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The Discursive Construction of Gender in Contemporary Management Literature

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ABSTRACT. This article analyses how the new type of worker is constructed in respect to gender in current management literature. It contributes to the increasing body of work in organisational theory and business ethics which interrogates management texts by analysing textual representations of gender. A discourse analysis of six texts reveals three inter-connected yet distinct ways in which gender is talked about. First, the awareness discourse attempts to be inclusive of gender yet reiterates stereotypes in its portrayal of women. Second, within the individualisation discourse, formerly discriminatory elements of gender lose their importance but a gender dimension reappears within the idea of 'Brand You'. Third, in the new ideal discourse, women are constructed as ideal workers of the future. The article argues that there is little space within this web of discourses for an awareness of the continued inequalities experienced by women in relation to men to be voiced and that this rhetorical aporia contributes to a 'post-feminist' climate.

KEY WORDS: gender, management, organisational theory, post-feminism, discourse analysis

Introduction

The common assumption about management texts is that they are written by men, about men and for men and that women are almost absent as protagonists, writers or consumers of management literature (Crainer, 2003). It has been argued that much research on gender and organisations carries a masculine subtext (Bendl, 2006; Benschop and Doorewaard, 1998a, b) and management writing is no exception to this. Within the field of business ethics, various writers have engaged with issues relating to gender such as the scarcity of women in senior roles (e.g. Oakley, 2000; Peterson and Philpot, 2007), gender differences in ethical decision making (e.g. Glover et al. 2002; McCabe and Ingram and Dato-on, 2006) or how feminist ethics can contribute to business ethics (e.g. Derry, 1997, 2002). Recent inquiries into business ethics have stressed the importance of looking at discursive constructions of gender (Calás and Smircich, 1997; Lämsä and Sintonen, 2001; Martin and Knopoff, 1997) and the critical reading of management texts is a good example of this. As management texts often exclude women from their representations of business practice, this should be a central issue for business ethics.

Management texts with such a marked masculine bias might be failing to keep pace with changes in the economy, however. Current academic and media writing suggest that the 'new knowledge economy' is changing the world of work in dramatic ways. Indeed, it appears that new forms and modes of employment are emerging and traditional concepts like hierarchical careers are put in question (cf. Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Beck, 2000; Castells, 1996; Cohen and Mallon, 1999; Pongratz and Voß, 2003). The new worker, the central figure in this changing world, is expected to benefit from new forms of flexibility and freedom but is also accountable in new ways. Research on gender and organisations has suggested that the concepts of flexibility, freedom and accountability are themselves – like management writing – gendered masculine (Alvesson and Billing, 1997; Kerfoot and Knights, 1993, 1996; Hearn and Parkin, 1992). If this is so, these concepts and texts need to be carefully scrutinised if theories and texts are to be developed that take gender seriously.

The aim of the article is to explore in how far management texts have changed to reflect the

changing world of work. Specifically, the article explores the ways in which the new worker is portrayed in contemporary management literature. The article is organised as follows: first, it poses the question of how far management writing can be described as masculine and how this may be changing to reflect the changing economy. The second section sketches out methodology and methods, defining the particular approach to discourse analysis adopted here and setting out the principles behind the selection of texts and the analysis itself. The third section explores the discursive boundaries of the three main discourses identified as being central to the way gender is constructed within these texts. The fourth and final section investigates the possible consequences of these discourses and draws some conclusions.

Reflecting management? Management literature as masculine and its potential to change

Many writers on business ethics have been centrally concerned with the number of women in senior managerial positions (e.g. Burgess and Tharenou, 2002; Burke, 1997; Oakley, 2000; Peterson and Philpot, 2007). Women's representation in the higher organisational echelons is still very low and figures seem to have stagnated or even decreased slightly in recent years (Catalyst, 2006; Singh and Vinnicombe, 2006; Treanor, 2007). When it comes to discussing why women should be represented at a senior level within organisations, two main arguments are mobilised. First, most agree that organisations lose out if they fail to tap the 'resource women' (Calás and Smircich, 1993; Economist, 2006; Vinnicombe and Colwill, 1995). Second, it is generally accepted that offering opportunities to women is an issue of social justice and corporate social responsibility.[1] For example, many companies cite measures of gender diversity and women in leadership positions as part of their annual social responsibility reports (for instance Cadbury Schweppes, 2006; for an analysis of this phenomenon see Grosser and Moon, 2005).

Writers on gender and business ethics have also tried to establish whether men and women make different decisions about the ethical issues which arise in management, but research in this area remains inconclusive at present (Glover et al., 2002; Jones and Gautschi, 1988; MacLellan and Dobson, 1997; McCabe et al., 2006). Another stream of research has tried to reconcile business ethics and feminist ethics. Derry (1997, 2002), for instance, argues that one should listen to women instead of fitting them into roles that were designed for men. Solomon (1997) argues that caring and compassion are not a women's or feminist theme but were also present in the theories developed by Hume and Smith, a point rarely acknowledged in business ethics. Whilst many theorists have pointed to Gilligan's work (1982) to argue that women bring a different voice to business and business ethics, Oriz (1997) warns that women's voices often continue to be defined within a patriarchal framework. Others have pointed out that often only certain women are deemed important in writing on business ethics, with senior women given prominence in spite of their relatively privileged position, while Third World women are excluded from theories altogether (Brenkert, 1997; Calás, 1992). Others argue that business ethics needs to explore how management texts are written and how their particular constructions validate certain realities (Calás and Smircich, 1997; Martin and Knopoff, 1997; Lämsä and Sintonen, 2001). This stream of research assumes that management literature not only reflects practice, but is also fundamental in shaping that practice.

Given the persistent dominance of men in business, it is not surprising that most literature in the field of management is about men and written for men (cf. Wilson, 2001). In reviewing what he considers to be the principal texts on management, Crainer notes that '[t]he lack of women writers is a reflection of traditional prejudices. Even now, books on management and business are largely written by – and for – men.' (Crainer, 2003, p. xxi). The masculine subtext (Bendl, 2006; Benschop and Doorewaard, 1998a, b) is particularly visible in women's absence from classical management texts, in which gender was generally not deemed significant enough to have any bearing on the validity of the theories being forward. Acker and Houtem (1992) reviewed the sex bias in classical management studies, for instance, and found that in one prominent example, the Hawthorne studies, the gender composition of the workforce was simply ignored.

Such texts implicitly and explicitly assume that the standard manager is male, white, and heterosexual (for instance Ferguson, 1994; Gerhard et al., 1992). The explicit maleness of management literature also becomes evident in the systematic use of the male pronoun in – mainly earlier – texts (Alvesson and Billing, 1997; Green et al., 2001). The implicit masculinity, meanwhile, can be traced by paying attention to the persistent use of sport metaphors or linguistic constructions like 'penetrating markets' (Collinson and Hearn, 2000, p. 264). An analysis of both together strongly suggests that even before women enter the picture, management discourses are '*already* male gendered' (Calás and Smircich, 1992, p. 228, emphasis in original).

Research in this field has sought to challenge such hegemonic assumptions and show how gender matters in organisations. One of the earliest studies in that respect was conducted by Kanter (1977), who shed light on the difference it makes to be a woman in an organisation. Hearn and Parkin (1983) highlighted the fact that sex and gender were at that time all but absent from the standard textbooks and readers. In reviewing the field, they noted that management scholars rarely looked at gender issues and that gender scholars rarely looked at management issues. However, since that time a plethora of studies have emerged that theorise both gender and organisations. Authors like Acker (1990), Gherardi (1995; Gherardi et al., 2003), Alvesson and Billing (1997) and Harlow and Hearn (1995) among many others (e.g. Brown, 1995; Calás and Smircich, 1991a; Meyerson and Kolb, 2000; Thomas and Davies, 2005) argue that organisations are not gender neutral but profoundly gendered. Martin and Collinson (2003) have particularly referred to the many synergies that are still to be gained from analysing gender and organisations together.

Various studies have explored the gendered nature of management writing. Fondas (1997) uses the 'feminine' as a deconstructivist strategy to show how a masculine image of the manager is sustained. She argues that although many newer management themes, such as *helping others*, would allow for an association with femininity, these associations do not become apparent and the image of a masculine manager is thereby left intact (Fondas, 1997). Martin and Knopoff (1997) have shown through re-reading Weber that apparently gender-neutral organisational theory contains a strong gender subtext. Calás and Smircich point to how important it is for management to produce texts that are gender aware (Calás and Smircich, 1991a) and illustrate this through a study of how the masculine image of the leader is implicitly constructed (Calás and Smircich, 1991b). Leonard (2004) has argued that management literature draws on only a small range of metaphors – such as space, time, and the sexual body – and that these structure how sense is made of gender. Ogbor (2000) unmasks the white, male, heroic standard in his analysis of ideology in entrepreneurial discourses, showing how discourses create myths about who can be an entrepreneur and what constitutes good behaviour for an entrepreneur. Ahl (2004) also studied how entrepreneurs are represented in management texts and found three ways in which women entrepreneurs were talked about: small differences were stressed and similarities with men were ignored, emphasis was continually placed on how unusual these women entrepreneurs were and an alternative feminine model of the entrepreneur was created which left the masculine standard intact. Through these three discourses, women are constructed as the non-norm, the secondary and the other but never as the standard entrepreneur, who continues to be masculine.

While research on gender and organisation has been flourishing, one could ask how much mainstream management texts have changed. Although many of the new managerial texts now mention gender, Wilson (2001, p. 5) argues that much of this literature remains gender "myopic"; although gender is named, the fuller dimensions of what it means and how it might alter dominant management paradigms remain unexplored. Charles Handy, for example, poses questions about gender but does not attempt to answer them (Green et al., 2001). It is also common for gender to be treated as synonymous with sex and equated with women (Calás and Smircich, 1991a; Green et al., 2001). Through these constructions, women are represented as the only gendered subjects, disturbing the smooth running of otherwise gender-free organisations; this discursive pattern is nicely summarised as "gender = sex = women = problem" (Calás and Smircich, 1991a, p. 229).

This representation is troublesome for two reasons. On the one hand, it highlights the tendency to biologise and essentialise women. Gender is treated

as a direct function of sex. In gender studies, the distinction between sex as biological construct and gender as social construct is widely accepted, particularly in second wave feminist texts (Oakley, 1972). More recent interventions have shown that sex is also socially constructed (Butler, 1990, 1993; Fausto-Sterling, 2000), moving gender theories even further away from a biologising views of gender. Instead of analysing sex, sexuality, and bodies in a systematic way as some research on gender and organisations has started to do (Brewis, 2000; Brewis and Linstead, 2000), mainstream management literature continues to biologise gender and to ignore the ways in which this is problematic. On the other hand, this biologising strategy also positions woman as the *other*, who needs to adapt to systems and structures. This clearly echoes de Beauvoir's famous assertion (1949/1993) that women are constituted as the other in mainstream discourses and it also reflects in Ahl's (2004) findings on women as entrepreneurs. Instead of changing organisations themselves, women are portrayed as having to adapt to fit into roles that have been designed for men (Calvert and Ramsey, 1996; Calás and Smircich, 1996; Puwar, 2004). Mainstream management is thus taking a truncated view of gender; one way of overcoming this shortsightedness is to show how management concepts, systems, and structures are themselves gendered.

What makes a text masculine, then? Masculinity studies is a field that has grown enormously in the last decades (Connell et al., 2005). This is often linked to the fact that new social formations are said to be more beneficial for women than for men, since women gain better results in education and often excel in the skills that are needed in the new economy (cf. Edley and Wetherell, 1999; Gill et al., 2000, 2005; Hill, 1997; McDowell, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003). Masculinities are often defined as being multiple, relational to femininities and detached from men's biology but still somehow apply to what is associated with men in society (Connell, 2005). Although the focus on masculinity is intended to avoid essentialising men, most definitions still effectively equate maleness and masculinity. Whilst MacInnes (1998) argues that masculinity should be abandoned due to these definitional problems, the concept has proved to be a useful tool when assessing gender in organisations, where masculinity has been identified as one of the fundamental structuring features (Alvesson, 1998; Collinson, 1992; Collinson and Hearn, 1994; Collinson and Hearn, 2005; Kerfoot and Knights, 1993, 1996; Wajcman, 1998).

It may be, however, that a significant shift is currently underway in this regard, and that the hegemonic, masculine model is longer accepted as the ideal. This shift is related to a widespread acceptance that the mode of economic production in the West has changed from manufacturing goods to providing services (for an analysis see for instance Beck, 2000; Castells, 1996, 1997). These economic transformations lead to a new concept of the employee who becomes a 'knowledge worker', a concept theoretically developed by Drucker (1969) as early as 1969. According to Drucker's conceptualisation, this worker is a 'he' who sells his skills and knowledge instead of his manual labour. By becoming aware of his value,[2] he assumes an active and powerful position in relation to the organisation.

The newlyfound importance and independence of the knowledge worker is enforced by a profound reorganisation of value-adding activities, which are in themselves facilitated by the increasing use of information communication technologies (ICTs). We then see the development of a new class of well-educated, technologically-versed, individualised workers whom Castells (1996, 2000) calls 'self-programmable labour'. The concept of the new knowledge worker does not only apply to ICT or new media professions but also assumed to be a wider phenomenon in working life (Pongratz and Voß, 2003). Instead of working for one company, knowledge workers tend to have a portfolio of jobs, which allegedly leaves them with freedom and control over their lives (but see Blair, 2001; Fraser and Gold, 2001). However, with increasing quasi-entrepreneurial independence, the knowledge worker becomes personally and individually responsible for constructing his/her own reflexive biography, which inevitably increases the personal exposure to risk (Beck, 2000; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1996). Within the resulting 'new economy', the worker is expected to be entrepreneurial, innovative, flexible and risk-taking, a situation which is presented as applying equally to all, regardless of sex, race, class or sexuality.

One way of illustrating the potential for management literature to change to reflect these new

realities is with reference to careers. The changes in the economy mean that old concepts such as the classical ladder-type career appear to be increasingly *passé*. The classical career is replaced by portfolio careers in which workers undertake a succession of projects rather than following a linear progression (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Castells, 1996). Although the extent to which this is likely to become a reality for most people is questionable, such a re-conceptualisation of careers poses interesting questions with regard to gender. If the standard concept of career is gendered, reflecting a lifecycle that is more common for men and resulting from organisational procedures which exclude women (Wajcman, 1998, p. 105f), a new formulation could have positive repercussions from a gender perspective. Interestingly, some models of women's careers, for instance O'Leary's (1997) *life-stream model,* show strong similarities with the widely promoted work-life balance and indeed a portfolio career lifestyle. This example suggests that a re-conceptualisation of old systems and structures could result in issues of gender, understood in a much broader sense than hitherto, entering the management canon.

The reasons for paying such close attention to the gender constructions in management is that they give an insight into the way in which a particular version of reality is constructed (Fairclough, 1992, 1995, 2005; Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Research on discourse and management has shown how much management texts shape perceptions of reality (cf. Ahl, 2004; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2006; Calás and Smircich, 1991b; Hardy et al. 2000; Phillips and Hardy, 1997). Gendered language is a powerful transmittor of meaning about who is seen as appropriate for a job; one could here think of a term like 'chairman' and what it conveys (Harlow and Hearn, 1995). Language can also be more subtle, in that certain linguistic tropes of winning and succeeding as well as competitive sports metaphors may exclude women, who can find such language alienating (Solomon, 1997). In this respect, discursive research can be highly useful as it allows exploration of underlying gender subtexts to show if the sustained gender inequality in the workplace is maintained, reversed or challenged by the particular texts under consideration. Discursive theories assert that representations shape reality in powerful ways, influencing how people interact. That being the case, gender representations in management texts need to be treated as an important issue for business ethics.

Methodology and method

In asking how the knowledge worker is constructed with respect to gender, I am interested in how our knowledge is mediated by discourse. The notion of discourse is a contested one and many different versions of discourse analysis exist (Gill, 2000; Parker, 1990; Potter et al. 1990; Taylor, 2001). One of the major differences lies in the degree to which a Foucauldian frame of analysis is followed. In the Foucauldian use of the term, discourse denotes a group of transformative statements which are constitutive of practices (cf. Potter, 1997; Potter et al., 1990). Those large discourses or 'dispositives' affect wider societal practices and such a view is indeed relatively common in research on organisations and discourse (e.g. Hardy et al., 2000; Phillips and Hardy, 1997). In contrast, Potter and Wetherell, on whose work I am primarily relying in the current analysis, use discourse to mean 'all forms of spoken interaction, formal and informal, and written texts of all kinds' (1987:7). While a Foucauldian discourse analysis would focus on larger and wider discourses, the analytic approach developed by Potter and Wetherell is more, but not exclusively, concerned with the fine grain analysis of language, its organisation and functions (for a discussion of different versions of discourse analyses see Alvesson 2002). This version of discourse analysis is also interested in the ideological practices that discourses create, commonly referred to as 'practical ideologies'. Ideology is not used here in the Marxist sense of a false consciousness but rather describes certain relationships and effects (Parker, 1990, p. 90). Ideologies are multiple and sometimes contradictory, functioning to justify, maintain or challenge power relations in society (Billig et al., 1988; Wetherell et al., 1987). Discourse in Potter and Wetherell's terms then refers to both language in use as well as to the ideology this language in use supports and makes possible.

A discourse analysis in the version formulated by Potter and Wetherell provides a useful tool to identify which gender representations are mobilised in newer management literature. It also allows us to

study language in action, to explore how language achieves its rhetorical function and to identify the role of silences and preferred readings within particular texts (Gill, 2000; Tonkiss, 1998). As discourse analysis is concerned with how discourses create and validate knowledge, the focus is usually on interpretative repertoires – that is, on those constructions which are encountered repeatedly and used in sense-making processes. An interpretative repertoire can be described as a register or lexicon (Potter and Wetherell, 1987:138) which is part of the common sense knowledge used to make sense of the world. Often the notions of discourse and interpretative repertoire are used interchangeably. Discourse analysis has been applied to various research questions but most notable is the research which investigates how inequality is reproduced and justified (for instance Gill, 1993; Speer and Potter, 2000; Wetherell and Potter, 1992; Wetherell et al., 1987). Treating discourse as a social practice, then, provides a useful framework to analyse how gendered meanings about the new worker are rhetorically created and reinforced, revealing the ways in which they help to organise knowledge in society and shape reality.

Previous research on gender constructions in management texts tended to use texts that are deemed management classics. However, if one aims to study contemporary management texts, it is obviously difficult to determine which text is going to become a classic. In order to select texts, I have opted for using an internet search to determine which texts are regularly referred to. Various web-based book searches were conducted in order to locate material and summaries, reviews, articles, and online material on different books were all reviewed. I also aimed at including the work of certain authors who hold a management guru status and whose books are widely consumed. Although it would be interesting to explore how work specifically on gender in management constructs gender, for the current analysis I looked for texts that would classify as mainstream management texts. I decided that the intended audience should span the whole range from MBA students to managers to the new workers themselves, in order to allow a varied overview of the mainstream management field. The literature I selected is thus a very specific sample, mainly works written by management gurus or books that were frequently discussed in relation to changes at work. In a discourse analysis representativeness is less crucial a consideration in compiling a sample than in some other approaches; rather, what is key is to learn as much as possible about variations in accounts (Marshall and Wetherell, 1989; Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell and Potter, 1992).

This selection process meant that the following books were included in the research. Since Charles Handy's (1993) *Understanding Organisations* has already been critiqued in relation to gender by Green et al. (2001), I selected his subsequent book, *The Empty Raincoat* (1994),[3] which develops the idea of the portfolio worker. His more recent book *The Elephant and the Flea* (2001) was also included in the sample. The strong autobiographical tendencies in the latter rendered it an unsuitable substitute for the earlier, more theoretical book, so I decided to analyse both. Rosabeth Moss Kanter is a well-known writer whose work often addresses gender (Kanter, 1977, 1989). Her book *Evolve!* (2001), which deals explicitly with the internet age was selected, as was a text by Tom Peters, who is well-known for his book on excellence (Peters and Waterman, 1982) analysed by Calás and Smircich (1991b). His newer book, *The Brand You 50* (2001), was written for the new independent worker, who had rarely been addressed directly. This direct address shows that the independent worker is becoming a manager of the self and worthy of engagement. As this change is central to the theoretical developments I aimed at studying, the book was included in the sample, although as a 'self-help' book it differs slightly from other texts. The final two books are both quoted frequently in the field of management. Although Frances Cairncross' (1997) first book is more influential, I chose her second book *The Company of the Future* (2002) since it was more relevant to the organisationally-focussed research topic. Finally, Daniel Pink's (2001)[4] book on freelance workers, *Free Agent Nation*, is widely seen as important and was therefore included as the final text in the sample.

The process of discourse analysis involves reading and re-reading texts until a high degree of familiarity is reached. Although the books were read several times, it was often difficult to see the discursive pattern without coding. I found it useful to base the analysis on thematical coding (Tonkiss, 1998) and I coded for qualities new workers are supposed to

have, the new career structure and the general use of gender in the texts. Sections that discussed these issues were coded and re-read. Through reading the texts in context as well as in coded form, I developed a deeper understanding of which concepts the texts invoked. The main discourses or interpretative repertoires identified are presented in the following section. I also explored what the texts leave out of sight and gloss over. As I was interested in the larger picture, I opted to provide a general impression of concepts by citing short quotes, only using longer passages where I thought it useful. Although there is no final interpretation of the texts and I offer one possible reading, the discourses I have identified do reflect the main approaches to dealing with gender in this kind of management literature. What is central here is to uncover the underlying and often unconscious gender assumptions that shape how gender is made sense of. Such an exercise is useful in that it increases the self-reflexivity of management as a discipline, but it also shows why gender representations are an issue for business ethics.

Three ways to talk about gender

The discourse analysis conducted on the texts led to three related yet distinct ways in which gender is talked about. The first interpretative repertoire relates to an awareness of gender issues, indicating that women are no longer absent from management literature. The second interpretative repertoire is the individualisation discourse, which shows that factors which previously hindered equality are losing their importance. The third interpretative repertoire is the new ideal discourse, which represents women as the new ideal workers. After discussing what each of these interpretative repertoires reveals, I explore what they obscure from sight.

Awareness discourse

On the positive side, my analysis established that management texts can no longer simply be described as women-blind. Various attempts are made to be inclusive and to show awareness of gender diversity. The following passage is typical in this regard:

> My first book on organisations was written 20 years ago. Quite unconsciously, I used the male pronoun exclusively throughout the book. It became a standard textbook. My book caused a great deal of offence to the many women who had to study it because it appeared to imply that I, the supposed authority, thought there was no place for them in management (Handy, 1994, p. 60).

Handy confirms the exclusionary effect writing can have, but rationalised his women-blindness with ''we all carry mental maps around with us'' (1994, p. 60) and ''my unconscious mental maps (...) only mirrored what many men felt then'' (1994, p. 61). The use of 'us' and 'many men' implies that his own stereotypes were not uncommon and that no-one could have been unaffected by such stereotypes. Another approach to inclusiveness can be seen in strategies like the use of ''her–his'' constructions. Peters uses these ''her–his'' constructions – such as 'depending on her-his skills' (Peters 2001, p. 5) to include women in his writing. While we hardly find any gendered examples in Cairncross' book, the remaining books studied are literally full of examples of women, which is unquestionably an improvement from earlier texts. However, different strategies for dealing with the distinction between sex and gender can be seen. In Kanter's book the sex of the person is often only visible through pronouns – for instance in an example of a ''knowledge nomad'' who is ''the head of public relations, barely in *her* thirties'' (2001, p. 199, my emphasis). Elsewhere, the context in which women are invoked is systematically in relation to care and family e.g. Pink sees care issues as the main reason for women to become free agents or ''mompreneurs'' (2001, p. 41). Gender awareness is also expressed in relation to jobs involving long hours, which are considered ''difficult for women if they want to raise a family'' (Handy 1994, p. 9), implying that in general women are responsible for 'families' and therefore have special needs. Although he also reinforced his gender-aware credentials by adding ''or for men, for that matter, who might want to do likewise'' (ibid.), in Handy's text women with family responsibilities remain the norm, while men with family responsibilities appear as an add-on, abnormal, and extraordinary.

In order to show gender awareness, arguments which sound on the first hearing as though they might

be coming from a feminist perspective are also deployed, as in the following section on domestic work:

> Most of us, however, do it ourselves, for free. And most of the 'us' are still women. No wonder they want some financial recognition (...) it won't happen (...) but no one would want to deny that home work is an immensely valuable and important aspect of work (...). A balanced life should surely include a good chunk of home work, for both sexes. Portfolio working (...) gives us the chance if we choose to so arrange things (Handy, 2001, p. 172).

Thereby Handy uses the long-standing feminist argument for the recognition of domestic work. Handy argues that 'a good chunk of home work' is part of a healthy work/life balance. The argument is used here to show that the portfolio lifestyle offers the chance for women and men to hold work/life balance. And indeed the new models of career do take caring responsibilities into consideration. The new careers are no longer-based on a male lifecycle but on one which, theoretically at least, incorporates caring responsibilities by ''adapting working hours to family status and by mixing parenting and job'' (Handy, 1994, p. 188). Pink even talks about a ''parental pullback'' (2001, p. 306) as a career development stage. In the past, general models regularly glossed over issues like family and caring responsibilities and thus it appears that there is some change in how these concepts are constructed in parts of the body of literature I studied.

It is not my intention to dispute the importance of care and it is a significant advancement that caring responsibilities are now debated in this context. In discourses about the new portfolio career, women's traditional role of juggling family and work is presented as new lifestyle for all. However, it is not clear whether the new work/life balance is indeed for all – that is, whether men are in fact taking greater responsibilities for caring labour. In the past men were rather reluctant to give up their traditional positions in order to take on caring responsibilities. If men do not alter their behaviour in this regard, then these arguments may backfire, so that the bulk of care work is still done by women, in addition to their professional responsibilities. It might in certain ways be a sign of progress that it is no longer seen as problematic to combine a job and caring labour. If the allocation of caring responsibilities remains unchanged, however, all that happens is that it becomes more difficult for women to argue for a more equal distribution of work, since the common rhetoric is that having a job and caring for children are not mutually exclusive and that professional success is equally possible whether or not a job is combined with caring responsibilities.

These accounts are also problematic from another perspective. The portrayal of women emerging from these constructions is of a fairly homogeneous group. As has often been pointed out, however, women are not uniform but are divided by 'race', class, decisions in relation to children and many other elements. Two aspects of women's experience in particular can be singled out: first, giving birth to children and second, being the primary carer for children. Giving birth is still in the realm of women, although some decide not to have children. Many senior women managers, for instance, do not have children (Wajcman, 1998). In respect to the second point, women do not need to be the primary carer. These distinctions are ignored in the texts, where the norm is of women having children and taking primary responsibility for them. However, Alvesson and Billing (1997, p. 141) rightly remark that it may not be women *per se* but women with caring responsibilities who encounter multiple problems at work. If women are treated as homogeneous group, a biological and social reductionism is introduced to the argument, defining women based on reproductive and stereotyped social functions. There is a long history of employers using the argument that women employees are a potential commercial risk and pointing to pregnancy and childcare to justify not employing or promoting women. Furthermore, this line of argument does nothing to render systems more child-friendly, since children become a 'women's problem' and thereby not very relevant for men. The proclaimed diversity and the new career models are discussed in such a way that the emerging constructions of women appear circular since they reiterate old societal roles, thereby reinstating the difference between men and women and negating between women.

Individualisation discourse

The second interpretative repertoire mirrors the individualisation paradigm. Individualisation refers

to the fact that traditional parameters which influenced biographies are eroding and individuals are now free (or forced) to make decisions about their life course (Beck, 2000; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1996; Giddens, 1991; Pongratz and Voß, 2003). The texts support such a mindset by stressing the control the individual has in shaping his/her own life. This is expressed in the following quotes: ''They aren't in charge of our careers – and by extensions our *lives* – anymore. We are. It is up to us to fashion ourselves'' (Peters, 2001, p. 12, emphasis in original); free agents are ''agents of their own future'' (Pink, 2001, p. 14); the ''path of career will largely depend on the choice of the individual'' (Pink, 2001, p. 306); the ''power has shifted from the organization to individuals, talent has replaced capital as the economy's most important resource'' (Pink, 2001, p. 182); and ''(personnel) evaluation has passed (...) from the organization to the individual. You are your own judge'' (Peters, p. 2001, p. 154). These quotes show clearly that it is the individual who has the chance to be successful. Indeed, opportunities appear to be open to all. What is not said is that individualisation involves not only a chance but also a burden. Failure becomes personal and can no longer be easily linked to collectively experienced barriers.

Through stressing choice and control, these texts make it seem as though discriminatory organisational procedures no longer hinder personal career development:

> Women still earn less than men for similar work. And women still face a stubborn glass ceiling. Those aren't good things, but they might end up mattering far less than some think (Pink, 2001, p. 23).

This means that if the new career is no longer dominated by discriminatory organisational procedures, the individual is not only responsible for his or her own career but that being a woman 'matter[s] far less'. It matters less because in individualised working environments, the individual can 'manufacture' his or her own life chances. This discourse suggests that the new developments provide men and women with equal chances for success, since they are able to shape their own careers. How this is achieved in practice is evident in the suggested strategy for dealing with the glass ceiling: ''for many, the best response to the glass ceiling is to exit through the side door'' (Pink, 2001, p. 309) and to find jobs elsewhere or become entrepreneurs. The discourses do not stress the self-fulfilment which may derive from being one's own boss for women but they present becoming a free agent as a viable way for women to circumvent barriers in professional life. The barriers themselves are thereby neither discussed nor reduced. These constructions render it unimportant to challenge unfair organisational procedures; it is now up to women to be successful as individuals, regardless of structures. In this neo-liberal, individualised choice discourse, no one is forced to remain within unequal structures since all are portrayed as being free to leave.

Although being a woman is constructed to be mattering far less, gender still plays a crucial role. One cannot escape one of the central ideas about the new worker: that she or he is a brand, ''Brand You'' (Peters' core idea; Handy, 2001, p. 180), or ''Me, Inc.'' (Pink, 2001, p. 322), a marketable package (''package yourself'' in Peters, 2001, p. 46) urged to adopt a strategy of ''selling yourself'' (Pink, 2001, p. 323). The knowledge worker is conceptualised as a saleable product and Pink offers the sales strategy of ''elevator speech. Be able to explain who you are, what you do, and why someone could benefit from your unique talents'' (2001, p. 324). This mode of self-presentation is portrayed as something everyone could be successful at.

Selling yourself is an activity of self-marketing: you have to make others believe that you are the best person for the job. Praising one's own abilities is, however, not an activity typically associated with women, although many women do excel at marketing themselves. At this point it is important to consider stereotypes to show how in some instances gender is glossed over. One could assume that traditional expectations in relation to femininity would mean that women tend to present their skills and achievements more modestly while men phrase them in a more self-confident fashion (Tannen, 1998). This behaviour can be interpreted as actively performing a gender identity (Cameron, 1995). At the same time, perception seems to be crucial. In the women in management literature, it is well accepted that even if men and women display very similar behaviour, it is interpreted differently (cf. Ayman, 1993; Singh et al., 2002; Wilson, 2001). This has

been referred to as the double-bind and the narrow path of acceptable behaviour for women in positions that are more associated with men (Jamieson, 1995). Self-marketing could then be seen as a way of being gender inauthentic. While men may be more comfortable with selling 'Me, Inc.' and are perceived as more successful in doing so, selling oneself may conflict with what it means to be a woman in society. In this instance gender certainly enters the picture. The texts under consideration, however, do not make reference gender issues for a specific reason: if one were to talk about how the practical ideologies of gender potentially position men and women differently from the outset, then the discursive construction of a fair and equal future attainable by all who master the skills of self-marketing would collapse. Such issues must remain unvoiced if the claim to having arrived at a position of gender equality is to be sustained. In glossing over these elements, gender is not taken seriously as its full consequences remain obscured. These discourses about individualisation make it impossible to articulate the possibility that some individuals may not be successful because of their gender – or indeed because of factors associated with any other axis around which inequality was previously distributed. This means that issues which are collectively experienced can only be discussed when they are to the advantage of women (or any other group), not when they disadvantage them.

The new ideal discourse

The new ideal that organisations seek in a worker is characterised by the following qualities:

> [T]hey also want people who can juggle with several tasks and assignments at one time, who are more interested in making things happen than in what title or office they hold, more concerned with power and influence than status (...) who value instinct and intuition as well as analysis and rationality, who can be tough but also tender, focused but friendly, and people who can cope with these necessary contradictions (Handy, 1994, p. 179).

The knowledge worker has four ''free agent values'': ''having freedom, being authentic, putting yourself on the line, and defining success on your own terms'' (Pink, 2001, p. 309). What is needed is connectivity (Pink, 2001, p. 310; Peters, 2001, p. 99) and caring, helping, empathy and listening (Peters, 2001, p. 99). Many of the characteristics of the new worker could be associated with masculinity – having freedom, putting yourself on the line, concern for power, toughness, rationality. Others would more readily be associated with femininity – such as multi-tasking, tenderness, connectivity, caring and friendliness. But when it comes to determining who possesses these skills, the authors erase any gender ambiguity by asserting that organisations ''want, therefore, as many women as they can get'' (Handy, 1994, p. 179). ''Combine this smattering of facts,'' Pink claims, ''with the four free agent values (...) and the next one hundred years (...) just might be the Feminine Century'' (Pink, 2001, p. 309). In a similar vein, he declares that '[w]omen are a driving force behind free agency, and could possible dominate the free agent economy' (Pink, 2001, p. 23).

Women's particular suitability for the new lifestyle also becomes clear in Handy's revelation:

> It was exciting (...) to find that there was another whole world out there that didn't check into offices or factories every morning, that set its own timetables and priorities, that mixed paid work and other work in all sorts of combinations, (...) to whom multi-tasking wasn't a new management buzzword but a fact of ordinary life (...) [His wife reminds him:] 'Most women have always lived a multi-tasking life. You may call it portfolio living, I call it getting on with things' (Handy, 2001, p. 170).

In order to make this model of employment palatable for organisations, the new ideal is regularly justified by reference to a ''talent war'' (Cairncross, 2002, p. 69; Kanter, 2001, p. 197ff). On the one hand this reflects a meritocratic situation (Alvesson and Billing, 1997) in that a larger pool of people means that the company can profit from the best workers available. On the other hand, the underlying rationale implies that there are negative reasons for employing women: there is a war for talent since there is a skill shortage (in other words a shortage of qualified male labour) and one has to 'fight' for talent.

However, the aim is not only to find generally skilled people but people with the 'right' skills.

Many of such skills are strongly gendered feminine. In a classic statement Handy asserts:

> Organisations need talented women in their core jobs, therefore, not only for reasons of social fairness, important though that is, but because many of those women will have the kinds of attitudes and attributes that the new flat flexible organisation needs (Handy 1994, p. 180).

Women are hired not because of arguments for gender equality but because of their assumed feminine skills. Femininity renders them qualified to be employed in new organisations.

The strongest support for the new ideal construction is provided by Peters' ''Anti-Dilbert[5]'' character the ''Icon Woman (Man)'' (2001, p. 38). In referring to this icon he regularly uses the female pronoun e.g. ''she is her own woman'' (2001, p. 38), and if not he uses 'her–his' instead of the more common 'his–her'. This linguistic strategy is very interesting, since we are used to constructions which employ the female forms as supplemental for the male one and not vice-versa. In this usage, the female form becomes standard, while the male form appears as supplemental. Finally, Peters sees Oprah Winfrey and Martha Stewart as the ''inventors'' (the book is indeed dedicated to them) of the new ideal, the ''Brand You''. By choosing women as the ideal, this discourse makes the claim that the future belongs to women because they are better suited for the new work paradigm. In contrast to the individualisation discourse, where gender was constructed as unimportant, the new ideal discourse makes gender matter again.

What happens to men in these constructions? As the future is actively portrayed as belonging to women, men seem to have no place in it. This becomes particularly apparent in Pink's advice to ''watch for women, rather than men, to define and shape the free agent future'' (2001, p. 312). In a feminised economy, men appear as no longer needed and their position seems to be endangered (Kerfoot and Knights, 1996, p. 95f). This is in line with the often assumed ''crisis in men/masculinity'' (Edley and Wetherell, 1999; McDowell, 2000, 2003). As well as referring to the fact that women purportedly have the skills required in the service society, this ''crisis'' is also said to follow from the fact that the goals of feminism have been achieved (Coppock et al., 1995; Projansky, 2001), leaving men confused (see Bly, 1991; Thomas, 1993). This would mean that gender equality has not only been achieved but has overshot its goal, since women are now supposed to be doing better than men. If femininity is learned, however, then there is no reason why men should not be able to acquire the sought-after skills. As Handy stresses, however, ''few men have had that much practice'' (1994, p. 180). Indeed, there is support for the argument that men have many of the very qualities which are so insistently attributed to women. Groups of men have a history of making important skills their own (Cockburn, 1983; Phillips and Taylor, 1980; Wajcman, 1998) or rather of attributing the highest value to the skills which are associated with men.

This can be illustrated by looking at the important skill of connectivity. It might be argued, for instance, that men have typically managed to be far more successful than women in using connectivity to increase their job prospects, profiting from informal boys' or lads' networks to facilitate their rise through the ranks (see Oakley, 2000; Tierney, 1995). One outcome of these networks has been so-called homosocial reproduction, reflecting the tendency of such men to socialise with others similar to themselves (Ely, 1994; Kanter, 1977; Wharton and Bird, 1996). The link between new economy connectivity and such social networks is spotted by Pink, who describes the functioning of the Home-based-Working-Mum network as ''like an old boys' network – except that its (...) members aren't boys and aren't old'' (2001, p. 192). In this way, Pink turns old boys' networks – a phenomenon which could put his ideal construction of women into question – as a supporting example for his claim that an alternative paradigm now predominates. Although characterised as a feminine skill, however, his very choice of example demonstrates that connectivity can be and has been performed by men. This cannot be made explicit, however, as it would counteract the idealisation of women. If women are the ideal and men are in crisis, any arguments which could point towards a sustained position of inequality for women have to be displaced.

There may be another way of explaining the position of men within this discourse, however. Calás and Smircich (1993) remind us that so-called feminine skills are generally identified as such by a

patriarchal or oppressive construction of women. In the past feminised attributes like 'nimble fingers', for example, were used as a reason for employing women in poorly paid manufacturing jobs where they were exploited for economic profit (Calás and Smircich, 1993). The new 'right skills' reflect traditional stereotypes of women and those very skills seem to be suited for portfolio work. If women are treated as predestined to become portfolio workers, this may not allow them to occupy the best positions available. If we expect that traditional jobs which involve working long hours and do not allow for a work/life balance will continue to exist and are more likely to be held by men, this could potentially lead to a dual-labour market in which riskier portfolio jobs are held by women. The new gender segregation would then be based on risk. Instead of challenging gender, the constraining relation between women and feminine skills would thereby be perpetuated and naturalised. If discourses are seen as disciplinary practices, influencing the individual decisional framework, then those discourses channel women into riskier jobs. Instead of creating new chances for women, the new paradigm may be positioning them in less favourable positions.

Discussing the constructions

Having discussed the three interpretative repertoires, it is useful to look for an organising rhetoric and examine positions which are unspeakable. The portrayal of awareness, equality and even the superiority of women makes it rhetorically difficult to voice the persistence of gendered inequality. These three discourses can thus be understood as contributing to a post-feminist climate (Coppock et al., 1995; Faludi, 1993; Projansky, 2001), in which the ideas of feminism have been so successfully incorporated into mainstream discourses that they are no longer needed. Women are no longer absent from management texts. Instead of simply ignoring gender, the individualisation discourse is used to argue that 'gender' – or rather being a woman – matters less, while at the same time the new ideal discourses portray women as the workers of the future. Although the discussion of gender remains superficial, what concerns me here is what happens to discourses about inequality. I have shown that the only inequality which can be discussed within these discourses is that of men's new position of supposed lack. Any argument that women continue to be unequal is thus pre-emptively rendered ineffective by means of a dual construction: First, being a woman does not matter under individualisation as all have equal chances and each worker is personally responsible for their own success; second, to disperse any remaining perception of inequality, women are represented as the ideal workers in the new economy. This can be best illustrated with the statement considered before:

> Women still earn less than men for similar work. And women still face a stubborn glass ceiling. Those aren't good things, but they might end up mattering far less than some think. Women are a driving force behind free agency, and could possibly dominate the free agent economy (Pink, 2001, p. 23).

Pink uses the pay gap and the glass ceiling to show how women were disadvantaged before but argues that this now matters far less since the new forms of work favour women. As women are said to shape and dominate the free agent world, they have all the advantages. The discourses leave no room to argue that a sustained inequality of women vis-à-vis men might still operate. Therefore the discourses are structured so as to make it rhetorically difficult to voice the disadvantages women might face in the new economy.

Although it may be a desirable scenario that women are doing better in the new economy, I will cast some doubt on whether such portrayals are accurate. These constructions may shape the future but they appear – at best – to be running ahead of reality. Although the work experience become more heterogeneous (Hakim, 1996), women are still unequal in many aspects of working life. Even in professions that are usually hailed as excellent examples for the new worker, such as new media or ICT work, old-style gender problems like the pay gap continue to exist (Batt et al., 2001; CEPT Consult, 2002; Gill, 2002; Gill and Dodd, 2000; Henninger, 2001; Manske, 2003; Perrons, 2003). What has changed is how gender differences like the pay gap are accounted for. As freelancers, women may earn less because they combine work and care work and spend less time in paid employment and work on fewer

projects (Gill, 2002). This indicates that gender roles may not be fundamentally challenged for new workers, with men continuing to take the role of primary breadwinner while women take a caregiver and additional breadwinner role. This could suggest that the discourses about new ideals and gender equality through work/life balance in fact provide a new discursive framework to legitimise old gender roles. Terms like 'mompreneurs' do indeed suggest that women's roles may have changed far less than expected.

The discursive effects of these representations are interesting. In a post-feminist climate, women feel equal and may lose sight of continuing sources of inequality (Coppock et al., 1995; Wetterer, 2003, 2004). The real-life effects such discourses have can be illustrated by Gill's (2002) study on new media workers, which shows that although women are not doing better, they believe their position has to do with 'personal failure'. They are resistent to using notions of gender inequality to make sense of their situation, preferring instead to individualise their experience. This individualisation makes it impossible to point towards collectively experienced phenomena as reasons for inequality (Kelan, 2007). Gender may then vanish from the agenda and although power continues to operate along gendered lines, these processes are not voiced or made visible in discourses. Although the constructions appear to be progressive, then, this should not blind theorists to their effects or prevent them from reflecting upon the vitally important question of what such constructions mean.

What is evident is that the challenge for the analysis of management texts is no longer to bring women in, but to explore *how* gender is used. The research agenda should be concerned with raising awareness of how these different constructions can be read and with developing creative ways to use gender in management texts. One strategy may be to consider the circumstances in which we want to use gender and those in which we do no longer need to draw attention to it. It would be also useful to consider how gender stereotypes could be destabilised, for instance through providing examples of men and women in unconventional and non-stereotypical situations. I am not offering any one-size-fits-all solution for using gender in management texts but the area of how to *write differently* clearly needs further thought.

Conclusion

Even though the gender portrayals in management texts appear progressive, a deeper analysis has revealed that they could have unintended consequences and that a further theorisation of representations is therefore required. Instead of being male-centred and male-dominated, the management literature suddenly appears to take account of women and even construct them as the new ideal. Although one might interpret this as progress, my analysis has suggested that the new subjectivities created for women remain problematic. This is because they are based on traditional notions of femininity prescribed by the existing gender ideology. Furthermore, as women appear as the new ideal, any possible systemic inequality of women is rhetorically rendered difficult if not impossible to voice. In consequence, it seems important to stress that authors writing about management have a moral responsibility for the personas they construct or report on. It is vital to develop strategies for how to use gender in management texts. Furthermore it is important to theorise the constructions we are confronted with, such as why men are largely absent from the discourses, what we make of terms like 'mompreneurs' and what role race and sexuality play in the texts. A last point to note is that I have assumed rather than shown that the texts have real-life effects and create decisional frameworks. As my own reading is clearly limited it seems vital that future research on gender and business ethics should engage with questions of how knowledge workers, managers, students and others read management texts, which mental frames emerge as a result and how these influence lives and shape reality.

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Notes

[1] Although debates in the field are shaped by men (Marshall, 2007).

[2] Drucker (1969) persistently referred to the knowledge worker as 'he' (e.g. 'but the knowledge worker sees himself as just another 'professional'' (259)). I therefore also used the male pronoun here.

[3] For the analysis the 1995 Arrow Books paperback edition was used to which the page references refer.

[4] For the analysis the 2002 Warner Books paperback edition was used, to which page references refer. It features an additional resource guide, similar to Peters' book, from pp. 315 ff.

[5] Dilbert is a character from a comic strip who is a technical nerd and a bit socially incompetent. The comic strip is mainly about his struggles at work with his apparently incompetent co-workers.

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