



Inflating and down playing strengths and weaknesses—Practicing gender in the evaluation of potential managers and partners



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 6 November 2013

Received in revised form 3 November 2015

Accepted 7 November 2015

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Gender

Age

Competence

Management

Potential

Evaluation

ABSTRACT

In this paper we contribute to the debate on gender in evaluation decisions and the male norm in management by examining how the skills and experience of women and men are described and interpreted in the evaluation of candidates' potential for future positions in a Swedish bank and a Dutch professional services firm. By drawing on Martin's concept of practicing gender, we show how strengths and weaknesses are discursively constructed in real time and space. We identify four different and subtle patterns of practicing gender in the evaluation of men and women in which men's strengths are inflated and their weaknesses downplayed, while women's strengths are downplayed and weaknesses inflated. Although women are included in the process and seen as competent, their potential is – in general – limited to lower managerial levels. Moreover, we examine the entanglement of gender and age. We discuss how these patterns of practicing gender can help us understand how gender and other inequalities are reproduced in seemingly gender egalitarian contexts where women and men are considered for higher positions.

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1. Introduction

Literature within the field of gender in organizations emphasizes that concepts used to evaluate candidates for positions or grants – such as competence, leadership and potential – are gendered social constructions (Acker, 2006; Holgersson, 2013; Lamont, 2009; Sinclair, 2005; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012). Questions about what is competence, and, conversely, who is competent involve judgment and gender affects assumptions about skills and experiences (Martin, 2001; Rees & Garnsey, 2003; Tienari, Quack, & Theobald, 2002; Wahl, 2014). Scholars have argued that interpretations of competence are made against a specific male norm and that in relation to this specific male norm, women are defined as deficient and lacking essential traits, skills and experience (Ely & Meyerson, 2010; Martin, 1996). This is one of the factors causing persistent gender inequalities in organizations today (Acker, 2006; Ely & Padavic, 2007).

The aim of this paper is to build and add to this literature by focusing on how gender is practiced in the actual construction of competence when evaluating candidates' potential for higher positions in organizations. Hitherto, studies on gender in organizations have predominantly relied on interview data that provides a retrospective view on the process. In these interviews, evaluators talk about the process in hindsight, constructing gender in a more conscious and maybe even politically correct way (e.g. Lamont, 2009; Holgersson, 2013; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012). These studies have not been able to capture the evaluation process in which gender is done in real time and space. It is in the heat of the moment where we can observe the subtle and often unreflexive accomplishments of gender (Berger, Benschop, & Van den Brink, 2015). We believe it is especially interesting to focus on gender during moments when the evaluation decisions take place, as people in powerful positions routinely practice gender without being reflexive about it (Martin, 2006). We therefore direct our attention to the practicing of gender in order to capture the way inequalities are created and changed in the workplace (Martin, 1996, 2003) by observing how competence is constructed in evaluation decisions. By making the moments of practicing gender more visible, clues about how to name, challenge and eliminate them can be gleaned (Martin, 2003, 2006).

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The study contributes to knowledge on how gender is practiced in the evaluation decisions by exploring real-time situations in which male and female candidates for management and partner positions are evaluated. We draw on empirical material of evaluations associated with management potential in a Swedish bank and partner potential in a Dutch professional services firm. In the Swedish banking context, senior managers evaluate management candidates and in the Dutch professional services firm, committee meetings evaluate future partners. A critical analysis of how the competence and potential of candidates is interpreted in relation to the profile of an ideal candidate is required in order to understand how gender inequalities are produced, maintained and changed. We therefore examine how the skills and experience of men and women are described and interpreted in the different evaluation processes included in our empirical material. We analyze how management and partner competence and potential are assessed in order to understand how some candidates are included and others are excluded in the construction of the ideal candidate.

Our cases show how evaluation is done through interaction and our analysis highlights how gender interacts with various supposedly objective or neutral evaluation practices as well as with other social categories, in particular age. We identify four different patterns of practicing gender in which the strengths and weaknesses of female and male candidates are evaluated differently. We contribute to theory by showing how gender is done on the spot, how age is involved and how focusing not only on exclusion but inclusion can help understand how the male norm is applied and negotiated when interpreting the competence of women and men. Although women are indeed included as competent candidates, their potential is limited to lower managerial levels.

2. Gendered competence

In this paper, we position ourselves in the literature of gender in organizations, where gender is defined as a complex, multilayered social practice which distinguishes between men and women, masculinity and femininity, and which involves both informal and formal power processes (Benschop, 2007, p.6). Following this definition, gender is much more than a distinction between the sex-categories men and women; it is a social practice that is produced, reproduced, negotiated and reshaped through all kinds of daily interactions (Poggio, 2006). This conceptualization emphasizes the mutual inter-relational construction of femininity and masculinity, as well as the importance of contextual and processual aspects in the construction of gender (Gherardi, 1994). The cultural and social context (Acker, 1992; Kelan, 2010; Van den Brink & Stobbe, 2009) can strongly influence the way gender is understood and 'done' (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Gender practices are an integral part of organizational practices (Martin, 2006; Poggio, 2006); the way (business) organizations are structured – and the evaluation process in particular – encompasses basic principles, rules and processes that create and recreate our perception of differences between men and women, masculinity and femininity, and the difference in value we attribute these.

Literature within the field of gender in organizations has emphasized that evaluation is a subjective process and that concepts such as leadership, excellence, competence and quality are social constructions in which gender is embedded. As a consequence, gender is embedded in organizational processes such as evaluation and selection, making the reproduction of gender inequalities part of everyday practices (Acker, 1990; Ely & Meyerson, 2010; Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2002; Eriksson, 2000; Martin, 1996). With this conceptualization of gender, this literature

distinguishes itself from studies in social psychology that have demonstrated the presence of gender bias (see for instance Balkwell & Berger, 1996; Biernat & Manis, 1994; Rudman & Glick, 2001), but it has yet to demonstrate how gender bias and stereotypes come about through organizational processes. Studies in the field of gender in organizations concentrate on how competence is discursively constructed in social interaction. In a study on gendering and evaluating dynamics, Martin (1996) investigated evaluations, both formal and informal, and the interactional styles of men who make evaluations in managerial contexts. Martin's analysis suggest that men's enactments of masculinities in and through their enactments of management-related evaluations reproduce men's dominance, assert men's rights to the best positions, opportunities and honors, and frame women as less valued and less worthy of powerful status and options. Her cases show how interaction and gendered interactional styles play out in managerial hierarchies. Selection, judgment and related social processes are characterized by the simultaneous and compounded gendered and hierarchical power of managers that are men. Van den Brink and Benschop (2012) show that the concept of scientific quality is inherently gendered, resulting in disadvantages for women and privileges for men that accumulate to produce substantial inequalities. In this study, although both men and women failed to meet selection criteria, male candidates often received the benefit of the doubt while women had to meet the formal standards. In an analysis of the recruitment of managing directors, Holgersson (2013) identifies (re)defining competence as a homosocial practice that reproduces male dominance in top positions in corporations. Competence is defined and redefined in such a way that the selection criteria match the preferred male candidates. Flaws displayed by the preferred male candidates were – in the studied cases – redefined as insignificant, temporary, or even as an advantage. Abrahamsson (2002) and Peterson (2007) have made similar observations of how competence is redefined in order to maintain or restore the superiority of a specific group of men. Indeed, men are also excluded in the constructions of competence. The work of Meriläinen, Tienari and Valtonen (2013) on executive search consultants and their perceptions of the 'ideal' executive body shows, for example, that not only women but also men are considered not to fit the 'ideal candidate'. These constructions of the 'ideal' candidate reproduced a particular kind of masculinity that served to maintain gendered power relations.

This literature highlights how interpretations of competences are made against a specific male norm and that in relation to this norm, women are defined as deficient and lacking essential traits, skills and experience. Key competences are often qualities associated with men and masculinities (Broadbridge & Simpson, 2011; Ely & Meyerson, 2010; Rees & Garnsey, 2003; Teigen, 2002; Tienari et al., 2002). Women often become constructed as deficient in relation to a male gendered managerial norm when the competence of individuals is evaluated in ostensibly gender-neutral ways (Kenny and Bell, 2011; Rees & Garnsey, 2003; Wahl, 1998, 2014; Wajcman, 1998). This results in a situation where women have to fit a prevailing model of success within the organizations, a model that has been shaped according to a specific masculine model, which is more problematic for women (Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2008; Martin, 2006; Van den Brink & Stobbe, 2014). It is also important to note that the managerial norm is also marked by other social categories, excluding men who do correspond to this norm (Holgersson, 2013; Kerfoot & Knights 1993, 1998). However, Lewis (2014) argues that the male norm might lead the focus of our research too much towards masculinities and the exclusion of women from management. In her view, research nowadays should also focus on how women are included in the

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