Gender, Power and Leadership: Perspectives from Figurational Sociology

Stefanie Ernst, University of Applied Sciences, Muenster/Germany

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1. Introduction
If one observes gender relations in today’s worklife one might ask how much have things changed. Do men behave like primitive barbarians in business life rejecting gender equality. And do women have to bear the burden of civilising them and the whole culture of business? Do we have to face gender war everywhere? What changes have taken place in recent years and what aspects remain the same?

Although the rate is increasing only 9 to 11% of professors in Germany are female. Only 6% of leading-positions are held by women worldwide (Statistisches Bundesamt 2001, Gallup Poll 1996). 56% of men think that children suffer as a result of their mother’s career. However 34% of men would give up their own career in favour of that of their wife’s (GRP 1999). How would one start to explain these figures besides adopting the methods of moral or political explanations?

Historically women have been under represented in the man’s world of power, leadership and business. Terms such as ‘Glass Ceiling’ have been used to explain women’s roles in leadership. Women are often critically regarded by men in the workplace as - outsiders. In leadership positions women are still causing confusion.

Nevertheless, women are actors not victims in this figuration with an unequal balance of power. To understand women’s leadership role in the workplace, one has to analyse not only gender relations in business life as a whole, but also the long term processes of exclusion and inclusion. This demands to reconstructing the long-term process of civilisation between men and women. It also means analysing to what extent this implicates a change of the power balances in the spheres of organizational life.

In the following time I will line out some of the main points of the figurational approach and its relevance for the investigation of the changing shape in the social construction of femininity and masculinity in the workplace. Then, after briefly mentioning the actual research on stereotypes, the long term process of exclusion and inclusion will be illustrated with a few of typical examples from the empirical data of etiquette books.

2. Men and women: Established and Outsiders?
The figurational model of Established and Outsiders relations was developed in order to understand social inequality. It came to mind that the social techniques of superiority and subordination stand in an interwoven dependence to power relations. Elias and Scotson pointed to the interdependence of praise-gossip towards ones own and rejecting gossip towards the outsiders. The position of the group members was dependent on the duration of residence and the belonging to the group. These sociologists claimed that in this socially equal class formation the rejecting gossip and praise gossip is internalised by the group members in a long-term process. The Established feel superior, more qualified and better – the outsiders have a lower self-confidence.
Women very often suffer from rejecting gossip and prejudices because they are newcomers in extraordinary social situations like leadership. If they enter male domains of power their behaviour is judged more severely.

Elias’s and Scotson’s useful model can only be summed up by using structural regularities which allow a comparison of social class differences and gender differences in leadership posts. The empirical paradigms set out in Established/Outsiders relations theory can be utilized to investigate the relations between men and women in leadership positions because:

1. Men in leadership positions tend to operate as a stronger and more homogenous group than women. Although the latest research (Connell 1999) shows that a great variety of masculinity exists, this has not completely led to the deconstruction of gender. Historically, in Germany men have had earlier access to higher education compared to women. Males were not supposed to do housework or take on child care responsibilities. But every woman was and continually is, in contrast, supposed to bear children at the expense of a senior career (Hite 2000: 63).

2. Men tend to be promoted more rapidly and are expected to stay in senior positions for longer. Men are assumed to be experts while women often have to prove that they are (Hadler 1995).

3. The way in which each group has been characterized in history is comparable to praise gossip and rejecting gossip. One can find forms of group charisma and group disgrace. Men are by tradition the ‘monopoly holders (Elias / Scotson 1965: 151)’ and old residents in senior positions with a specific old-boy network. The integration or the exclusion of newcomers is connected with the ‘length of residence (Elias / Scotson 1965: 150)’ in the leadership world.

4. One can state that women in the leading positions of academic and business life suffer from the former established – male superior power: it not only enabled men to reserve social positions but to regard and treat women newcomers as strangers and the group's worst section (Douglas 1987; Cockburn 1993). Although women themselves may not feel like outsiders and act as actors, they are being confronted with the very ambivalent structure of organisational life: being outsiders because of the traditional bourgeois structure of business and family life.

5. Nevertheless, women nowadays have the same and often better qualifications as men and the accessibility to more equal career entry structures and opportunities. Today it is easier for women to enter such professions as ministers, lawyers, professors and business executives. With the social changes between the sexes, plurality and ambiguity has led to the diminishing of contrasts.

6. Because women's place in the model of Established and Outsiders is not at all clear, further inquiry into the gender gap of this specific model of figurational interdependencies has to be carried out. I would argue that women in leadership positions have started the process of transition from being outsiders in the scientific and business world to moving towards being established in certain leadership posts.
Another aspect that should be taken into account is that in organization theory the prevailing frameworks are the parties and the systems models (Mastenbroek 1995: 8). On the one hand in the systems model gender differences seem to be irrelevant because the organization appears to be ‘an entity with certain functional requirements’. In the parties model on the other hand the ‘subgroups with self-interests’ are predominant (Mastenbroek 1995: 9). Gender seems to be one of the main dividing and conflicting factors in organizational life. Therefore the organizational life’s structure should be regarded as an interdependent network with elements of several spheres and power balances between several sections.

The empirical paradigms set out in Established/Outsiders relations theory can be utilized to investigate the relations between men and women in leadership positions. The reason is the men’s oldness in higher education and leadership posts. Moreover, the structure of the organization’s system is predominated by male monopoly holders who oftenly treat women newcomers as strangers and the group's worst section.

3. Etiquette books and the gender relations

Traditional etiquette books as well as modern career guides offer several valuable insights into the analysis of work relations between the sexes. Both kinds of books had and have to face current problems of society and social change: whereas in the 18th century people were confronted with a scientific revolution, in the 20th century globalisation is the great enterprise of mankind. These popular sources paradoxically implicate traditional images about supposed femininity and masculinity. This belief is predominant although social reality and its efforts towards modern management have changed. The social constructions of gender differ from modern individual self-images of men and women, but they cause a dynamic of decision-making in leading positions. By studying business etiquette, it is possible to map a socially constructed ambivalence. I mean the ambivalence between supposedly masculine professionalism and task-oriented leadership and what is perceived as inherently relations-oriented femininity in working and everyday life.

4. Women’s under-representation and research on stereotypes

In the Established/Outsiders figuration one can assume strategies resulting from a minority status, network- and mentorship-system. These factors regulate the opening and closing of power resources, problems of membership and tradition, phenomenon such as gossip and so on.

Gender Studies show that the typical ‘male’ career and its advantages are favoured by organizational life, such as promotions, coaching and mentoring-systems. Therefore the ‘Glass-Ceiling’ is the most important reason for women’s under-representation in leadership-positions. Men and women are members in ‘networks of interdependent groups’ (Mastenbroek 1995: 9). Here it is possible to apply, at first, the rational system level, that is stereotyped as to belong to the male domain. Women’s abilities in this field have been completely denied by tradition because the common belief taught women to be emotional and people-oriented. Secondly, the socio-emotional level is the women’s world, because they are expected to have special soft skills and to be better qualified in this arena (Ferrario 1991:
The power and interdependence level, thirdly, focuses on the power struggle, that is traditionally characterized as male. In this conflicting arena the power struggle between men and women has increased due to the heightened awareness in society about women’s discrimination (Faludi 1993). And last but not least, the negotiating level of organizations is a market sharing all kinds of “scarce resources” (1995: 14).

5. Gender relations in the workplace: the past and the present

In order to investigate this relationship I have studied the changes and resistance to behavioural practices between the sexes and their connection to techniques of gossip and gossip control. In the 18th century the intellectual bourgeois woman was an ambivalent figure - hated and idealised at the same time; standing on the border of science, neither integrated nor completely excluded. Since then femininity figured as an ambivalent construction to separate and stigmatise women. As the ‘minority of the worst (Elias / Scotson 1965: 159)’ the intellectual woman was an expression and decline of the fantasies and fears of established scientists and writers on etiquette books. Every male author - or as a growing minority - female, spread the praise-gossip on male scientists while the academic women suffered from blame-gossip. The most popular German author, Knigge (1788), blamed the intellectual woman for being a torture for every man. He states that a woman may try to ‘perfect her writing and speech by her own studies and chaste literature (…)’.

‘But she ought not to make a profession of it, she ought not to stray in all kinds of erudition. It causes not only disgust but compassion, if one realises the way in which these poor beings dare to discuss the most important things which during all the centuries have been a result of troublesome research by great men (...) (Knigge 1788: 196)’.

We can find a diametric opposition towards the young working men: his ideal stands in contrast with the women’s life of ‘leisure and lightness’. In 1804 Lafontaine laments:

‘... the doctor, the lawyer, the teacher, they all must be in their place; the carpenter, the farmer, they should never postpone their work, if they do not want to loose their clients or their harvest (Lafontaine 1804: 110)’.

In the following 19th century scientific women achieved the status of outsiders, who were not allowed or able to study at all. Therefore in etiquette books the women working outside university have been addressed. As a consequence of industrial and structural change, bourgeois women had to start working. But their work had to be denied as bourgeois society favoured the housewife who worked for love. Under these new circumstances, the ideal came to exist that women who had to work should work in so-called feminine and morally acceptable jobs in the welfare, health and the educational system. The self-image of 19th century
bourgeois women, whether oriented towards emancipation or not, shared this attitude and favoured a specific ideal of motherhood and femininity. This ideology was connected with issues of solving the social crisis of modern society with female resources. Femininity figured as an ambivalent construction to separate and stigmatise women in science. The internalization and constant ambivalence of the rejecting gossip is expressed in the following caricature of 1910: on the one hand, for a woman being intellectual means being unattractive, prudish and lonely. On the other hand, the ideal of a woman is the motherhood. This model is also preferred by many female politicians in past and present Germany. Marianne Weber, a historian and lawyer, for example laments that women have the ability to discover a reconciliation between custom and the increasing modernisation of the world. The reason is that, they are able to understand the feelings of others and because of this understand the motifs of their actions’ (Weber 1906: 22).

In the women's liberation movement from the outgoing 19th century onwards, femininity constantly was an ideal. But despite the conservative image of motherhood during both World Wars, femininity nowadays symbolises an alternative and a solution to the crisis of (post-)modern society. It figures, as an alternative to the increasing difference between private and popular life. The women outsiders value their position as a possibility of building up a positive self-identity and to gain success in the established monopolies of force. They prefer integration with respect to difference. Women’s difference to men runs under the name of inclusion in the senior positions in business whilst before it was an argument for women’s exclusion. The slogan, ‘being the boss and a woman at the same time’, expresses this extraordinarily ambivalent position. The fear of losing femininity is widespread. The mannish woman is described as a ‘monster’ with gender problems and a risk for identities, social roles and places in the hierarchy of professions. For example in another etiquette book from 1955 you can find the idea that many of the female employees

‘try to imitate their male colleagues, not only in the case of performance but also in the case of behaviour. They talk like men, behave like men in their posture and their movement, they ignore the feminine charm favouring the male carefreeness, their aim is to know and do everything and to make men’s jargon to their own (Oheim 1955: 386)’.

Expressed in terms of informalisation and formalisation, this image portrays a severe stage of formalisation in which a woman’s right of becoming equal is denied: women’s loss of self-control means - in this sense smoking a cigarette - losing femininity. Moreover, really being a woman in 1963 means that women in leading positions have to be careful in order to create a good working atmosphere especially if they are superior to men:

‘Grace and agility which also implies a strength of character and professional efficiency is always better for a woman than to play with feminine coquettishness. Men like real women with motherly instincts more than outmoded piles of files,
grouchy old spinsters who are eaten away by ambition and craving for recognition
(Andreae 1963: 114)

Although women in themselves may not feel unfeminine, they are confronted with this antagonistic expectation in organizational life. The result is that no matter what intentions she has, her actions are interpreted in the framework of infringing or confirming femininity.

The parallels between historical ideals and the popular belief of so-called specific women’s skills in the workplace can be observed. In the past it was thought that because of women’s sensitivity, emotionalism and altruism, women were more qualified to work in typical women’s jobs like nursing, teaching and taking care of those in need. Moreover, nowadays one fears a decline of the welfare state if young women lose their social abilities (Ostner 1991, 1992). It is a hint of the homogeneous and essential ahistorical idea of femininity despite the fact that the next generations of women have moved. It is also an example of women having to pay the price for the solution to social problems. Considering the recent debates on gender equality, we can find, for example, the suggestion that businesswomen suffer from the loss of their personality, of being spontaneous, affectionate and sensitive. Men on the other hand are expected to develop and to enact their abilities (Ferrario 1991: 19).

Since the 18th century this theme of dilapidation is an important and constant motif. It is utilized to argue that business, scientific and family life are incompatible as well as, implicitly, task-oriented and people-oriented work and leadership style. This motif has been allocated between the sexes and it was internalised in the self-descriptions of men and women and was also forced by the German judicial systems: Until the 1950s female teachers who wanted to marry had to give up work. Since 1977 married women and mothers are allowed to work without their husband’s permission. The actual conflict nowadays, Morgan states, seems to be that mostly the women have to make a ‘choice between less investment in children and more investment in work, or more investment in the family and less in work’ (Morgan 1997: 88). This conflict is interwoven with the defense strategy of men in leading positions: they protect their work life from family efforts (Liebold 2001).

Nevertheless one can also observe that there is a change in the generations of women who cope with these expectations. This is a further hint to the ascent of formerly outsiders becoming established (Mueller 1999). But the central underlying opposition of functionality and impersonal behaviour in a ‘Man’s World’ (Spencer / Podmore 1987) on the one hand and femininity in the sense of taking care of others in private and public life on the other hand is also predominant (Wajcman 1998). Private and public behaviour are mixed together and compensate for women’s presence in business life and leading positions. In this respect flirting at work, problems of sexual harassment, gender-working lessons in management and training on soft skills especially for men (Dzallakowski 1995) are an expression, that the established men have to find a new role and place in business and university life.
Female leadership in this situation is the catchword and rhetoric for women's success and women's new self-identity in male domains of power. The formerly stigmatised female inability to do research and intellectual work, to make decisions and to lead subordinates, becomes the modern overestimated qualification to rescue the world. In one of the best selling career guides for women it is stated that the future demands ‘intuition, prudence, the ability to sympathise, the appreciation of ecology concerns or unemployment’. And here, we have to realize, ‘that the male domains of economic power sway. All these forthcoming qualities are the so-called typically ‘feminine’ qualities’, which ‘until now have been responsible for women’s difficulties to succeed in the management-world (Henes-Karnahl 1989: 139-40)’.

This figurational-ideal expresses the reciprocal dynamics between Established and Outsiders, by how women have adopted prevailing ideals of femininity which is constructed through difference by men, as something that seems to be common sense. But it is an aim of modern management culture to succeed in facing the great problems resulting from an obsolete authoritarian leadership style. Relations-oriented, task-oriented and people-oriented behaviour towards subordinates and democratic management are catchwords in this context. One may assume that this is a chance for women to prove their special abilities, and the business guides and the mainstream imply this. But they also mention that one should not go so far as to suggest that women make mistakes because they are too naive, insecure and too hard-working (Huber 1995). Others demand to make use of the capability of caring for others, sympathy and intuition (Heim / Golant 1995; Bown / Brady 1995). We can therefore find the new ambivalent ideal of ‘harmonious difference’.

Nevertheless, several studies show that there is not an increasing amount of women in management or science because of their special resource, but because of socio-economical change (Ferrario 1991; Nerge 1992; Hadler 1995: 37). Therefore, feminine leadership is more an ideology than social reality in the world of business and it reflects a particular period in the battle between women who want to be Established and men who want to defend their privileges.

6. Conclusion

Seen with detachment, to favour a female leadership style, is a strategy of Outsiders building up a new identity by destroying the group-charisma of the Established. But at the same moment it is also rhetoric employed by the Established to genderize leadership posts. This ideal is allocated on the socio-emotional level of organizations. For further investigations one should question whether this new leadership style is really acceptable and efficient in all spheres of organizations, for example the task-oriented, system-level or the negotiating level. To establish a new alternative, organizational order appears to be the women’s genuine strategy. However, is this not an ambivalent kind of counter-stigmatisation of the formerly established group which is not allowed to enter the new ranks?

It has attempted to withdraw all the blame-gossip that women neither have the qualifications nor the historical right nor morals and privilege to be in leading and decision-making positions. Working mothers are often assumed to be egoistic, neglecting their children in pursuit of their own careers. Nowadays, and in
social-democratic Germany, due to the fact that the ideology of motherhood is still very popular, the problem of private and public caretaking and housework has also not been resolved. The interdependence of the established-outsider-figuration behind this gossip is neglected. What is frequently overlooked is that those characteristics which seem to be ‘natural’ are in fact socially constructed and a product of unequal hierarchical power relations which the established groups want to defend. One can ask whether the ‘growing acknowledgement of the benefits of both female and male managerial styles (Ferrario 1991: 18)’ is taken for granted and builds up an androgynous, mixed leadership style in organizational life or not.

References

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**Author:**
Dr. Stefanie Ernst
University of Applied Sciences Muenster, Project Qualitaetsentwicklung
Dez.1
Huefferstrasse 27
D-48147 Muenster
Sternst@fh-muenster.de