men in comparable positions. They tend to build ties with colleagues of the same or lower hierarchical levels rather than 'orientating themselves upwards' (e.g. Scott, 1996). Aligned with SET, women's subjective evaluations of what they have to offer are significantly less impressive than objective evaluations; therefore, they 'undersell themselves'. As a consequence, they position themselves less favourably in regard to networking.

Practical implications

First and foremost, we hope that this article's findings will motivate women to scrutinize their positioning in networks and encourage them to interact more proactively and less reservedly with powerful social contacts. Women's tendencies to underestimate their value in professional networks and on the job market are at odds with the demand for qualified women. Instead, women can be convinced of their qualities and of their resulting objective 'professional value' and engage proactively in the powerful networks that they are likely to benefit from and valuably contribute to.

Our study also offers interesting insights into networking patterns for corporate decision-makers on the whole and for men in particular. Powerful persons can support female engagement by taking the first step towards establishing networks and towards reaching out to women who hide behind their modesty. Such a step will likely benefit not only the women approached but also initiators and the entire social environment owing to the contributions that women can make. In addition to such 'pull effects', increased awareness resulting from, for example, training programmes tailored towards women's needs can create a 'push effect' that encourages women to engage in networking.

Limitations and future research

It is important to consider the limitations of this study. First, our interviews were of a retrospective nature, as the interviewees recalled past experience and events. However, as Bateson (1972: xvi) states, '[An individual] cannot know what he is facing until he faces it, and then looks back over the episode to sort out what happened' (cited in Weick, 1995: 305–306). Thus, this article hopefully encourages other researchers to further examine women's extrinsic and intrinsic barriers to effective networking through the use of alternative or complementary study designs (e.g. longitudinal, observational or experimental studies) to overcome the aforementioned potential bias.

It should also be recognized that the extent to which people engage in networks or hesitate to approach social contacts for support is influenced by aspects other than those identified in this article, such as personality traits (Wolff and Kim, 2012). Although there are excellent female and poor male networkers, we are confident that our data reveal typical patterns and motivation of female networking behaviour. Furthermore, the gender stereotypes discussed, which reflect widely shared views of acceptable behaviour for men and

women, vary from society to society (Schein et al., 1996). Although our interview partners had working experience abroad or had at least worked with international teams, they had primarily worked in German contexts. One interviewee with a German / American background noted cultural differences in how networking is perceived per se. In contrast to networking in the USA, networking in Germany is associated with a negative connotation of needing another person's 'vitamin B' to progress. This could have an impact on the relational morality theme derived. Hence, it may be worthwhile to extend our study to other settings, such as an American setting. It would also be interesting to examine the long-term effects of an increasing number of women who are assuming powerful positions on 'rules of play' in effective power networks. According to our expectations, a higher proportion of women will bring about a change at least with regard to structural barriers. However, it is also conceivable that the nature of important networks will become more emotional, morally concerned and less dominated by utilitarian motives.

We would like to acknowledge that networking behaviours may benefit women in ways that did not surface in this study. Networks not only provide access to instrumental resources that foster career advancement but also emotional and more intangible but still valuable benefits such as social support and friendship (Ibarra, 1993). The literature also refers to such relationships as having 'expressive value' (Rothstein et al., 2001: 4). Some authors, such as Molm (2003), argue that the act of reciprocation is in and of itself more important than the magnitude of its value because consistent reciprocity serves as a mechanism to reduce uncertainty. Hence, future studies should critically consider effectiveness in networking as it is presented in this article.

Conclusion

Researching why women have less success with networking is vitally important to efforts towards the development of gender equality in work settings. Our study confirms the existence of structural barriers in the form of homophily and work–family conflict that hinder women's networking efforts. Furthermore, women's tendencies to harbour moral concerns about 'exploiting' social ties cause them to under-benefit from networking activities based on the social exchange of benefits. This adverse effect of relational morality on networking effectivity is complemented by women's tendencies to underestimate and undersell their professional self-worth (i.e. gendered modesty). These considerations provide a holistic explanation for women's hesitations to instrumentalize social ties and for the consequent ineffectiveness of their professional networking efforts compared to those of their male counterparts.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the participants at seminars at EBS Business School for helpful comments on earlier versions of this article. The article benefited greatly from the feedback of two anonymous reviewers and Associate Editor Olga Tregaskis.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

ORCID iD

Marjo-Riitta Diehl https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4553-4295

References

Adams JS (1963) Towards an understanding of inequality. *Journal of Abnormal and Normal Social Psychology* 67(5): 422–436.

Ahuja G, Soda G and Zaheer A (2012) The genesis and dynamics of organizational networks. *Organization Science* 23(2): 434–448.

Barron LA (2003) Ask and you shall receive? Gender differences in negotiators' beliefs about requests for a higher salary. *Human Relations* 56(6): 635–662.

Blau PM (1964) *Exchange and Power in Social Life*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.

Bowles HR, Babcock L and Lai L (2007) Social incentives for gender differences in the propensity to initiate negotiations: Sometimes it does hurt to ask. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 103(1): 84–103.

Brass DJ (1985) Men's and women's networks: A study of interaction patterns and influence in an organization. *Academy of Management Journal* 28(2): 327–343.

Brass DJ, Galaskiewicz J, Greve HR and Wenpin T (2004) Taking stock of networks and organizations: A multilevel perspective. *Academy of Management Journal* 47(6): 795–817.

Burgess D and Borgida E (1999) Who women are, who women should be: Descriptive and prescriptive gender stereotyping in sex discrimination. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law* 5(3): 665–692.

Burke RJ (1984) Mentors in organizations. *Group and Organization Studies* 9(3): 253–272.

Burt RS (1992) *Structural Holes: The Social Structure of Competition*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Casciaro T, Gino F and Kouchaki M (2014) The contaminating effects of building instrumental ties: How networking can make us feel dirty. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 54(4): 705–735.

Cropanzano R and Mitchell M (2005) Social exchange theory: An interdisciplinary review. *Journal of Management* 31(6): 874–900.

Cross R and Thomas R (2011) A smarter way to network. *Harvard Business Review* 89(7/8): 149–153.

Deckop JR, Cirka CC and Andersson LM (2003) Doing unto others: The reciprocity of helping behavior in organizations. *Journal of Business Ethics* 47(2): 101–113.

Eisenberger R, Lynch P, Aselage J and Rohdieck S (2004) Who takes the most revenge? Individual differences in negative reciprocity norm endorsement. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 30(6): 787–799.

Ely RJ, Ibarra H and Kolb D (2011) *Taking gender into account: Theory and design for women's leadership development programs*. Faculty & Research Working Paper. INSEAD, Fontainebleau.

Forret ML and Dougherty TW (2001) Correlates of networking behavior for managerial and professional employees. *Group & Organization Management* 26(3): 283–311.

Forret ML and Dougherty TW (2004) Networking behaviors and career outcomes: Differences for men and women? *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 25(3): 419–437.

Gioia DA, Corley KG and Hamilton AL (2013) Seeking qualitative rigor in inductive research: Notes on the Gioia Methodology. *Organizational Research Methods* 16(1): 15–31.

Gioia DA, Price KN, Hamilton AL and Thomas JB (2010) Forging an identity: An insider-outsider study of processes involved in the formation of organizational identity. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 55(1): 1–46.

Glaser BG and Strauss A (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Chicago, IL: Aldine Publishing Co.
Goebel M, Vogel R and Weber C (2013) Management research on reciprocity: A review of the literature. *Business Research* 6(1): 34–53.
Gouldner AW (1960) The norm of reciprocity: A preliminary statement. *American Sociological Review* 25(2): 161–178.
Hanson S (2000) Networking. *Professional Geographer* 52(4): 751–758.
Heatherington L, Daubman KA, Bates C, Ahn A, Brown H and Preston C (1993) Two investigations of 'female modesty' in achievement situations. *Sex Roles* 29(11–12): 739–754.
Heilmann ME (2001) Description and prescription: How gender stereotypes prevent women's ascent up the organizational ladder. *Journal of Social Issues* 57(4): 657–674.
Homans GC (1958) Social behavior as exchange. *American Journal of Sociology* 63(6): 597–606.
Homans GC (1961) *Social Behavior*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc.
Ibarra H (1992) Homophily and differential returns: Sex differences in network structure and access in an advertising firm. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 37(3): 422–447.
Ibarra H (1993) Personal networks of women and minorities in management: A conceptual framework. *Academy of Management Review* 18(1): 56–87.
Ibarra H (1997) Paving an alternative route: Gender differences in managerial networks. *Social Psychology Quarterly* 60(1): 91–102.
Ibarra H, Carter NM and Silva C (2010) Why men still get more promotions than women. *Harvard Business Review* 88(9): 80–85.
Ingram P and Zou X (2008) Business friendship. *Research in Organizational Behavior* 28: 167–184.
Janoff-Bulman R and Wade MB (1996) The dilemma of self-advocacy for women: Another case of blaming the victim? *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 15(2): 143–152.
Joecks J, Pull K and Vetter K (2013) Gender diversity in the boardroom and firm performance: What exactly constitutes a 'critical mass?' *Journal of Business Ethics* 118(1): 61–72.
Joshi A, Liao H and Roh H (2011) Bridging domains in workplace demography research: A review and reconceptualization. *Journal of Management* 37(2): 521–552.
Kan MY, Sullivan O and Gershuny J (2011) Gender convergence in domestic work: Discerning the effects of interactional and institutional barriers from large-scale data. *Sociology* 45(2): 234–251.
Kulik CT and Olekalns M (2012) Negotiating the gender divide: Lessons from the negotiation and organizational behavior literatures. *Journal of Management* 38(4): 1387–1415.
Kuwabara K, Hildebrand CA and Zou X (2018) Lay theories of networking: How laypeople's beliefs about networks affect their attitudes toward and engagement in instrumental networking. *Academy of Management Review* 43(1): 50–64.
Lincoln JR and Miller R (1979) Work and friendship ties in organizations: A comparative analysis of relational networks. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 24(2): 181–199.
Lincoln YS and Guba EG (1985) *Naturalist Inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE.
Lyness KS and Thompson DE (2000) Climbing the corporate ladder: Do female and male executives follow the same route? *Journal of Applied Psychology* 85(1): 86–101.
Lyonette C and Crompton R (2014) Sharing the load? Partners' relative earnings and the division of domestic labour. *Work, Employment and Society* 29(1): 23–40.
McGuire GM (2002) Gender, race, and the shadow structure: A study of informal networks and inequality on a work organization. *Gender & Society* 16(3): 303–322.
Miles MB and Huberman AM (1994) *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook* (2nd edn). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
Molm L (2003) Theoretical comparisons of forms of exchange. *Sociological Theory* 21(1): 1–17.

Moore G (1990) Structural determinants of men's and women's personal networks. *American Sociological Review* 55(5): 726–735.

Morrison AM and Von Glinow MA (1990) Women and minorities in management. *American Psychologist* 45(2): 200–208.

Murstein B, Cerreto M and MacDonald M (1977) A theory and investigation of the effect of exchange-orientation on marriage and friendship. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 39(3): 543–548.

O'Leary VE and Ickovics JR (1992) Cracking the glass ceiling: Overcoming isolation and alienation. In: Sekeran U and Leong F (eds) *Womanpower: Managing in Times of Demographic Turbulence*. Beverly Hills, CA: SAGE, 7–30.

Piskorski MJ (2014) *A Social Strategy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Powell GN, Butterfield DA and Parent JD (2002) Gender and managerial stereotypes: Have the times changed? *Journal of Management* 28(2): 177–193.

Ragins BR and Cotton JC (1991) Easier said than done: Gender differences in perceived barriers for gaining a mentor. *Academy of Management Journal* 34(4): 939–951.

Renzulli LA, Aldrich H and Moody J (2000) Family matters: Gender, networks, and entrepreneurial outcomes. *Social Forces* 79(2): 523–547.

Rothstein MG, Burke RJ and Bristor JM (2001) Structural characteristics and support benefits in the interpersonal networks of women and men in management. *The International Journal of Organizational Analysis* 9(1): 4–25.

Rudman LA and Phelan JE (2008) Backlash effects for disconfirming gender stereotypes in organizations. *Research in Organizational Behavior* 28: 61–79.

Sandberg S (2013) *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*. New York: Vintage Books.

Schein VE (2001) A global look at the psychological barriers of women's progress in management. *Journal of Social Issues* 57(4): 675–688.

Schein VE, Mueller R, Lituchy T and Liu J (1996) Think manager—think male: A global phenomenon? *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 17(1): 33–41.

Scott DB (1996) Shattering the instrumental-expressive myth: The power of women's networks in corporate-government affairs. *Gender & Society* 10(3): 232–247.

Seibert SE, Kraimer ML and Liden RC (2001) A social capital theory of career success. *The Academy of Management Journal* 44(2): 219–237.

Shipilov A, Labianca G, Kalynsh V and Kalynsh Y (2007) Career-related network building behaviors, range social capital, and career outcomes. *Academy of Management Proceedings* 1: 1–6.

South SJ, Markham WT and Corder J (1982) Social structure and intergroup interaction: Men and women of the federal bureaucracy. *Amercian Sociological Review* 47(5): 587–599.

Strauss A and Corbin J (1998) *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory* (2nd edn). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Tannen D (1995) The power of talk: Who gets heard and why. *Harvard Business Review* 73(5): 138–148.

Uehara ES (1995) Reciprocity reconsidered: Gouldner's 'moral norm of reciprocity' and social support. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 12(4): 483–502.

Vinnicombe S and Colwill NL (1996) *The Essence of Women in Management*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Walster E, Walster GW and Berscheid E (1978) *Equity: Theory and Research*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Weick K (1995) *Sensemaking in Organizations*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE.

Wellington S, Kropf MB and Gerkovich PR (2003) What's holding women back? *Harvard Business Review* 81(6): 18–19.

Westermarck E (1908) *The Origin and Development of the Moral Ideas*. London: Macmillan and Company.
Westphal JD and Milton LP (2000) How experience and network ties affect the influence of demographic minorities on corporate boards. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 45: 366–398.
Whiting VR and de Janasz SC (2004) Mentoring in the 21st century: Using the internet to build skills and networks. *Journal of Management Education* 28(3): 275–293.
Willemsen TM (2002) Gender typing of the successful manager—a stereotype reconsidered. *Sex Roles* 46(11–12): 385–391.
Wolff H and Moser K (2009) Effects of networking on career success: A longitudinal study. *Journal of Applied Psychology* 94(1): 196–206.
Wolff H-G and Kim S (2012) The relationship between networking behaviors and the Big Five personality dimensions. *Career Development International* 17(1): 43–66.

Elena Greguletz finished her doctoral studies focusing on women's pathways to leadership at EBS Business School, Department of Management and Economics, in June 2018. She holds a bachelor's degree from EBS Business School, Germany and a master's degree from London School of Economics, UK. After graduation, Elena rejoined the German management consultancy goetzpartners, focusing on international restructuring, transformation and organizational change projects. [Email: elena.greguletz@ebs.edu]

Marjo-Riitta (Maikki) Diehl is Professor of Organizational Behavior and HRM at EBS Business School in Germany. She received her PhD from the London School of Economics, UK. Her research interests include organizational justice and other social exchange theory based concepts to study employment relationships and diversity management. Marjo-Riitta's work has appeared in various international and national outlets, including *Journal of Management, Human Relations* and *Journal of Managerial Psychology*. [Email: marjo-riitta.diehl@ebs.edu]

Karin Kreutzer is Professor of Social Business School at EBS Business School, Germany. She holds a doctoral degree from University of St Gallen, Switzerland, a master's degree in International Business Studies from University of Passau, Germany and a master's degree in Management of Nonprofit Organizations from Bocconi University, Italy. She worked for international NGOs in Germany and Italy. Karin Kreutzer has done research on organizational identity in hybrid organizations, nonprofit governance and professionalization. [Email: karin.kreutzer@ebs.edu]

Appendix 1. List of interviewees.

Interviewee	Position	Origin[a]	Age	Children
1	Executive board member	German	~45	2
2	Executive board member (DAX or MDAX)	German	~45	2
3	Leadership position	German	~50	1
4	Leadership position	German	~45	2
5	Leadership position	French	~45	0
6	Leadership position	German	~40	0
7	Executive board member	German	~45	3
8	Executive board member	German	~40	1
9	Entrepreneur	German	~35	0
10	Entrepreneur	German	~50	0
11	Leadership position	German	~40	2
12	Executive board member (DAX or MDAX)	German	~50	0
13	Entrepreneur	German	~40	0
14	Entrepreneur	German	~50	6
15	Entrepreneur	German	~30	0
16	Executive board member (DAX or MDAX)	German	~60	1
17	Leadership position (DAX or MDAX)	Swedish	~45	2
18	Executive board member (DAX or MDAX)	German	~55	1
19	Executive board member	French	~35	1
20	Leadership position	German	~55	1
21	Leadership position	US-American	~40	1
22	Leadership position	German	~40	0
23	Leadership position (DAX or MDAX)	German	~60	1
24	Leadership position	German	~50	2
25	Executive board member (DAX or MDAX)	German	~45	1
26	Leadership position	German	~35	0
27	Leadership position	German	~50	3
28	Executive board member	German	~40	0
29	Entrepreneur	German	~55	2
30	Leadership position	German	~50	1
31	Executive board member (DAX or MDAX)	German	~60	2
32	Entrepreneur	German	~45	0
33	Entrepreneur	German	~50	2
34	Executive board member	German	~50	4
35	Entrepreneur	German	~50	2
36	Executive board member	German	~65	1
37	Executive board member	German	~50	0

[a]Origin as mentioned in interviews.