



Narratives by women managers about spousal support for their careers

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Summary In this article we present a qualitative study of spousal support for the careers of women managers. The research material consists of the narratives of 25 women managers in Finland. The study has two main implications. Firstly, unlike previous studies, we use a narrative approach to demonstrate that a woman manager's career and spousal support are experienced as ambiguous and evolving over the career. The support was constructed by the women managers as flourishing, irrelevant, deficient or inconsistent. Secondly, to increase our knowledge about gender relations, we combine discussion of the topic with gender order analysis and suggest that gender order is critical for an understanding of the nature of spousal support. We conclude that a male spouse who is willing to break the traditional gender order and provide his wife with various forms of support is often constructed as having a positive influence on the career of his woman manager wife. The study calls attention to families as sites of doing gender.

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Introduction

A substantial body of research in the field of careers and management has drawn attention to the intersection of career and family for women managers (e.g. Blair-Loy, 2003; Duxbury & Higgins, 2005; Ezzedeen & Ritchey, 2008; Guillaume & Pochic, 2009; Lämsä & Hiillos, 2008; O'Neil & Bilimoria, 2005; Powell & Mainiero, 1992; Simpson, 1998; White, 1995). Recent research findings suggest that career and family are not separated, and that the relationship

between them is multidimensional: not only do women's career experiences and outcomes affect their experience of family life, but also vice versa (Greenhaus & Foley, 2007; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006; Greenhaus & Singh, 2004; Rothbard, Phillips, & Dumas, 2005; Ruderman, Ohlott, Panzer, & King, 2002). Despite this growing interest in the effect which the family has on a woman's career (Blair-Loy, 2003; Guillaume & Pochic, 2009; Mäkelä, Käsälä, & Suutari, 2011; Powell & Mainiero, 1992), previous research has paid little attention to what is meant by family, and has assumed a simple and unambiguous understanding of the term. With some few exceptions (e.g. Ezzedeen & Ritchey, 2009; Gordon & Whelan-Berry, 2004), studies often ignore the fact that women managers' families consist of different members who may have different roles at different times during these women's career paths.

This study aims to fill that gap in research by studying empirically how women managers experience the support

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given them by their male partners from the perspective of their career. Spousal support has been researched to some extent for working women in general (Friedman & Greenhaus, 2002; Gordon & Whelan-Berry, 2004; Rosenbaum & Cohen, 1999) and for women in executive positions (Ezzedeen & Ritchey, 2008). However, these studies have not problematized support for a woman manager from her male spouse, and they have ignored the fact that such support is neither automatic nor unproblematic in the different twists and turns of a woman's career path (Ezzedeen & Ritchey, 2008). Nor have these studies considered the argument that support is interconnected with power relations between spouses; power relations affect both the woman's career and the family context (Connell, 1987). Indeed, gender relations in the family can act as a key organizing factor, providing resources or imposing limitations on a woman manager's career (Gherardi, 1995; Kimmell, 2000). Thus, we are interested in what kind of gender relations women managers construct when discussing their experiences of spousal support for their career. In this study we use the concept of gender order to analyze the informal social arrangements that define the complex and changing patterns of gender relations (Connell, 1987), particularly between the woman manager and her spouse. Gender order not only describes the values, expectations and norms of what is appropriate for women and men, but also tends to create subordination, female and male domains, and segregation in status and occupations, power and knowledge.

Following recent methodological approaches in the field of career research (e.g. Bujold, 2004; Cohen, Duberley, & Mallon, 2004; Cohen, 2006; Savickas et al., 2009; Young & Collin, 2004), we use narrative methodology and in particular, life-course re-framing (Moen & Sweet, 2004; Savickas et al., 2009), to explore how these women managers make sense of their spousal support for their career. The ontological and epistemological assumptions we have adopted here draw on social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) in its moderate form, which emphasize the socially and culturally embedded nature of meanings and knowledge, which are seen as created through language use and communication (Katila & Meriläinen, 1999; Lämsä & Sintonen, 2001; West & Fenstermaker, 1995). Thus the woman manager is enabled to construct her career herself, using social and cultural conventions while linking disparate elements of her career together and connecting them to broader aspects of her life (Bruner, 2004; Bujold, 2004; Chase, 2005).

The present study makes two key contributions to research in this field. First, we contribute to earlier research on women managers' careers and families by investigating the evolving dimension of spousal support for the women managers' careers. Earlier studies of spousal support have been cross-sectional in nature; as far as we know, there are no studies which have captured the dynamics and complexity of how women who have risen to a managerial position think about the spousal support they have (or have not) received in connection with their career throughout their lives. The adopted life-course re-framing provides the advantage that it moves the focus from individuals and their conflicting or enabling role obligations at any one point in time to the dynamic understanding of relationships between roles and among individuals as their lives unfold – over time, in tandem

and in particular contexts (Moen & Sweet, 2004; Savickas et al., 2009).

Secondly, we aim to increase knowledge about gender relations by focusing on what kind of gender order, the institutional and informal social patterns between genders, women managers themselves produce and maintain when discussing their experiences of spousal support for their career. Relying on the approach used by West and Zimmerman (1987), we see that gender relations are created and "done" both as an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements and as a means of legitimizing fundamental divisions in society, such as gender order (Gherardi & Poggio, 2001). So, while talking about the support they get from their spouses for their careers in this study, women managers make choices of how they represent the phenomenon. This can then be seen to have implications in their careers, even if the links between language use and other social practices are best seen as indirect and mediated rather than direct (Alvesson, 2004; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997).

This article proceeds as follows. After presenting our theoretical framework, we will move on to describing our methodological approach. We will then present our empirical results. The final section is in two parts: in it we will discuss our contribution to the field and draw our conclusions.

Theoretical framework

Gender order and careers

Connell (1987) uses gender order to refer to a historically constructed pattern of power relations between men and women which, together with femininity and masculinity, can become institutionalized in various levels of society (see also Tienari, Quack, & Theobald, 2002). Gender order describes the institutional and informal social arrangements that define the complex and changing patterns of gender relations in a particular context (Connell, 1987). Traditional gender order emphasizes the male breadwinner model, which assumes that the man is the primary breadwinner in the family, and the wife is regarded as either a home-based non-market carer or a secondary earner (Gherardi, 1995; Gherardi & Poggio, 2001). When women work outside the home, as they do increasingly in many societies, they are expected to pursue professions which are suitable for "real women", who are caretakers (Wood, 2008).

Indeed, "a career" is often written about in organizational and management literature as if it was gender free (Wilson, 1998). Normatively the ideal manager is considered to be a man whose work is his life and whose wife takes care of his household (Acker, 1992; Kanter, 1977), even if she is active in working life herself. This norm of a family man with a wife to manage his household while he gives his full attention to his job is embedded in the concept of career (Nieva, 1985, p. 175). Thus, according to the traditional gender order, women are more likely to be expected to provide resources for their husbands' careers than receive resources for their own careers and therefore they become positioned in an unequal situation in relation to their husbands. However, this traditional ideal should be seen as a societally embedded construction, something which evolves in time rather than as anything static (Tienari et al., 2002).

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