

## «We need more women in managerial jobs» – Gender equality and management in the Nordic context: Deconstruction and critical perspectives

Janne Tienari

*Lappeenranta University of Technology, Finland*

Charlotte Holgersson

*Stockholm School of Economics, Sweden*

Susan Meriläinen

*Helsinki School of Economics, Finland*

Anne-Marie Søderberg

*Copenhagen Business School, Denmark*

Eero Vaara

*Ecole de Management de Lyon, France*

**Abstract.** Focusing on the Nordic context, this article highlights complexities between gender equality discourse established at the societal level and discursive practice in organizations, particularly in relation to management, managing and managers. This research task is carried out by deconstructing a management text, and grounding the deconstruction in critical feminist literature. This analysis illustrates how managerial discourse is challenged and questioned by pro-egalitarian arguments in the Nordic context. However, it also demonstrates the pervasiveness of the gendered elements in managerial discourse, which relies on specific conceptions of parenthood where motherhood is constructed as problematic whereas fatherhood remains absent – and thus unproblematic. It is suggested that the ‘Nordic case’ provides a fruitful basis for similar studies in other societal contexts in Europe.

*Key words:* Gender equality, feminist perspective, management, discourse.

---

Address: Janne Tienari, Department of Business Administration, Lappeenranta University of Technology, P.O. Box 20, FIN-53851 Lappeenranta, Finland. E-mail: [janne.tienari@lut.fi](mailto:janne.tienari@lut.fi)

## Introduction

In this article, our aim is to challenge discourse on gender equality established at the level of society, and to highlight complexities in the usefulness of such discourse in understanding discursive practice on management in organizations. Our example is the Nordic context. As an illustration of discursive complexities, we first ‘deconstruct’ from a feminist perspective (Martin, 1990; Calás & Smircich, 1999) an article that was published in the staff newsletter of a transnational company. This company, which has operations in Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Norway, emphasizes its Nordic profile. In our view, this piece of text is illustrative of the persisting tensions between, on the one hand, gender egalitarian societal discourse and, on the other, gendered discursive practice on management.

After deconstructing the exemplary text, we discuss the ‘Nordic’ in the light of cross-societal (cross-national / cross-cultural) comparative research, and go on to ground our deconstruction – as one of several possible – in recent feminist research. With particular reference to managers, managing and management, we discuss critical literature on organizational life in the Nordic countries.

We suggest that this kind of reflection has wider significance, as it aptly demonstrates the persistent dominance of the gendered discourse of management. In particular, it shows how managerial discourse adjusts flexibly to a context where it is challenged and questioned by societal discourse as well as the material arrangements that societal discourses give rise to. We are confident that the ‘Nordic case’ presented here provides a fruitful basis for similar studies in other societal contexts in Europe.

## Deconstructing a management text

In its Corporate Statement for 2001, a transnational company declares that it «*adheres to a Nordic heritage of freedom, equal opportunity, care for the environment and good citizenship*». Apart from this one vague reference, however, the equality question did not make the text in the Corporate Statement, while care for the environment and good citizenship were discussed elaborately. In the section on human resources a table showed the distribution of men and women in management in the company, but no distinctions between different layers of managerial responsibility are made explicit. It is evident that there are women in managerial positions. It can, however, be concluded from the list of senior executives – provided in the last pages of the Corporate Statement – that the top echelons of the company consist almost exclusively of men.

The lack of women in top management is not something that is merely shoved under the carpet. It is an issue that surfaces occasionally in discussions within the Nordic company. In the staff newsletter in one of the countries, for example, a column titled «*More women into managerial jobs*», accompanied by the smiling face of the author of the text, a male senior executive, was published. The text presents a point: «*There are simply too few women who seek vacant managerial*

*positions»* in the company. The message in the text (translated in total below) is that *«we want to change this»*.

*More Women into Managerial Jobs*

The demands on management grow year by year. Therefore we shall make sure that we have the right number of qualified candidates when we are selecting managers in the future.

Right now, the distribution between the sexes of managerial positions does not look good: while more than a half of the employees of [the company] are women, it concerns just every seventh, when we look at the number of managers above the group manager level. There are simply too few women who apply for vacant managerial positions.

We want to change this, because as the situation is, [the company] fails to obtain the managerial potential that female employees represent. That is why we are now launching a process, which will create a more equal gender division in managerial positions in [the company].

There may be many reasons why women do not apply for vacant managerial positions. One reason is the tradition-bound attitude that the manager comes in first in the morning and leaves last – an expectation that is difficult to live up to and combine with having small children.

The executive management's opinion is that it should be possible to combine an attractive managerial job and a well-functioning family life. There should be room to make allowance for individual needs and plan the time for working so that it fits into the modern family pattern, because we have use for whole managers of both sexes.

We have asked [the company's] human resources experts and present managers to point out potential female managers. We will contact them if they do not apply for vacant managerial positions, so that we can get it pinpointed why they don't apply and expose whether the reasons are barriers, which [the company] has an impact on and has an opportunity to break down.

There must be more women in managerial positions in the future. Not as a contribution to gender politics, but to make sure that managerial positions will always be filled by the best qualified employees.

It is evident that official corporate discourse that is orchestrated in the Corporate Statement and the staff newsletter of the Nordic company downplays the significance of any differences among organizational members, be these differences due to gender, race, age, nationality or something else (cf. Sørderberg & Mathiesen, 2002). The message is that, in principle, everyone has a fair chance to succeed. In our view, these texts refer to attempts to conform to an assumed societal dis-

cursive framework of (gender) equality in the Nordic context. The mentioned texts are, arguably, examples of a strategic mobilization (cf. Hardy et al., 2000) of equality discourse.

Company materials thereby evoke alternative readings. These readings can be carried out by means of deconstruction. This is what we intend to do in the following in the case of the text in the staff newsletter. For Martin (1990), deconstruction (and reconstruction) is an analytic strategy to examine what particular texts (stories) say, what they do not say, and what they might have said but, for some reason, do not. Calás and Smircich (1999: 656) talk about deconstructions as «philosophical meditations delineated in very close readings of particular texts. These readings attend to the language in the text and to those areas where language betrays itself.»

For us, the crux in deconstructing texts lies in the potential to tease out alternative interpretations, which are contextually and theoretically grounded. The idea of reading ‘silences’ is intriguing here; what is missing in the text, but could have been included. In brief, deconstruction is well suited to highlight «suppressed gender conflicts» implicit in texts and to show «how apparently well-intentioned organizational practices can reify, rather than alleviate, gender inequalities» (Martin, 1990: 339). No claims to objective truths are, however, made here. Our reading of the text is no better than anyone else’s. Neither do we intend to claim to reveal what the author of the text has intended to communicate. What we need to do, however, is to reflect on our own subjectivity (cf. Martin, 1990) and, in so doing, give sense to our interpretations.

To simplify somewhat, the way to go about deconstructing pieces of text involves the following stages. First, it is important to identify areas of the text where a particular word or phrase is privileged as central to the meaning of the text. Second, one should look for ‘another term’, an opposite, the privileged term may have concealed, and bring that term to view. Third, the trick is to make both terms undecidable so that other meanings could be constituted over the text (cf. Martin, 1990; Calás & Smircich, 1999).

It seems to us that the key words in the exemplary text are «*management*», «*women*», «*qualified*», «*seek*» and «*select*». In the first paragraph, management is carved out as a dynamic phenomenon and the organization as a meritocratic system:

The demands on management grow year by year. Therefore we shall make sure that we have the right number of qualified candidates when we are selecting managers in the future.

«*We*» is an active agent in the text; «*we shall make sure that we have*» and «*we are selecting*». It becomes clear that «*we*» refers to the (male) executive management of the company. It does not refer to the company as a whole (i.e. all employees). Correspondingly, women are discursively constructed as the Other, i.e. «*they*», measured and marginalized against a male ideal in management, i.e. «*we*» (cf. Martin, 1990; Calás & Smircich, 1999). The Other, constructed as passive in the text, then appears problematic:

Right now, the distribution between the sexes of managerial positions does not look good: while more than a half of the employees of [the company] are women, it concerns just every seventh, when we look at the number of managers above the group

manager level. There are simply too few women who apply for vacant managerial positions.

The problem related to the Other is a problem of appearance for the company; it *«does not look good»*. The reason for the apparent company problem is clear: *«there are simply too few women who apply for vacant managerial positions»*. Women are blamed for a problem, which the executive management has now identified. Apparently, women lack the necessary ambition or they are risk averse in some way. The message seems to be clear: the fact that women lack something is problematic for the company. They lack qualities needed in management – qualities that are commonly considered as masculine (cf. Collinson & Hearn, 1994).

If one considers the organization in question, it is clear that *«we»* (i.e. male top managers) are unable to use the typical justification for why there are no women in managerial positions, that is, that there are no competent female candidates (what we learn in the Corporate Statement quoted above is that there are plenty of women in managerial positions down the hierarchy). A possible alternative reading for *«there are simply too few women who apply for vacant managerial positions»* would then be that there are ‘simply too many men’ who apply – and are selected.

We want to change this, because as the situation is, [the company] fails to obtain the managerial potential that female employees represent. That is why we are now launching a process, which will create a more equal gender division in managerial positions in [the company].

Executive management will actively tackle the women’s problem for the benefit of the company; *«we want to change»* and *«we are now launching»*. This is an illustration of the power of interpretation (cf. Wahl, 1995). A meritocratic system of managerial advancement is, again, constructed discursively. The text relies on this although earlier research would suggest that the selection criteria for managerial positions are usually far from unambiguous. These ambiguous criteria are ‘silenced’ in the text (although implicitly, these are the very criteria women are constructed to ‘lack’, i.e. activeness and ambition).

There may be many reasons why women do not apply for vacant managerial positions. One reason is the tradition-bound attitude that the manager comes in first in the morning and leaves last – an expectation that is difficult to live up to and combine with having small children.

When the reasons for the apparent problem of *«There are simply too few women who apply for vacant managerial positions»* is discussed, gendered assumptions of family obligations automatically enter the text: *«One reason is the tradition-bound attitude that the manager comes in first in the morning and leaves last – an expectation that is difficult to live up to and combine with having small children.»* This comment constructs a traditional male breadwinner family model as a natural order of things. In other words, it is taken for granted that only women *«have»* and take care of small children (Höök, 2001). Further, managerial discourse is confirmed here as assumptions of the daily routines in being a manager are not challenged or questioned.

The executive management's opinion is that it should be possible to combine an attractive managerial job and a well-functioning family life. There should be room to make allowance for individual needs and plan the time for working so that it fits into the modern family pattern, because we have use for whole managers of both sexes.

This is an ambiguous paragraph. It remains somewhat unclear who is expected to be flexible; the company, the family or the individual in question. It is clear, however, that «*the tradition bound attitude that the manager comes in first in the morning and leaves last*» is not questioned in any explicit way. Opportunities to «*plan the time for working*» thereby remain vague. Further, the notion of «*whole managers*» is intriguing; in top management recruitment, this has in earlier research been identified to mean men with a stable, 'happy' family situation (cf. Kanter, 1977; Holgersson, 2001). Linked to this, «*well-functioning family life*» evidently refers here to a core family, where tolerance to the manager's (man's) work obligations prevails. The ultimate question – what is a «*modern family pattern*» (and how it deviates from previous patterns) in the present context – remains ambiguous.

We have asked [the company's] human resources experts and present managers to point out potential female managers. We will contact them if they do not apply for vacant managerial positions, so that we can get it pinpointed why they don't apply and expose whether the reasons are barriers, which [the company] has an impact on and has an opportunity to break down.

«*We*» is active once more; «*we have asked*», «*we will contact*» and «*we can get it pinpointed*». The executive management («*we*») are apparently unaware of the whereabouts of competent women in the company, but now make it clear that they have sought for expert advice. There is a mix of aggressiveness (or determination) and opening up for possible change in this paragraph. On the one hand, the imagery is direct and unconditional, much in the style of George W. Bush's «*hunt'em down and smoke'em out*» rhetoric on what he calls terrorism. On the other hand, the text opens up for the possibility that there may be «*barriers*» in the organization that have an effect on women's career making. The nature of such barriers remains, however, unsaid.

There must be more women in managerial positions in the future. Not as a contribution to gender politics, but to make sure that managerial positions will always be filled by the best qualified employees.

The text issues a strong statement in the last paragraph: «*There must be more women in managerial positions in the future.*» In the next sentence, however, a reservation is made. Correction of gender bias is not done «*as a contribution to gender politics*» but as an effort to secure that «*managerial positions will always filled by the best qualified employees*». This can be argued to be highly questionable as qualifications are relative and open to various interpretations. The particular use of words is interesting here, as 'politics' can in general be thought to carry negative connotations in a corporate context. Formalizing the correction of gender bias in its own right – «*a contribution to gender politics*» – is made to sound like a swear word, something that is alien

to the everyday functioning of the organization (cf. Calás & Smircich, 1992). The classic discursive discrepancy between competence and equal opportunities prevails in the end.

In all, what we have presented above is merely one possible deconstruction of a text in a company staff newsletter in the Nordic context. It is yet a plausible one, as we shall argue in the following. Accounting for inequality between the sexes is a sensitive topic. In essence, inequality is simultaneously constructed as something that needs to be acknowledged and as something that is a problem that will only be solved if the passive «*they*» (i.e. women) change, not the active «*we*» (i.e. male executives).

### **The 'Nordic' in cross-societal comparison**

In recent years, an increasing number of comparative studies has highlighted cross-societal similarities and differences with regard to the labour market position of women in relation to men. Among the main issues studied in this literature are institutional and normative influences on the degree and forms of women's and men's participation in labour markets, and the gendered division of labour along the lines of sectoral, occupational and vertical segregation (cf. Duncan, 1998; Fagan & O'Reilly, 1998). The cross-societal variability in women's and men's economic and social position, the argument goes, should be understood as an outcome of historical development, shaped by national institutions, societal structures as well as norms and values. These societal forces influence what comes to be considered as appropriate representation of women and men in the public and private spheres of life (i.e. work and family), what becomes considered as legitimate qualifications for specific jobs, and what constitutes relationships of (in)equality between the sexes.

In these comparisons, Nordic countries typically enjoy a gender egalitarian status. The Nordic region consists of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. The gender egalitarian image of these countries is grounded in specific arrangements in society, which enable the large-scale participation of women in the labour force. For example, there has been a gradual extension of public child care facilities to enable combinations of child rearing and participation in the labour market for both sexes. This is often perceived as an indication of gender equity. According to this view, a just society is «one that allows individuals to exercise autonomy and to fulfil themselves in life regardless of sex» (Meriläinen, 2000: 417). In such a 'Nordic Ideal', a relatively weak male-breadwinner mode prevails (Duncan, 1998; cf. Melkas & Anker, 1998; Meriläinen, 2000; Åström, 1995). State policies are based on an egalitarian-individualistic, double earner family model, where men and women are considered as individual breadwinners.

There are hence societal and institutional normative pressures towards equality and equal opportunities between the sexes in the Nordic countries. Specific outcomes are also clear. In contrast to societies marked by more conservative male dominance (cf. Duncan, 1998), women have made significant advances in the labour markets of Nordic welfare society (Aaltio-Marjosola, 2001: 112). Balancing work and family life, for example, has increasingly become a question of

individual solutions for women aspiring to succeed in the public sphere of life (cf. Meriläinen 2000; Jacobson & Aaltio-Marjosola, 2001).

Hand in hand with these societal ‘material advancements’, it seems, the overall discursive framework on men and women has shifted in the Nordic countries over the past decades. The public discourse in the Nordic context nurtures equality and equal opportunities (cf. Bergquist et al., 1999; Borchorst et al., 2002). In public discussion, it has become increasingly suspicious to utter opinions and viewpoints that question the basic ideal of equality between the sexes, that is, opportunities for all members of the society to fulfil themselves as individuals. It has been pointed out that this is the case especially in times of strong economic growth (Anttonen, 1997).

### **‘Nordic Ideal’: Critical perspectives**

With particular reference to managers, managing and management in organizations, there exist several theoretical perspectives to challenge the ‘Nordic’ as an ideal of gender equality. We introduce three perspectives below; segregation, public-private divide, and organizational change.

First, it is evident that in the Nordic labour markets and working life in general, segregation according to sex persists in terms of access to different areas of activities (e.g. occupations). These segregations are historically constituted. In higher vocational and academic education, men have traditionally dominated technology-related fields, highly valued, while women constitute a large majority in, for example, teaching and nursing (Aaltio-Marjosola, 2001). Women’s high participation in a segregated labour market becomes understandable also through the fact that in the Nordic context, the public sector has provided jobs especially in care-related, female dominated occupations.

Labour markets in the Nordic countries are not only horizontally segregated. Vertical segregation is also prominent as the upper echelons in organizations continue to be a particularly clear example of a male-dominated terrain, especially in the private sector (see e.g. Statistics Sweden, 2000; Vanhala, 1999). Even in service industries where women numerically dominate – such as retailing and banking – the top echelons of organizations consist almost exclusively of men (Sundin, 2000; Tienari, 1999, 2000). In brief, in light of segregation, the Nordic countries do not deviate from societies characterized by what may be labelled as more conservative male dominance.

Second, then, criticism of the ‘Nordic ideal’ can be grounded in peoples’ perceptions of the separation of public and private spheres of life. It has been argued that managers and management continue to be constructed according to the ‘classic’ core family and male breadwinner model in the Nordic context (Wahl, 1995; Andersson, 1997; Holgersson, 2001), in spite of the egalitarian public discourse. This is an all too familiar story. Kanter (1977) argues that a (male) manager requires the emotional and practical work contributions of a wife. Management thereby consists of the work of two people; the man at work and the wife at home. Relatedly, segregation is a question of parenthood. For women attempting to pursue a career, family and motherhood continue to be a



drawback. Conceptions of parenthood and motherhood are embedded in the 'cultures' of companies (Eriksson, 2000) as well as in the mythical management archetypes in society (Aaltio-Marjosola, 2001).

According to Höök's (2001) study in the Swedish context, motherhood is constructed as a biological process. To have children is something that concerns women only. Fatherhood, however, is socially constructed as a one-time event. In comparison with the mother, the father is not perceived to be affected by any of the practical or emotional consequences of parenthood. The implications of this are, for example, that women who have children and who also want to pursue a career are seen as doing so at the expense of her children. A father, however, is seen pursuing his career for the sake of the children since he is the bread-winner. In sum, the constructions of fatherhood and management are mutually reinforcing, while the constructions of motherhood and management undermine each other (Höök, 2001; cf. Hearn & Parkin, 1987; Aaltio-Marjosola, 2001).

Consequently, women deviate from what becomes accepted as the managerial norm. To manage is constructed as time-consuming and, according to Kanter (1977), it can be understood in terms of total commitment. Spending as much time as possible at work is one way of demonstrating that no other commitments in life are as important as work. In line with this, Cockburn (1991) argues that a management career is often synonymous with long working hours, mobility and continuity, i.e. an 'added career' with no breaks (cf. Acker, 1990, 1994; Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998). The definition of management competence is presented as gender neutral when it can, in fact, be argued to be intrinsically linked to qualities attached to men (Wahl, 1998). More specifically, it is shaped according to particular masculinities as certain types of men are preferred over others (Collinson & Hearn, 1994; Holgersson, 2001).

Despite claims for gender equality, male executives in the Nordic context acknowledge that they feel comfortable working with other men. They have a tendency to rationalize such preferences in recruitment; in other words, privileges are turned into merits (Asplund, 1988; Holgersson, 2001; cf. Bourdieu, 1984). Studies of Swedish male top managers' perceptions of women and management also indicate that it is common for male managers not to see the lack of women on top positions as a problem; if they do perceive the lack of women as a problem, it is a problem for women, not for the company (e.g. Wahl 1995; Holgersson, 2001). This is also the experience that Czarniawska-Joerges (1994) reports from her field studies in Sweden; the attitude among male managers seems to be that equality programmes will effectively take care of 'women's problems' as a minority.

Third, and in line with the above, it is evident that male domination in management is not a static phenomenon. Gender distinctions and relations are embedded in practices and structures, which are in constant flux. Relatedly, the 'Nordic ideal' can be criticized in the light of managerial (or managerialistic) strive for, and legitimation of, constant change and transformation in organizational structures and practices (see e.g. Tienari, 1999 and 2000; Tienari et al., 2002). For example, it has been argued that an instance of organizational change such as a merger is likely to result in a reconstitution of gender segregation; when the relative number of top positions decreases, the competition for the remaining positions intensifies also among the otherwise privileged (Tienari,

2000). In Abrahamson's (2000) words, the dominant gender order is restored in the organization even when it becomes subject to change efforts.

Tienari et al. (2003) studied a transnational, Nordic company, which is built through a series of recent cross-border mergers and acquisitions. Their particular focus is on how male senior executives account for the lack of women in the top management of the company as well as gender inequality more generally. Tienari et al. (2003) findings support the argument that while public discourse in the Nordic countries nurtures equality and equal opportunities, managers and management continues to be constructed according to the 'classic' core family and male breadwinner model (cf. Wahl, 1995; Holgersson, 2001). In senior executives' narration in the cross-border merger context, family and motherhood continue to be a fundamental drawback for women attempting to pursue an upward mobile career. This discursive construction of management seems to be as much about expectations of motherhood as about being a mother.

Tienari et al. (2003) suggest that the cross-national element in organizational change and transformation work to amplify the aforementioned conceptions of motherhood. This relates to Calás and Smircich's (1993) ideas about how, in an apparently globalizing world, «the household is extended up to the national border». Calás and Smircich discuss critically the apparent valuing of a number of essential women's qualities in managerial work, and specify how such discourse on feminine-in-management positions against the discourse on 'globalization' (see also Connell, 2001). Cutting corners somewhat here, Calás and Smircich's point is that the meeting of the discourses

...locate a certain class of feminine values in the 'middle manager' position (the home office) while the rank-and-file – embodied in the values of the 'diverse' – keep the national (home) fires burning. In the meantime, the strategists (not a feminine or diverse image, to be certain) move to a higher, more valuable international playing field where decisions are made (Calás & Smircich, 1993: 77).

Under rubrics such as extensive need for travelling, the gendered subtext in the transnational organization is discursively reproduced; in the male top executives' perception, women are not able to travel as much as is required of executives, due to their family obligations. They are unable to meet the challenges of the international or 'global' playing field that has become ever more prominent in the company through the cross-border, Nordic dimension. In the discourse, senior executive management remains reserved for men whose wives take care of the home (Tienari et al., 2003)

Many researchers have pointed to how (talk about) gender often seems to be 'out of place' in the public sphere of life, especially when it comes to management. Again, the Nordic countries are no exception. In the Finnish context, Korvajärvi (1998) has explored ways in which gender is often distanced from everyday organizational life by organizational members. Gender and questions of equality and inequality are, for example, distanced spatially or temporally. In spatial distancing, the message is that «inequality exists, but not in our organization». Distancing can also be accomplished temporally, in the vain that «things used to be bad, but now they are alright» (cf.

Hearn, 1998). Gender is a truly elusive concept. In all, the Nordic 'ideal' of equality is relative, and very much in the eye of the beholder. Or on the tongue of the storyteller.

### **A note on cultural essentialism**

Above, for the sake of argument, we have treated the Nordic countries as a rather monolithic block in terms of gender relations. In some respects, when compared with the United Kingdom or Central- and Southern Europe, for example, the Nordic countries share important common characteristics. The public discourse in Nordic societies, at least, treats equality between the sexes as a serious social and societal concern. Also, the Nordic welfare society model enables women as well as men to actively participate in the labour market. In comparison to Germany, for example, Finland and Sweden do provide individual women (and men) with more flexible opportunities to balance between making a career and having a family, instead of being forced to choose one over the other (cf. Tienari et al., 2002; Theobald, 1999).

It is important to point out that, despite emphasizing fundamental similarities, some of the more fine-grained alternative frameworks to theorise gender systems in Europe, as discussed in Duncan (1998), differentiate between the various Nordic countries. Also, literature on 'cross-cultural management' insists on differences between 'cultures' in the Nordic countries (cf. Laine-Sveiby, 1987, 1991). Although conceptions of culture as essence are in many ways problematic (cf. the critique in Söderberg & Holden, 2002), they provide an avenue to analyze perceptions of similarity and difference (Vaara, 2000), also in questions of gender equality and inequality.

### **Concluding reflections**

Our aim in this article has been to challenge discourse on gender equality established at the societal level, and to highlight complexities in the usefulness of such discourse in understanding discursive practice in organizations, particularly in relation to management, managing and managers. We have done this by means of deconstructing a management text, and grounding our deconstruction in critical feminist literature. This deconstruction illustrates how managerial discourse is challenged and questioned by pro-egalitarian arguments in the Nordic context. It shows, however, the vagueness of the discursive strategy (cf. Hardy et al., 2000) regarding gender equality in the focal organization when it adjusts to these challenges.

In the deconstructed text, there is an apparent mix of aggressiveness or determination – the imagery is direct and unconditional – and opening up for possible change. Overall, it is clear that women are discursively constructed as the passive «*they*», measured and marginalized against a male ideal in management, i.e. the active «*we*» (cf. Martin, 1990; Calás & Smircich, 1999). Women are blamed for a problem, which the (male) executive management has now identified,

and will actively tackle. The executive management will tackle the problem on behalf of those directly concerned, i.e. the passive women.

When the underlying reasons for the apparent problem are discussed, gendered assumptions of family obligations enter the text. A traditional male breadwinner family model is constructed as a natural order of things. It is taken for granted that only women (have and) take care of small children (Höök, 2001), and that this presents complications in relation to being a manager. Formalizing the correction of gender bias in its own right is, finally, rendered alien to the everyday functioning of the organization (Calás & Smircich, 1992). The classic discursive discrepancy between competence and equal opportunities prevails in the text. A meritocratic system of managerial advancement is constructed discursively.

To deconstruct is to search for an understanding of the exclusions on which writers need to rely in order to represent a particular 'reality' (cf. Martin, 1990; Calás & Smircich, 1999). In the text deconstructed, there are many 'silences'. Managerial discourse is confirmed as assumptions of the daily routines in being a manager are not challenged when the apparent 'problem of women's lack' is constructed. Tradition-bound attitudes on management are ambiguously discussed, but not problematized in any way. The text opens up for the possibility that there may be organizational barriers that have an effect on women's career making. The nature of such barriers remains, however, unsaid.

Overall, the management discourse dominating the exemplary text relies on specific conceptions of parenthood where motherhood is constructed as problematic whereas fatherhood remains absent – and thus unproblematic. These conceptions contradict the egalitarian-individualistic, double earner family model that is the basis of societal arrangements such as child care in Nordic societies, as they construct management according to a 'classic' core family and male breadwinner model (Wahl, 1995; Andersson, 1997; Holgersson, 2001; Tienari et al., 2003).

Finally, it is important to note that societal equality discourse mobilized by, for example, political actors does put increasing pressure on business firms in the Nordic context. Equality discourse has 'material consequences' such as (change in) legislation, which forces decision makers in business to grasp specific issues. The media also plays a significant role in this. These pressures are evident in the text deconstructed; the reasoning relies on the notion that the lack of women who apply for vacant managerial positions is a 'company problem'. More precisely, it is a problem of appearance for the company; it «*does not look good*». It is no longer merely a personal question for the women (and men) concerned.

## References

- Aaltio-Marjosola, I. (2001). *Naiset, miehet ja johtajuus*. Helsinki: WSOY. (Women, Men and Leadership.)
- Abrahamson, L. (2000). *Att återställa ordningen. Könsmönster och förändring i arbetsorganisationer*. Umeå: Boréa. (To Restore Order – Gender Patterns and Change in Work Organisations.)
- Acker, J. (1990). Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations. *Gender and Society*, 4, 139-158.

- Acker, J. (1994). The Gender Regime of Swedish Banks. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 10, 117-130.
- Alvesson, M., & Billing, Y. D. (1992). Gender and Organization: Towards a Differentiated Understanding. *Organization Studies*, 13, 73-103.
- Andersson, G. (1997). Karriär, kön och familj. In A. Nyberg, & E. Sundin (Eds.), *Ledare, makt och kön* (SOU, 135). Stockholm: Fritzes. (Career, Gender and Family.)
- Anttonen, A. (1997). *Feminismi ja sosiaalipolitiikka – miten sukupuolesta tehtiin yhteiskuntateoreettinen ja sosiaalipoliittinen avainkäsite*. Tampere, Finland: University of Tampere Press. (Feminism and Social Policy – How Gender Was Made a Core Concept in Social Sciences Theory and Social Policy.)
- Asplund, G. (1988). *Women Managers. Changing Organizational Cultures*. Chichester: Wiley.
- Åström, G. (1995). Society in a Gender Perspective. In Anna Wahl (Ed.), *Men's Perceptions of Women and Management*. Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, Sweden.
- Benschop, Y., & Doorewaard, H. (1998). Covered by Equality: The Gender Subtext of Organizations. *Organization Studies*, 13, 73-103.
- Bergqvist, C. (Ed.) (1999). *Likestilte demokratier? Kjønn og politikk i Norden*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Billig, M. (1995). *Banal Nationalism*. London: Sage.
- Borchorst, A., Christensen, A. D., & Siim, B. (2002). Diskurser om køn, magt og politik i Skandinavien. In A. Borchorst (Ed.), *Kønsmagt under forandring* (pp. 247-266). Copenhagen: Hans Reitzel. (Discourses on Gender, Power and Politics in Scandinavia.)
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Calás, M. B., & Smircich, L. (1992). Using the F-word: Feminist Theories and the Social Consequences of Organizational Research. In Albert Mills, & Peta Tancred (Eds.), *Gendering Organizational Analysis*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Calás, M. B., & Smircich, L. (1993). Dangerous Liaisons: The 'Feminine in Management' Meets 'Globalization'. *Business Horizons*, 36 (2), 73-83.
- Calás, M. B., & Smircich, L. (1999). Past Postmodernism? Reflections and Tentative Directions. *Academy of Management Review*, 24, 649-671.
- Cockburn, C. (1991). *In the Way of Women*. London: Macmillan.
- Collinson, D., & Hearn, J. (1994). Naming Men as men: Implications for Work, Organization and Management. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 1 (1), 2-22.
- Connell, R. W. (2001). Masculinity Politics on a World Scale. In S. M. Whitehead, & F. J. Barrett (Eds.), *The Masculinities Reader*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Czarniawska-Joerges, B. (1994). Editorial: Modern Organizations and Pandora's Box. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 10 (2), 95-98.
- DeCillia, R., Reisigl, M., & Wodak, R. (1999). The Discursive Construction of National Identities. *Discourse and Society*, 10, 149-173.
- Duncan, S. (1998). Theorising Gender Systems in Europe. In B. Geisler, F. Maier, & B. Pfau-Effinger (Eds.), *FrauenArbeitsMarkt*. Berlin: Edition Sigma.

- Eriksson, U. (2000). *Det mangranna sällskapet. Om konstruktion av kön i företag*. Gothenburg: BAS Förlag. (Company to a Man: Constructing Gender in Business.)
- Fagan, C., & O'Reilly, J. (1998). Conceptualizing Part-time Work: The Value of an Integrated Comparative Perspective'. In J. O'Reilly, & C. Fagan (Eds.), *Part-time Prospects: An International Comparison of Part-time Work in Europe, North America and the Pacific Rim* (pp. 1-31). London: Routledge.
- Hardy, C., Palmer, I., & Phillips, N. (2000). Discourse as a Strategic Resource. *Human Relations*, 53, 1227-1248.
- Hearn, J. (1998). *The Violences of Men: How Men Talk About and How Agencies Respond to Men's Violence to Women*. London: Sage Publications.
- Hearn, J., & Parkin, W. (1987). *'Sex' at 'Work'*. London: Whetashaeaf Books.
- Holgersson, C. (2001). The Social Construction of Top Executives. In Sven-Erik Sjöstrand, Jörgen Sandberg, & Mats Tystrup (Eds.), *Invisible Management: The Social Construction of Leadership*. UK: Thomson Learning.
- Höök, P. (2001). Management as Uncontrollable Sexuality. In Sven-Erik Sjöstrand, Jörgen Sandberg, & Mats Tystrup (Eds.), *Invisible Management: The Social Construction of Leadership*. UK: Thomson Learning.
- Jacobson, S. W., & Aaltio-Marjosola, I. (2001). 'Strong' Objectivity and the Use of Q-Methodology in Cross-Cultural Research: Contextualizing the Experience of Women Managers and Their Scripts of Career. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 10, 228-248.
- Kanter, R. M. (1977). *Men and Women of the Corporation*. New York: Basic Books.
- Korvajärvi, P. (1998). *Gendering Dynamics in White-Collar Organizations*. University of Tampere Doctoral Dissertation. Acta Universitatis Tamperensis 600.
- Laine-Sveiby, K. (1987). *Svenshet som strategi*. Stockholm, Sweden: Timbro. (Swedishness as Strategy.)
- Laine-Sveiby, K. (1991). *Suomalaisuus strategiana*. Porvoo, Finland: WSOY. (Finnishness as Strategy.)
- Martin, J. (1990). Deconstructing Organizational Taboos: The Suppression of Gender Conflict in Organizations. *Organization Science*, 1, 339-359.
- Melkas, H., & Anker, R. (1998). *Gender Equality and Occupational Segregation in Nordic Labour markets*. Geneva: International Labour Office.
- Meriläinen, S. (2000). Discourses of Equality and Difference in Bank Managers' Talk. *LTA / The Finnish Journal of Business Economics*, 3, 416-432.
- Statistics Sweden (2000). *Women and Men in Sweden: Facts and Figures*. Örebro: SCB.
- Sundin, E. (2000). Women and Men as Managers in a Female Dominated Sector and Company. *LTA / The Finnish Journal of Business Economics*, 3, 394-415.
- Söderberg, A. M., & Holden, N. (2002). Rethinking cross-cultural management in a globalising business world. *International Journal of Cross-Cultural Management*, 2 (1), 103-121.
- Söderberg, A. M., & Mathiesen, S. F. (2002). *Nordic ideas – From Words to Action. A Case Study of Corporate Storytelling in a Post-merger Integration Process*. Conference paper to be presented at European Group for Organizational Studies (EGOS) 18th Colloquium, July 4-6, 2002, Barcelona, Spain.

- Theobald, H. (1999). *Geschlecht, Qualifikation und Wohlfahrtsstaat. Deutschland und Schweden im Vergleich*. Berlin: Edition Sigma. (Gender, Qualifications and the Welfare State: Germany and Sweden Compared.)
- Tienari, J. (1999). The First Wave Washed Up on Shore: Reform, Feminization and Gender Resegregation. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 6, 1-19.
- Tienari, J. (2000). Gender Segregation in the Making of a Merger. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 16, 111-144.
- Tienari, J., Quack, S., & Theobald, H. (2002). Organizational Reforms, 'Ideal Workers' and Gender Orders: A Cross-Societal Comparison. *Organization Studies*, 23 (2), 251-281.
- Tienari, J., Holgersson, C., Söderberg, A.-M., & Vaara, E. (2003). An Uneasy Coupling: Reflections on Women and Management in a Merging Organization. In A-M Söderberg, & E. Vaara (Eds.), *Merging Across Borders: People, Cultures, Politics*. Copenhagen: Copenhagen Business School Press.
- Vaara, E. (2000). Constructions of Cultural Differences in Post-merger Change Processes: A Sensemaking Perspective on Finnish-Swedish Cases. *M@n@gement*, 3, 81-110.
- Vanhala, S. (1999). Yksityisen sektorin johtajamarkkinat lamasta nousuun. In Eeva-Sisko Veikkola (Ed.), *Onko huipulla tyntyntyt*. Helsinki: Tilastokeskus / Työmarkkinat. (Private Sector Management in the Recovering Managerial Labour Market.)
- Wahl, A. (1998). Deconstructing Women and Leadership. *International Review of Women and Leadership*, 4, 46-60.
- Wahl, A. (Ed.) (1995). *Men's Perceptions of Women and Management*. Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, Sweden.

**Resumo.** Focalizado no contexto Nórdico, este artigo realça as complexidades existentes entre um discurso assente na igualdade de géneros sexuais, existente ao nível societal, e as práticas discursivas nas organizações, particularmente no que diz respeito à gestão e aos gestores. Este objectivo é alcançado através de uma deconstrução de um texto de gestão, a qual é baseada na literatura crítica feminista. Esta análise ilustra os desafios e questões que se colocam ao discurso de gestão pelos argumentos pro-igualitários no contexto Nórdico. Contudo, também demonstra a infiltração de elementos pertencentes ao género sexual no discurso de gestão, os quais assentam em concepções específicas de maternidade ou paternidade, em que a primeira é tida como problemática, enquanto a segundo está ausente, logo não é problemática. Sugere-se que o «caso Nórdico» fornece uma base rica para estudos semelhantes em outros contextos societais na Europa.

*Palavras-chave:* Igualdade no género sexual, perspectiva feminista, gestão, discurso.