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Contesting discourses and challenged gender roles in the financial sector. Jeanne Strunck, Aalborg university, DK

The present paper presents aspects of a study of a Danish bank which calls for more female top managers and of the possibilities and/or barriers of female and male employees to pursue such top management positions. In the particular social organization in question, the gender roles 'seem to be challenged', but, to some extent, the masculinised discourse and the masculinised company culture prevail. The focus of the study is on the importance of position in relation to gender and discourse and the impact of gender and position on the perceptions of career opportunities for male and female employees in a bank setting.

The data analysed derive from 5 of six focus group interviews made by a Danish bank with a number of aspiring managers and top managers leaving out a mix group interview with top managers. The data consist of two interviews with male aspiring managers (6 and 11), one with female aspiring managers (6), one with female top managers (6) and one with male top managers (4). The interviewees have different backgrounds in the bank or experience from other organizations, but they are all employed in the particular bank and their affiliation to the bank varies from a few years to several years.

In 2007, the interviews with the aspiring managers formed part of an in-house management training programme in the bank with the intention to prepare employees for occupying management positions and to recruit more women for such positions. The focus of the interviews was on the participants' attitudes towards manager identity, how they perceived themselves and each other as future managers and how they experienced possible career enabling and constraining factors.

In spite of the fact that the interviews with top managers did not form part of a training programme, the main topics were similar to those of the interviews with aspiring managers, but included the recruiting processes of the bank as well to know if the ways of recruiting could explain the lack of female top managers in the organization.

Concerning the situational context in which the data have been produced, we have to notice that the focus group interviews were carried out in a business setting where the participants had the same reasons for being present, that some of them knew each other from the daily work while others did not. The mediator of the interviews is known by most of the participants, because she is a consultant in the human resources management department. Only the male aspiring managers' interview had another mediator who is a male employee in the bank and who is known by some of the other men. The mediators as well as the participants know that they are going to discuss career opportunities for men and women and that the discussion is taped. The focus group interviews are made at the workplace during the work hours and the interviews are made in five separate groups. This means that male and female participants do not speak with each other but about themselves and the other gender. These contextual factors influence the discourse situation and the discourses of the participants who, furthermore, may influence each other in the groups by their mutual discourses during the interviews. We have to take into account that the constructions of group memberships during the interview sessions may be the result of the participant's interpretations of the ongoing communicative event as well as a gender grouping in the workplace may exist because it is perceived relevant by the employees. As we shall see, the social and discursive practices related to the company culture have an impact on the career opportunities of men and women in the bank too.

The focus of the analysis is on the discursive constructions of gendered identities and group relationships and is carried out from a social constructivist and a face approach. In this approach

that we may call 3 generation gender studies as Baxter (2003) does in her poststructuralist work, gender is not something that we have but something that we do. Gender is enacted in institutions and organizations and shapes social relations and meanings with consequences for the division of labour.

The notion of 'involvement' is to be understood in the sense that people have a need to be involved with others and that they need to show this involvement. The notion refers to people's need to be treated as a member of a group and to be considered as contributing and accepted members of society. Sociolinguists often call 'involvement' a sign of solidarity politeness, because it shows the common values of the participants. The notion of 'independence' covers a person's right not to be dominated or imposed by others. Furthermore, 'independence' means that "we need to maintain some degree of independence from other participants and to show them that we respect their independence" (Scollon and Wong-Scollon 2001: 36). This means that we need to be able to act individually, on the one hand, and that we show respect of the autonomy of others, on the other hand. Participants in interaction may show independence by not presuming/or by making minimal assumptions of the needs or interests of others, by giving them options, by not imposing and by apologizing for interruptions.

In other words, people aim to build up closeness and rapport with each other while at the same time they try to avoid being a threat to each other's social distance. The choice of degree of involvement and independence that participants use in their discourse depends on their knowledge of each other, on the degree of social closeness or distance of the speakers, on social equality/inequality, as well as it depends on the situation, the purpose and the cultural context in which the interaction takes place. Scollon and Wong-Scollon regard differences in language use to be a question of expectations that differ from one situation to another and that a specific speech style can not (stereotypically) be categorised as male or female as it depends on the situation and on group membership.

The analysis aims at suggesting how the positions as aspiring and top female and male managers in a Danish bank setting and their discursive constructions of involvement and independence display the group relationships among them and how these constructions produce and reproduce the social practices of the context.

The aim of the analysis is to examine whether gender and position matter for the discursive constructions of group relationship and whether this is perceived to have an impact on the possibilities for career making in the bank.

The present paper presents a few aspects of the analytic focal points to reveal how the constructions of involvement and independence are built up in the interviewed participants' discourses. The attention is paid to the use of tag questions, expressions of agreement and approval, expressions of cooperation, references to statements put forward by others and signs of hesitation.

The analysis is divided into two main parts: data from interviews with aspiring managers and data from interviews with top managers.

Aspiring managers: gender matters

The analysis of the data from the three interviews with aspiring managers shows that there are some differences in the ways women and men perceive their group relationships and career opportunities in the bank.

The groups perceive their opportunities for getting management positions to pass different ways.

The female respondents state that they have to be encouraged by superiors to apply for management positions whereas the male respondents express that their own strong will and qualifications is the most important factor:

(1) ... and when he found some new challenges in another department, I was asked if I would like to get his former job because I clearly... eh ... (AW3)ⁱ

(2) ... take the decision to want to be a manager [is] not a question of much philosophizing, but I say I will go for it and that's the difference for me (AM1, 3)

Both male and female participants start the sessions by presentations during which each person gives information about her/his civil status, job in the bank, experience and ambitions.

The two first female presentations are characterised by the use of the independence strategy and pass off without interruptions from the other participants as conversations between the mediator and the particular woman. There are no comments on the contributions which may be caused by the actual situation where the interview has just started and where the women do not know how exactly this, to some extent, unknown situation is going to develop or what will be the formality level. By their speech strategy they respect the speaker's autonomy but at the same time they do not show their interest in the speaker.

But from the third presentation the women start using the involvement strategy which is expressed directly through tag questions, direct expressions of agreement and references to what others have said.

As regards the discussion of applying for management positions one of the women states:

(3) ... we had worked together for 2 – 3 years and did so after he got that position too, didn't we? [...] So, it wasn't him exactly as a person, it was more the way it was done, you see? (AW3)

The female respondents show signs of cooperation during the exchange of words like in the following when the discussion is about networking. The women agree that networking could enable their possibilities for pursuing management positions, but that it is difficult to enter the male networks. Inequality and gender segregation seem to be the main problems for the female employees:

(4) AW6: I don't say that men are lying, really, that's not what I'm saying, but I just say that some persons do have hidden agendas in order to be able to encourage other things.

AW3: They are very strategic.

AW6: Yes, precisely.

AW3: Very strategic indeed and anyhow that's difficult for me to be. I feel exactly like you, I don't bother to pretend ... eh...

(5) Yes, and then again this question of being a woman. We are a bit fragile (AW5)

Having found solidarity and agreement in the group, no one loses face in spite of the fact that they express the feeling of powerlessness. In (5) the speaker even anticipates other members' perceptions

of women in general which is in opposition to the involvement strategy but no one seems to react negatively to it and the situation does not get face threatening because the involved women work on a mutual agenda. To stress their solidarity the women use irony and humour in the references to their male colleagues, too.

The statements and the personal stories told by the women demonstrate their solidarity and group relationship caused by the social order and the dominating male culture of the bank. One of the reasons for the women's references to the statements of the others is, of course, that they are gathered to discuss their career opportunities, what may be enabling and constraining factors, and it turns out that they agree on these points. Another reason may be that having listened to some of their colleagues' presentations they have been influenced by them and furthermore, that they want to be accepted as members of the group by expressing the same attitudes. Throughout the women's interview the prevailing strategy is involvement.

The presentations in the men's interviews differ from each other as one group (AM2) follows the independence strategy all along whereas the participants in the other group (AM1) take the floor from the moderator, correct each other and make interruptions from the second presentation on. Unlike the women, the men keep the distance to each other for a long time by the use of the independence strategy. During the men's presentations there are no signs of involvement or agreement to others' statements and none of them use tag questions during the interviews.

Later on, during the discussion parts, the men do agree on certain attitudes, but they do not express their agreement directly as do the women. Characteristically, the men do not seek cooperation, rapport and solidarity with the interview partners and do not build up a group identity before they start discussing gender, career and mixed networks:

(6) But there is no doubt that it might be refreshing with a woman's face in some of these get together situations. Because I was wondering who is going to hear this tape because we have said the word dick a hell lot of times now. That's the way it is when men meet, then we often get this atmosphere of changing room (AM1, 1)

To which another male replies:

(7) Well yes, but that depends on who I sit together with. I don't risk those female conflicts. I don't sit in the middle of the chicken run daily (AM1, 4)

(Negative metaphor about women: they gossip about irrelevant topics!)

Most of the men agree to these statements by telling private stories and by laughing which are signs of involvement and demonstrate that a group relationship is being built up on the grounds of mutual understanding, by stressing the men's network, what men have in common in relation to habits and interests and by being different from women. But it is rather late in the interview sessions that the group membership is constructed by the male participants compared to the women's interview where a mutual agenda is constructed early in the session.

Concerning the importance of networking, the women feel marginalised from the men's network and the men are not very keen to accept mixed network groups:

(8) It isn't very funny to play football on mixed teams ... (AM1,1)

(9) When women are present the most important aspect is to take care of each other, more than to win (AM2, 2)

There are very few signs of hesitation, references to others' statements and no tag questions in the men's interviews and the participants construct their mutual relations in other ways than do the women: they do so by deference strategies and indirect involvement expressed by their storytelling, not by direct agreements.

Another difference between the two genders is that whereas the women are open about their problems, the men focus on their competences and achievements in their jobs.

When discussing family and job both genders agree that the wish to be present at work and to have enough time for the family is a problem, and some of the men even perceive their families as an inhibiting factor for their career.

The men, like the women, end up having built up group relationships on the basis of differences from the other gender which suggests that the gender groups construct and reproduce the social (gendered) order in the organization.

As we have learned from the analysis there are no indications that one gender is more 'polite' than another, but the two gender groups use face strategies in different ways and construct group relationships in relation to different topics of discussion, at different moments of the interviews.

The participants' discourses demonstrate that gender matters at this level of the hierarchy when group relationships are constructed as two homogeneous groups and that this has a negative influence on women's possibilities for pursuing management positions in the bank.

Top managers: gender does (not) matter

During the interviews with top managers, female and male, the participants are asked to make comments on job adverts concerning top positions in the bank. The adverts are written by top managers together with the communication department and the aim of the discussion during the interviews is to know if the adverts appeal as much to women as to men. Furthermore, the top managers are encouraged to discuss if the lack of female managers may be a question of gender segregation. At the end of the interview, the female top managers, unlike the male top managers, are confronted with some of the stereotypes put forward by female and male aspiring managers, an aspect which turns out to have an influence on the female managers' constructions of group relationship.

When discussing their perceptions of the most important management assignments, the data show that the male managers perceive development within the financial results for the bank as their most important task in opposition to the female managers who find leadership and personal development to be most important. These statements are relevant in regards to the job adverts because the adverts are perceived by both groups to correspond to the demands of the bank and to the male managers' values. The female managers do not find the adverts appealing to female interests and values:

(10) And it is right what XX just said: the job advert supports the masculine aspects and the hardcore, not creativity and human relationships which are feminine aspects (TW2)

The data show the female perception of a social order dominated by a masculinised culture which influences negatively on possible female applicants, as stated by the women. Ex (10) demonstrates that the women express their mutual agreement directly by referring to each others' statements right from the beginning of the interview. The female interviewees go on telling about the ways of recruiting and how they got their positions. All of the female managers were asked by superiors to

apply for their positions and they state that this is the way in which most female and male colleagues get top positions. Like in the data from the interviews with aspiring managers, female and male top managers also find networking to be necessary to pursue promotions in the bank:

(11) It is a question of being know by the right persons (TW4)

(12) Yes, and it is important to be at the right place at the right moment (TW5)

As regards recruiting, the male top managers have followed more ways to their positions as some of them applied for their jobs because of an advert, others because they were asked by executive officers in the bank to do so and finally, some of them because of influential networks outside the bank. When the male managers themselves have to engage a new manager, they state that:

(13) We are looking for persons having the same values as we have (TM1)

The social order seems to be reproduced and the involved managers are aware of it and accept it. During the interview, female and male managers state, though, that they engage female as well as male applicants because mixed teams are most innovative, but the male managers agree that:

(14) ... at lower management levels female values are useful but at top management level there is more cynicism and the women who get up there have got that too, so I do not find any differences (TM2)

Again the male values prevail, and the male managers find it necessary for women to have “male genes” and to behave like male managers to be respected as top managers. One of men states that, in fact, some female colleagues at top management level act like “power women” and are respected for their competences. We may say that in this man’s perception ‘male gender is done’ by the women. In the data there are, in fact, a few examples where the female managers admit wearing male costumes to fit the social order and where they are doing gender by expressions like “we give it a kick up the arse” (TW2), an expression which is traditionally attached to men’s discourse. Such statements and perceptions demonstrate that female and male managers acknowledge it necessary to accept male values and that gender(ed) behaviour matters.

But some of the male managers seem to have a nuanced attitude towards gender and career. They agree with their female colleagues that to most men the salary is an important factor for taking on top management positions and that for women it is a question of personal challenges. But the male managers state that some younger men do not find top positions attractive because they are no longer prestigious. Younger men prefer to have time for the family in stead, as do most women, as the male managers say. The data show, that the top male managers, as the aspiring male managers, doubt that women have as much interest in getting top positions as do most men.

The female managers do not agree to such an attitude. They find management positions attractive as “play grounds” which make it possible for them to live out their ambitions, but many women do not regard themselves as being competent enough to be top managers, as they state:

(15) I was really surprised to have the qualifications for such a job [...] perhaps it is that typical female perception... (TW1)

On the one hand, the way the conversations pass off is characterized mainly by the independence strategy as neither female nor male respondents use tag questions or appeals. But on the other hand,

both groups express signs of agreement. The female managers express their agreements directly through references to others' statements and the male managers do it indirectly through their personal point of views and statements with similar meanings as those of others'. The female and male participants do not interrupt each other. They respect the point of views of the others, even when they do not agree. This means that the independence strategy prevails but still, some elements of the involvement strategy are present due to the participants' agreements which support their group relationships. However, these group memberships are not based on the same stereotypes and homogeneous categories as we found in the discourses of the aspiring managers.

But when analysing the last part of the female managers' interview, the discourse strategy changes. In this part, the female interviewees make comments on some stereotypes put forward by aspiring managers and the speech style of the conversation becomes ironic. The women start using the pronoun 'we' to indicate their perception of being a group of homogeneous persons challenged by the dominant male order. They express their involvement, but at the same time they assume the agreement of the others which is not polite in the strict sense of it:

(16) We can not identify ourselves with the meaning of such a statement (TW2)

During this part of the interview, the women express their disagreements to perceptions of women stated by men, and they start making stereotypes about them:

(17) This attitude tells something about men's vulnerability (TW4)

The last part of the conversation among the female group is characterized by humour, sarcasm and a high degree of mutual work as the women agree, use tag questions, impose and finish the others' statements. The women take openly exception to the meanings expressed by the stereotypes put forward by aspiring male managers about women and their approval to stereotypes about men put forward by aspiring female managers. The female top managers perceive themselves as members of the same gendered social group as the aspiring female managers and as such they agree that gender matters for pursuing management positions.

Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that there are some differences in the use of discursive strategies, constructions of group relationships and perceptions of possibilities for pursuing management positions depending on gender and position.

Female aspiring and top managers agree that to pursue management positions they have to be encouraged by superiors, in opposition to the aspiring male managers who point at personal will and qualifications as the most important factors. The male top managers seem to have used various ways to get their positions, but they stress good networks as being part of their possibilities.

The five groups of interviewees find networking necessary for promotion, but only the aspiring female managers mention that they have difficulties in getting access to the male networks which are regarded important for their promotion.

The aspiring female managers construct their group membership by the use of the involvement strategy right from the start of the interview and they express agreement and cooperation on a mutual agenda. A perception of solidarity in relation to the question of inequality and a dominating male order prevails in the group.

The strategies used by the two groups of women, aspiring and top managers, differ in that the female top managers keep an independence strategy during most of the interview, until they start commenting the statements put forward by the aspiring managers, female and male. At that moment

they start building up a group relationship signified by the use of the involvement strategy and a perception of adherence to the same gendered social group as the aspiring female managers.

Except that female top managers use the involvement strategy in the last part of the interview, the discourses of female and male top managers are characterized by the independence strategy and they do not seek acceptance or agreement from one another. The top managers accept diverse points of view, keep a distance and retain autonomy

When accepting that the behaviour of their male colleagues apply for them selves as well, the top position seems to be more important than gender, but when the discussion is about stereotypes and gender, the gendered social group adherence is stronger than position.

As regards the aspiring male managers, the independence strategy prevails and they keep the distance for a long time, but, as the female top managers did, the two groups of aspiring male managers change the strategy to involvement when discussing gender, networks and career opportunities. In this situation they express agreement and construct group relationships.

Female as well as male aspiring managers build up group relationships at the basis of differences from the other gender which is not that distinct for female and male top managers.

The analysis of the data demonstrates that the perceptions of the interviewees, the job adverts and the dominant patriarchal social order in the bank create difficulties for women to pursue top management positions. Furthermore, as regards the perceptions of career opportunities for men and women, the analysis suggests that position matters to some extent, but gender and gendered identities seem to exceed position.

ⁱ AW: aspiring women (group of 6 women). AM1: aspiring man in group 1 (6 men). AM2: aspiring man in group 2 (11 men). TW: top manager, woman. TM: top manager, man. Numbers such as AW1; AM1, 1 etc.: a person's place in the line of presentations in the interviews. The translation of the examples is mine. The Danish texts can be provided.