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Gendered career-making practices: On 'doing ambition', or how managers discursively position themselves in a multinational corporation

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Although in the last decades there have been an increasing number of female managers, few make it to top management positions. In this study we want to gain insight into the persistence of the 'glass ceiling' by analyzing, from an ethnomethodologically informed discursive approach, how managers discursively position themselves in career making practices. Our study is located at the Dutch site of a multinational corporation where no women were found in higher positions, despite their growing presence in management positions. We aim at unraveling the implied membership competencies to participate in career making practices. In line with research on gendered organizations we consider these competencies to be gendered. In a detailed discursive analysis of interview material we identified an underlying paradox of 'doing ambition'. We conclude that the women in this study who are 'doing ambition' are inevitably caught in a double bind position. The (re)production of gender inequality can be understood in terms of this double bind that is normalized in the organization. We argue that the discursive approach demonstrated in this article, is suitable for gaining insight into the often paradoxical demands managers, and especially women, face in daily career practices.

Although the number of female managers has been rising steadily over the last decades in most industrialized countries, very few women make it to the top of the business world (see, for instance, Catalyst, 2003; European Board Women Monitor, 2004). This is especially true for the Netherlands, where the glass ceiling, 'a transparent barrier that [keeps] women from rising above a certain level in organizations' (Morrison, White, Van Velsor, & the Centre for Creative Leadership, 1987, p. 13), is thick and firm. In the Netherlands, women now account for 43% of the labour force, but hold only 3.3% of the executive board seats (SCP/CBS, 2004). In understanding the causes and obstinacy of this glass ceiling, it is of particular interest to study the career-making practices in

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2 A. M. Sools et al.

organizations that help or hinder promotion of male and female managers to the organizational top.

The aim of the present study is to unravel the discursive practices by which managers position themselves in the career-making arena of a multinational corporation in the Netherlands. Career-making in this particular organization at the time the data were collected was shifting both ideologically and practically from an uniformly organized hierarchical career system (defined as ‘moving upwards’, ‘getting on in the hierarchy’ and ‘making promotion steps’) to a more diverse, and flexible, career system.¹ The ideological change for instance, is reflected in corporate slogans like ‘Be Yourself’, which is accompanied practically by for instance a changing (cafeteria) human resource reward system. This shifting organizational reality is reflected in the interviews with male and female managers presented here. The analysis of the interviews focusses particularly on the ambivalent discursive positioning of men and women towards ambition and the role ambition plays in the way managers position themselves in the career-making practices of this organization. We will show how the complex dynamics of ‘doing ambition’ in these gendered discursive practices on the one hand reinforce gender inequality and on the other hand conceal that discrimination takes place. A discursive analytic framework as demonstrated in this article can enrich our understanding of the often contested daily practices managers have to deal with. Before turning to the case and analyses, we will first discuss in more detail theories concerning (differential) career paths of women and men, how careers are constructed in ‘talk’, and what our discursive method has to offer in understanding the dynamics of organizational life.

Career paths of women and men

Most current career literature centres on observable, that is measurable and ‘factual’, differences or commonalities in men’s and women’s careers. Realist-based theories tell us that women’s careers tend to differ from men’s. Thus it is shown how career patterns of men can typically be characterized as an uninterrupted linear progression up through the organizational ranks, whereas those of women are often ambiguous and complex, more sequential and characterized by interruptions (Lyness & Thompson, 2000; Melamed, 1996). Career paths of women in management are typically described by the metaphor of an ‘obstacle course’ (Ragins & Sundstrum, 1989) rather than by a steady rise on the career ladder. More recently, changes in the concept of career have been identified, along with societal shifts, such as the rise of dual career couples. Career progression typically meant vertical advancement through the organizational ranks, but nowadays careers can also be defined as horizontal movements within the organization or from one company to the other, or even as ‘personalized’ careers outside organizational barriers (Stroh & Reilly, 1999).

Although recent literature then, appears to allow for diversity and change over time in the study of career patterns, this diversity only arises as the reflection of some external reality. From a social-constructivist perspective, however, gender and careers are not considered as simple matters of fact, but rather as social constructs, that are produced

¹ Although it is no longer the only way to think about personal career paths, the hierarchical career model is still a largely taken-for-granted – albeit disputed – background for our interviewees. Therefore, in the remainder of this article we use ‘career making’ to refer to linear hierarchical steps toward the organizational top, i.e. making promotion.

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'Doing ambition' 3

and reproduced in daily interactions of social actors (for career issues see, for instance, Collin, Richard, & Young, 2000; for gender issues see, for instance, Bruni, Gherardi, & Poggio, 2004; Butler, 1990; Korvajärvi, 1998). Moreover, research inspired by the perspective of 'gendered organizations' (Acker, 1990, 1992) increasingly shows the complexity of gendered practices in organizations. Different levels of complexity, both within and between organizations, between men and women, and between gendered processes and power relations, are identified (Hearn, 1998) and their dynamics and paradoxical nature explored (see, for instance, Johansson, 1998; Korvajärvi, 1998). In this article, we explore how the dynamics and paradoxes of career-making practices are constructed in talk on an interpersonal level (as opposed to the sociological analyses of Acker and those in her footsteps).

A discursive perspective studies how both hierarchical and alternative career paths are constructed in talk and acknowledges their often disputed and negotiated character. El-Sawad (2005), for instance, discusses metaphors that unlock different ways of talking about careers. She identifies (1) spatial and journey metaphors such as career ladders, fast track, flying, driving, steering; paths tracks, crossroads and turning points; maps and charts; meeting dead ends and getting lost; (2) competition models such as game, sport, playing field; and (3) horticultural metaphors, such as controlling and disciplining, growth, corporate mushroom. These metaphors are interesting as they communicate the organizational perceptions of careers and how the workers in such organizations position themselves towards the organization.

The ambivalent construction of careers in talk

Managers may have either explicit or implicit knowledge about how to get on. This knowledge can be understood as 'membership competence' in the sense first used by Garfinkel. Membership competences are the competences involved in being a bona fide member of a collectivity (cf. Garfinkel, in Ten Have, 1999). Membership competence should be interpreted neither in a purely psychological sense, nor in the sense of specific organizational skills (e.g. leadership skills). Rather, it involves the ability to act and express oneself intelligibly as a member of a certain social collective, thus constituting one's membership of this social collective. In the context of a hierarchically organized corporation, this typically involves that managers constitute their membership of the organization by demonstrating that they can act in ways that are naturally recognized as conveying ambition. This implies that they can be identified as 'ambitious' by others as well as themselves. This does not mean, however, that all managers necessarily aspire to get on in hierarchical terms, nor that they are willing or able to do what it takes. The very act of labelling itself alters the relationship between self and others, and paves the way for a different treatment of the ambitious and the not ambitious (see also Bicknell & Liefoghe, 2006).

The process by which managers are identified by others and themselves as 'successful' or 'ambitious', might not be gender neutral. Research by Schein and colleagues investigating the relationship between characteristics perceived necessary for management success and characteristics thought to be typical for men and women, has shown repeatedly that people perceive successful leaders similar to men, not women. This is captured quite adequately in the adage 'think manager, think male' (e.g. Schein, 1971, 2001; Schein, Mueller, & Jacobsen, 1989). The identification of men with managerial jobs and the masculine norm of organizations is still taken for granted

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4 A. M. Sools et al.

(see, for instance, Wajcman, 1998). This is because the gendered nature of organizations is often concealed (Acker, 1990) and the stereotypical masculine image of 'the manager' is masked as an abstract, 'disembodied' worker (cf. Acker, 1990, p. 170). As Acker puts it, the abstract manager is thus typically identified as a male worker with a wife who takes care of the children. This raises the question what discursive strategies a female worker would have to employ in order to get on in the organization. From social role theory (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Karau, 2002) it can be argued that adapting to the (masculine) leader role prescription of the successful manager is problematic for women because of the violation of the female gender role this pertains. At the same time, adhering to the female gender role is problematic as it excludes women from being perceived as an adequate leader (see, for empirical evidence, reviews by Eagly & Karau, 2002; Van Engen, 2001), particularly when females are judged for their suitability for top leadership positions (Van Engen & Vinkenburg, 2005). How female managers (try to) negotiate these contradictions when making career progression in organizations is therefore of particular importance. Moreover, the difficulties this entails need not be obvious for (fe)male managers in organizations because the discourse of the abstract, disembodied worker is often taken for granted (cf. Acker, 1992; Benschop, Halsema, & Schreurs, 2001). As we will argue below, an analysis of discursive practices might reveal how (fe)male managers position themselves in the organizational arena and thereby negotiate their career success.

In the present study, we hope to unravel the discursive practices regarding career making in which managers partake, that, as we will argue, on the one hand reinforce gender inequality and on the other hand conceal that discrimination takes place. By focussing on discursive practices we explicitly approach everyday talk and conversation within the organization from an action perspective (Edwards, 1997). Talk is then seen, not as a window on people's 'inner' experience or state of mind, but as a way of accomplishing social goals. It is in this sense that talk is considered as strategical - albeit not necessarily consciously planned - rather than referential. A discursive perspective takes as its starting point the assumption that people have certain skills or competences that allow them to account for the joint actions of everyday life and that they are able to actively and strategically position themselves relative to the normative demands of particular social settings (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). By talking about what it takes to make a career in the organization, our interviewees position themselves in the organizational arena and thereby demonstrate their ability to make proper social judgments. The managers' accounts of the career-making practices in the organization not only produce and reproduce the cultural patterns concerning promotion and success, but also show how managers position themselves in relation to these patterns and negotiate alternative positions. Like Shepherd's 'systematic constructionist approach to technology discourse in the enterprise context, our analysis of ambition discourse focuses on the microlevel of talk-in-interaction, while acknowledging the way conversational discourses are embedded within specific interpretative contexts (see Shepherd, 2006).

Beyond statistics and positivism

An adequate understanding of the reproduction of gender differentials in leadership opportunities requires that we move beyond positivism and statistics (see Special Issue *Journal of Organizational and Occupational Psychology*, 2006) in order to focus on the 'doings' of the participants in the organization and the background of largely unspoken

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'Doing ambition' 5

normative demands against which these doings occur. An obvious question, then, is whether the analysis of 'talk' can truly give us any insight in the principles that underlie the production and reproduction of gender inequality. After all, people hardly ever explicitly intend to reproduce gender inequalities. Can an analysis of discursive practices give us insight in the principles that underlie the persistence of gender biases and discrimination? In this paper we speak of 'underlying principles' and occasionally of 'mechanisms' to refer to those processes that play a role in the reproduction of persistent beliefs and discourses within the organization and their consequences for individuals. Although we are aware that the search for something 'underlying' is quite problematic from a discursive perspective, we maintain that the nature of people's accounts can potentially be understood or 'explained' in terms of the normative demands, conflicts and paradoxes that are often only implicit in their words and actions (for a discussion of the tacit nature of normative demands, see Baerveldt & Voestermans, 2005).

A focus on discursive practices does not automatically imply a strictly constructivist position. People do not randomly 'pick' a discursive version of reality, but are both emotionally and bodily engaged in the practices they discursively produce (Baerveldt & Voestermans, 2005; Cromby, 2004). Discursive accounts are often ambiguous and conflicting rather than logical and coherent. El-Sawad, Arnold, and Cohen (2004) refer to the presentation of conflicting arguments within an account of a single member of an organization as 'doublethink'. This doublethink arises when organizational members are dealing with multiple identities such as peer and a subordinate, employee and mother (El-Sawad *et al.*, 2004). Managers may not always be consciously aware of these conflicting identities. Although our interviewees are typically highly articulate about their motives and intentions, we intend to demonstrate that their accounts may nonetheless reflect underlying conflicts and paradoxes of which they are not necessarily fully aware. These conflicts and paradoxes may be conducive to the very problems each individual actor may want to denounce.

Making a career is something managers do and their 'doings' are both enacted and reflected in everyday discourse in the organization. By analysing this discourse we hope to reveal some of the tensions, contradictions and paradoxes that underlie the practice of career talk and doing ambition. How do the managers in this organization discursively position themselves in career-making practices? What are the competences enacted and reflected in career talk? And how do these competences hold up when they are embodied by women and not by an 'abstract worker'? These are the questions that in our view are pertinent for an adequate understanding of the glass ceiling for women in management.

Case and method

The research presented here was conducted at a research laboratory, which is the largest Dutch site of a multinational corporation. In this organization, women are underrepresented in the higher echelons of management, despite the increase of women in middle-management positions within this company. The total number of employees at this site is 1,298,465 of whom are managers. One in four managers is a woman. The 24 highest positions in this corporation are occupied by men. Women are not found above middle-management level. About 15% (six women) of the positions at this level are held by women. In the remainder of the article, the fictitious name 'Enir' will be used for this organization, in order to guarantee anonymity.

The management of Enir announced in a national newspaper that they were interested in targetting the small number of women in higher positions. The high female

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6 A. M. Sools et al.

turnover was considered the primary cause of the glass ceiling. The company thought the masculine organizational culture could contribute to the high turnover of qualified women. Based on this assumption a 'women in management' (WIM) group was established to put the issue on the agenda, to research the underlying causes and most importantly to come up with an action plan. The first author of this article participated as a researcher in the WIM group for 6 months and conducted the study this article draws upon.

The initial analysis of organizational demographic statistics resulted in a dismissal of the high turnover hypothesis, since in fact a higher proportion of men than women was found to leave the organization, although not significantly so. The misperception of the high turnover of women might be due to the high visibility of women in a male-dominated environment, which is part of the so-called token-effect, as described by Kanter (1977). Additionally, it was found that working part-time, another common explanation of women's lesser career success, did not adequately explain women's lack of upward mobility in this organization. Of the full-time working managers, female managers did not reach top positions as often as their male counterparts. More importantly, it was found that women did not progress through the organizational ranks as fast as their male counterparts.

To understand formal and informal career processes in the organization, in-depth interviews were conducted with 17 managers. Interviews were arranged with three male and three female managers employed at middle-management - the highest level where women could be found in this organization. These managers are considered 'hands-on' experts in terms of their actual experience with moving up the ranks in this organization. First, three women were selected. Then three men were selected who matched the age range and managerial level of the women. The women at this layer of management were aged between 28 and 41. The women in this organization are generally much younger (the average age of men is 42, while the average age of the women is 32) and belong to a much more restricted age range than the men (between 22 and 41 vs. 22 and 62). The selection of these six managers was based on the criterion of 'variation coverage', aimed at discovering a wide range of discursive strategies (Smaling, 2003). This variation was accomplished by purposive selection of characteristics that were thought to be relevant for the perspective on career making. Therefore managers were selected from a variety of departments (technical, commercial, personnel), working part-time and full-time, and with a variety of other characteristics (married or single, children or not, part-time or full-time).

In addition, one male and four female managers who had left the organization no more than 2 years prior to the study were interviewed to learn more about the exit reasons and their now outsider perception of the organization. Finally, six interviews were conducted with three male and three female managers from the HR department (who together are responsible for a wide range of departments in the organization) to gain information about formal and informal career processes in the organization.

In the interviews, a wide range of topics was discussed. A topic list guided the interview and included promotion processes, opportunities for promotion, career goals, the combination of work and care, the possibilities and desirability of part-time work at different position levels, general perception of ambition, own ambition, descriptions of successful managers, 'drop-outs' and executives, and social relations at work. The exit interviews covered the same topics, but included some additional questions regarding the current work situation and the motivation to leave Enir.

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'Doing ambition' 7

After a few interviews, the topic list was slightly changed to exclude explicit questions about differences between men and women. Asking people directly to describe how bias in the workplace occurs is problematic because people (1) often deny there is unequal treatment or bias in their organization, or (2) attribute differential outcomes for men and women to external factors and not to unequal treatment within the organization (see also Acker, 1990, 1992; Benschop *et al.*, 2001; Collinson & Hearn, 2000; Doorewaard, Benschop, & Brouns, 1997). Direct questions about gender inequality evoked not only an overly conscious equality discourse, but sometimes also irritation on the part of the interviewee and consequent diminished rapport. The awareness of gender equality issues might have been further triggered by expectations regarding the interviewer's perspective, since she was a young university researcher, hired by the WIM group to study the supposedly high turnover rate of female managers in this organization.

All the interviews, each of which lasted approximately 90 minutes, were recorded on tape and subsequently transcribed verbatim. In accordance with the conventions of conversation analysis, these transcriptions contain indications about sound level, speed, pauses and so forth. The analysis was performed on the original (Dutch and in one case English) text. Interview excerpts were thoroughly discussed with students and teachers at the university, including the authors of this article. The analysis took place in three steps. First, we thematically analyzed the discourse on career making, by coding interview excerpts bottom-up. This means we grounded the development of themes in the perspectives of participants rather than imposing our own theoretical point of view. In this phase of the analysis we allowed a wide range of concepts regarding career making and success, such as moving upwards, growing, learning and getting on, in order to explore a wide variety of meaning-making practices in this organization. Then we found that discourses regarding career making were pervaded with literal references to ambition, indicating that this word serves as a baseline or taken-for-granted organizational background. This is in line with findings from research among Dutch top managers. Fischer and van Vianen (in Kruyzen, 2001) found that 98% of these top managers consider ambition a key success factor for their careers. This finding was also corroborated in the interviews with HR managers in this case study, who identified ambition as the key factor for promotion among highly qualified managers. Interestingly, the interviewees were quite ambivalent about ambition, as indicated by differential positionings towards and different meanings attributed to ambition. We felt that this ambivalence needed explaining. Therefore, our second step was to take a closer look at the ambivalent positioning towards ambition. We used discursive analytical techniques to analyze all excerpts concerning the word ambition, including both excerpts elicited by a direct question about ambition in general or the interviewees' personal ambition and spontaneous utterances regarding ambition. This resulted in identifying the paradoxical discursive practice of 'doing ambition'. In the third step, we looked at 'doing ambition' from a gender perspective in order to answer the question about differences in career advancement between men and women. For the purpose of this article, we selected excerpts that are typical for the gendered dynamics of 'doing ambition'.

Our analysis of the interview material is inspired by a discursive psychological view of 'language-in-interaction' (Edwards, 1997; Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). According to this view, talking is considered acting or doing. The question is what people accomplish in talk. Anything people raise in dialogue or conversation is seen as a rhetorical positioning in a public debate (Shotter & Billig, 1998). An interview situation can likewise be seen as a dialogue between the interviewer and the interviewee, with the latter regarded as somebody who actively presents a certain

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8 A. M. Sools et al.

version of reality, both in response to, and anticipating, competing versions of reality. A speaker can implicitly or explicitly adopt or counter a certain version of reality or position in a debate, in what Van Langenhove and Harré (1999) refer to as 'reflexive positioning'. A discursive analysis looks upon the claims made in the interview situation as 'accounts' rather than as neutral or context-free answers (Edwards & Potter, 1992). In the following analysis, we will first focus on the dynamics of 'doing ambition' as discursive practice and on the patterns underlying this practice. Then, the differential demands for women 'doing ambition' will be discussed.

Analysis

The paradox of ambition

The interviewees were asked to imagine and describe an ambitious person. In the descriptions that were subsequently given, it was striking that most interviewees spontaneously made a distinction between two aspects of ambition. This was not a neutral distinction: a positive and a negative side were mentioned. In this section, we discuss the aspects of ambition that were distinguished and how the interviewees relate to them. Subsequently, we analyze what the effect of this positioning is. The man who has the floor in the following excerpt (respondent 2, abbreviated as R2) formulated his description quite carefully when asked by the interviewer to describe an ambitious person.

Excerpt 1

1. *Imagine an ambitious person. Describe that person.*
2. Brrr. (shudders with disgust) Ambitious?
3. Yes.
4. (.) er (takes a deep breath) Somebody who wants to learn things, I consider an ambitious person.
5. person.
6. *Mm. mm. Somebody who wants to learn things.*
7. Yes.
8. *Are there any other things?*
9. No, he (laughs).
10. *That is what ambition entails?*
11. It is for me. Er. . . So, that is, I myself see it as separate from getting on in in in hierarchical structures.
12. hierarchical structures.
13. *Mm. mm (.) erm.*
14. That's how I would define it.
15. *Mm. Yes. And in the company? How is an ambitious person looked upon then?*
16. (. . .) °How is an ambitious person looked upon in this company?° (. . .) somebody who actively thinks about what his next position will be.
17. actively thinks about what his next position will be.
18. *Mm. mm.*
19. These may be hierarchical considerations or er considerations of learning.
(Man, employed, middle-manager, R2)

The reaction 'Brrr' to the word *ambitious* opens up a world of meaning in which being ambitious is not a neutral stance. By reacting in this manner, the interviewee distances himself from ambition. He presents himself as 'somebody who wants to learn things' (line 4). Later on in the interview, he confirms that he is ambitious in this sense.

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'Doing ambition' 9

He emphasizes that this is his idea of ambition by first saying 'it is for me' (line 11) and 'I myself see' (line 11), and then 'that's how I would define it' (line 14). In this way, he takes issue with imaginary others for whom ambition means 'getting on in hierarchical structures' (lines 11 and 12). By distancing himself from this negative form of ambition, he manages both to formulate it and to avoid the impression that he himself is engaged in getting on. This effect, which is realized by the positioning *vis-à-vis* ambition, will be discussed again with reference to excerpts of other interviewees. The same interviewee answers the question 'Give a description of a quitter' as follows.

Excerpt 2

1. 'Ha, that's the idiot who's been at the same desk for years (laughs). The loser (laughs).
2. But that's the way they feel about it, of course. Someone who's been at the same desk
3. for years is really just an idiot.'

This excerpt helped us reject an alternative explanation of the careful discursive positioning in the first excerpt. First we thought this manager was maybe reluctant to speak. So his careful answering mode could be due to lack of trust or due to a personal answering style. But, in contrast to the question about an ambitious person he shows no hesitation in describing quitters as losers (this word is also used in Dutch); those who stay 'at the same desk for years', which could indicate a lack of upward mobility in their careers (see also excerpt 6) or a lack of learning.

Another difference with the preceding excerpt is that the respondent immediately relates a question about an ambitious person to himself, while being standoffish about the quitter. Then he presents this as something that is generally known by saying 'that's the way they feel about it, of course' and 'really just'. That getting on is the natural thing to do is implicit in this excerpt. This manager reacts not only against people who do not get on, but also, in the first excerpt, against people whose aim is to get on. That his ambivalent positioning is not unique to him, becomes clear by taking a closer look at the other interviews. The paradoxical attitude towards ambition also appears in the following excerpt, in which this time a female executive has the floor. She waits for quite a long time before answering the question about an ambitious person. She also indicates that she finds it a tough one. As in the first excerpt, care is taken when the subject of ambition comes up.

Excerpt 3

1. *Imagine an ambitious person. Describe that person.*
2. (. . . long pause) Yes, I think that's a very tough question, er
3. *Mm. mm.*
4. (.) because you yes, there are various gradations, you have ambitious people who er yes want to
5. get to the top as fast as possible.
6. *Mm. mm.*
7. But:: yes, I think there's also ambition in saying, well I just continuously want to see a great
8. challenge in my job.

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10 A. M. Sools et al.

9. *Mm. mm.*
10. And if that can be combined, it is of course the er 'the ultimate'. But er, I think this a very
11. tough one, I think, I think that the general picture in the case of an ambitious person is
12. that that someone just wants to move on as fast as possible to the very highest position that it is
13. possible for him or her to reach.
14. *Yes, that is the general picture, you say*
15. Yes
16. *And what is your own opinion about it?*
17. Yes, when I look at myself, I am also ambitious. I would also very much like to achieve
18. something. But that is more like well really showing them what you stand for. And, as a result,
19. growing and possibly (.) getting promotion.

(Woman, employed, middle-manager, R3)

This woman contrasts the general picture - which is presented when she talks about 'you have' - of the ambitious person who wants to get to the top as fast as possible (lines 4, 5) with her own idea of ambition - 'I think' (line 7) - which is continuously seeing enough challenge in the job. By presenting the combination of the two as 'the ultimate' (line 10, she uses the English word 'the ultimate'), she includes the negative form of ambition, showing implicitly that she considers it a desirable yet extreme option to gain rapid promotion. By using the phrase 'of course' (line 10), she shows how natural this difficult to reach ('but I think this is a tough one') normative ideal is. In view of her earlier positioning *vis-à-vis* people who want to get on as fast as possible, it is surprising that this aim should also be included in the ultimate target. Subsequently, she presents herself as somebody about whose ambitions we can have no doubt by emphasizing this twice using the word *also* in line 17. By following this decisive positioning with 'but that is more' (line 18), she modifies her own position towards ambition in relation to the general picture she has sketched of it. By the formulation 'I would also very much like to achieve something' (line 17), she carefully but decisively positions herself as ambitious. She discursively counters hierarchically oriented ambition with her own ambition that consists or 'showing what you stand for' (line 18). Both types of ambition are oriented at 'achieving something', but the goals differ. This manager can thus be seen as carefully negotiating a different, nonhierarchical career path. The picture she presents of herself is one in which gaining promotion is achieved as a side-effect. What she brings about by using the word *possibly* (line 19) is to show, albeit not primarily, that she is open to a higher position. This effect - showing that she is not after getting on, but also that she is not averse to it either - is reinforced by the short pause inserted after the word *possibly*.

This reflects the same paradoxical attitude of wanting to gain promotion, on the one hand, and of saying that you are not focussed on it, on the other. Prior to the next excerpt, the interviewee is asked to describe an ambitious person. He starts by saying 'Well, ambition is always a loaded word. So you have a negative side and a positive side.' First he describes the positive side, with which he identifies, and subsequently the negative side. The negative connotation of hierarchical ambition is toned down in various ways in the following excerpt.

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'Doing ambition' 11

Excerpt 4

1. A negative kind of ambition, I think, is when it is focussed on er moving higher up in the
2. organization. If it's about better wages or more prestige, er, though both better wages
3. and more prestige are all very well, but if these are your primary motives, then I think
4. that is a slightly negative version of ambition. Because then you're not focussing on self-
5. realization or something like that or er on simply doing your very best, but you're far
6. too focused on how people perceive you or something. My god, do I have a big car
7. parked in front or a bigger door in my house or a house that's bigger, etc. Oh well, er, though
8. this and it isn't always easy to separate these two things, [. . .] you notice that when you start
9. earning more and have more property, that you er have to be very careful not to get sucked into
10. this rat race and you know that, Christ, things can always be bigger. They can always be more
11. beautiful and I, well, what's the point. [. . .] So there's a thin line between these two types of
12. ambition, I think. [. . .] If they coincide er if the result coincides, it's fine, of course. [. . .] But er
13. but the negative version is also often focussed - is often at the expense of other people. A little,
14. so you first of all because you are always comparing yourself with other people so that doesn't
15. encourage everyone to make a joint effort to improve things. I mean, otherwise you couldn't
16. rise above it, of course.

(Man, employed, middle-manager R4)

This manager, too, distances himself from the kind of ambition that is mainly focussed on gaining promotion (lines 1-2). In lines 4-6, he renegotiates his own ambition as 'focused on self-realization', and 'doing your very best'. Elsewhere in the interview, he calls someone who is ambitious in the first described negative sense a *Streber*. This (German) word can be translated as 'careerist' but then it loses some of its negative connotation. By clearly positing this point of view and then pointing out the advantages of hierarchical ambition in a clause (2-3), he can show he is interested in gaining promotion without being troubled by the negative associations attached to the careerist. He waters down his first statement even further by saying he thinks it is 'a *slightly* negative version of ambition' (line 4). Then, in spite of his earlier negative representation, he proceeds to make hierarchical ambition understandable by representing the temptations of gaining promotion as an external force that 'sucks you in' (line 9). Being an outright careerist is thus placed outside the ambitious person's intention: such a person has not opted to do so but has given in to temptation.

Another negative side of ambition he mentions is that hierarchical ambition is often at the expense of other people (line 13). Interviewees also call this aspect 'jockeying for position' or 'letting no-one stand in one's way'. Interviewees often denounce people who work their way up by trampling on others. In the excerpt above, the manager tones

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12 A. M. Sools et al.

down this interpretation of ambition, which he considers to be negative, once again by saying that it is 'a little' (line 13) at the expense of other people before pointing out the inevitable competitive element.

Identifying possible advantages of gaining promotion legitimates the pursuit of a top position. By pointing out the enormous attractiveness of this rat race to amass material wealth, the pursuit of a top position becomes less of a choice and more of a happenstance. By representing the competitive element as a given and as inevitable, the perceived negative consequences of gaining a top position such as letting no-one stand in your way, are trivialized.

Explaining the ambivalence

It is becoming clear how ambition is represented in the organization's everyday practice. When managers are asked directly about their ambition, they do not provide clear-cut answers such as 'yes, I am ambitious' or 'no, I am not ambitious'. Managers do not deny they are ambitious; they rather negotiate their own way of 'doing ambition' and career making. They contrast their own ambition with a more general idea of ambition, which none of the interviewees personally identify with. Because *all* managers in our study present themselves in the same way by dissociating themselves from the general picture, this then becomes the norm. Painting such a general picture of the ambitious manager who is bent on gaining promotion allows managers to present their own ambition in more subtle ways. The various accounts they give mitigate the negative connotation of hierarchical ambition. This makes ambition less of a nasty word and facilitates the expression of being interested, though not too explicitly, in a better position. Such implicit expression of hierarchical ambition is mandatory, because managers who make the impression or explicitly acknowledge they do not want to be climbers are soon taken to be losers.

What do these managers accomplish by positioning and repositioning themselves towards ambition? Their ambivalent positioning can be explained by an underlying paradox. This is a pragmatic paradox (as compared to a logical or grammatical paradox), which means it is a paradox that arises in interaction (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). The paradoxical imperative underlying the ambivalence towards ambition is the following: *show that you want to gain promotion without showing you want to*. Managers who succeed in presenting themselves this way have successfully presented themselves as 'ambitious'. In the next section, we take a closer look at the stylization of ambition.

Doing ambition

The interviewee below explains how showing ambition actually takes place or what 'doing ambition' entails.

Excerpt 5

1. I think that if you're ambitious in your work, you show some commitment, some keenness
2. in your work. When a project has been rounded off or is approaching completion that you
3. show I want more, more, more. Bigger, seeing other things, I want to learn. [. . .]
But then this is

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'Doing ambition' 13

4. an attitude you display all day, every day again. And then you don't necessarily need to mention
5. this in an interview once or twice a year I want more, but you just feel that some want to go
6. further in their work and that others are fine the way they are.

(Man, employed, middle-manager, R12)

Being ambitious is described as an attitude of commitment that is always present (line 4). Another interviewee says it is his 'standard operating procedure'. It is important that others perceive this ceaseless commitment. The manager in the excerpt above reinforces the importance of such visibility by repeating 'you show' or 'you display' as much as three times (lines 1-4). He proceeds to explain how such perception takes place: identification of an ambitious person in terms of commitment does not take place in periodical performance interviews. What is more, the pejorative way in which he says that 'you don't *necessarily* need to *mention* this in an interview once or twice a year' (line 5) seems to be a rhetorical way of expressing that this is precisely the way *not* to show ambition; on the contrary, in the organization's everyday practice it is immediately apparent, through intuition and perception, who is ambitious and who is not. This would make identification of ambitious people a matter of feeling. Especially with matters of feeling, the danger of stereotype is immanent. By speaking in terms of '*you* feel' and '*you* see', he presents this course of affairs as having supra-personal, general validity. Perceiving ambition in others thus becomes a self-evident process: it is self-evident who does and who does not belong to the category of ambitious people.

The paradox that emerges again is that although it is considered to be obvious who has ambition and who has not, it is far from obvious what precisely makes someone appear as ambitious in the eyes of others. Ambition is something that needs to be displayed or demonstrated rather than claimed. It is a matter of *showing*, not telling. This raises an intriguing question: how does one show or demonstrate something that is considered to be obvious, something 'you just feel' (line 5)? Or to put the question in a more ethnomethodological format: what are the resources or competences that allow a participant in the organization to display ambition as a 'matter of course'?

Something all managers seem to agree upon is the importance of showing 'drive', 'keenness', or 'eagerness'. The importance of showing 'drive' as indicative for ambition becomes clear in how managers talk about the *absence* of drive.

Excerpt 6

1. *So what is a drop-out, then?*
2. A drop-out, oh well, there are plenty of those, people who have been around for years and er
3. just have a job and come to the office every day. [. . .] I don't mean that you should work long
4. hours or something, not at all. On the contrary, I'm very much opposed to a macho kind of
5. culture that says that working long hours is an OK thing or something [. . .] I think drop-outs are

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14 A. M. Sools et al.

6. people who just don't have any ambition at all. Cause that's what it is. There are plenty of
7. those.

(Man, employee, middle-manager, R4)

The question about drop-outs is followed by the remark 'oh well, there are plenty of those' (line 2 and repeated in line 6-7). The ironic use of the word 'plenty' (rather than 'a lot') combined with the use of the indexical 'those' not only creates the effect of depicting 'drop-outs' all being the same, but also evokes the impression that everyone knows who they are. Simultaneously the repeated use of 'oh well' (line 2 and 6) presents drop-outs as just a fact of life, something with which one will have to live. Furthermore, the word 'just' (line 6) expresses casualness in calling certain *others* drop-outs and thus signals that he himself sides with the successful ones. Then he mentions an abstract 'macho kind of *culture*' (line 4) which does not necessarily mean that he is making a stand against working long hours. So why does he mention this? And how is this related to his next remark about drop-outs as people who 'just have a job' (lines 2, 3) and 'don't have any ambition at all' (line 6)? The following excerpt points to a similar theme.

Excerpt 7

1. *Someone who drops out, how would you describe such a person?*
2. Well, you can drop out in a variety of ways, because the job doesn't hold out any challenge
3. anymore, that's one, and another one, well, I feel that people also drop out, even if they're
4. physically present, if they just do their work and do it the way they're supposed to do it,
5. but fail to make that extra effort, which I very much like to see. And this doesn't mean
6. eh working 42 hours a week, you know, don't get me wrong, but this is about extra drive,
7. motivation, to just perform well.

(Woman, employee, middle-manager, R3)

This woman distinguishes two kinds of drop-outs: first, those who drop out because the company does not hold out any further challenge for them and, second, those who lack commitment in their work and do not go beyond the call of duty (lines 4 and 5). People in the first category are not drop-outs in the negative sense of the word: they are not losers but purposely opt to leave the company. Another way of dropping out is represented as undesirable by this woman. As in the previous excerpt, this woman also contrasts her own view to the general picture of a drop-out by saying '*I feel that people also drop out*' (line 3).

We gain a further insight in the paradoxical nature of 'doing ambition' in the next line. Drop-outs are again portrayed as people who 'just do their work' and moreover as people who do it 'in the way they are supposed to do it' (line 4). In order to demonstrate ambition, however, one is supposed to do *more* than one is supposed to do, 'to make that extra effort' (line 5). By adding 'which I very much like to see' (line 5) this woman profiles herself as someone who likes to make that extra effort. This is how she distinguishes

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'Doing ambition' 15

herself from those who do their work without inspiration and at the same time demonstrates that she belongs to those who do have inspiration: the successful ones.

What is striking in excerpts 6 and 7 is that both respondents make so much effort in distancing themselves from a direct relation between ambition and number of hours worked. In the words of respondent in excerpt 6: 'I don't mean that you should work long hours (. . .) I'm very much opposed to a macho kind of culture that says that working long hours is an OK thing' (lines 3-5). The respondent in excerpt 7 also emphasizes ('don't get me wrong', line 6) that the 'extra effort' or 'drive' that is missing in losers, is 'not about working 42 hours a week' (line 6). The positioning against working long hours is understandable against a taken-for-granted practice or belief that working hours *is* seen as a prerequisite for success. However, this positioning can become less straightforward when a manager tries to reconcile possibly contradictory positions, as we will see in the next excerpts.

The magical disappearance of ambition

By now, it has been stressed several times that, in order to come across as ambitious, the thing to do is to show drive or enthusiasm. Yet ambition is often linked to the number of hours worked, which in turn tends to be linked to motherhood. The woman in the next excerpt reacts against the practice in which having a child automatically entails working part-time. Underlying this is the implicit assumption that working part-time is an indication of a lack of ambition. This type of anticipation to what can be considered a dominant discourse about women's ambition that is responded to by both men and women in the organization, can be incorporated in a not so straightforward way, as the next excerpt indicates.

Excerpt 8

1. You look at yourself in a certain way. Look, before I had a child, when I was still working full-
2. time, then yes, you're ambitious, you work long hours and you show enormous commitment of
3. course. After my daughter's birth, I started working part-time, and then your commitment is still
4. strong, only you feel that it's quite a bit less of course, because it's 'only' (using the nonverbal
5. sign of putting a word between brackets) part-time, and I must say, I don't know whether it's
6. still the case, but that's very much how it was experienced. Like, she's now working part-time,
7. so she is probably less eager now. In any case, she's a lot less ambitious.

(Woman, ex-employee, freelance consultant, R10)

By using the words 'of course' (lines 2, 3 and 4), this woman makes it sound perfectly obvious that when she started working part-time, she showed less commitment than when she was still working full-time. Then she assigns a lower assessment to working part-time by saying that it's 'only' part-time (line 4). The association between working part-time and a lack of ambition is presented as generally valid by speaking in the third person about 'it' was perceived: '*she* is a lot less ambitious' (line 7). The use of the third

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16 A. M. Sools et al.

person pronoun 'she' seems in marked contrast with her initial contention that it is about how 'you look at *yourself* in a certain way' (line 1, italics added). Notice, however, that the use of 'you' rather than 'I' already serves to present her case as one that is more generally valid. By subsequently changing to 'she' a hardly noticeable shift is made from how this woman presents looking at herself to how she perceives being seen by others. This excerpt demonstrates how a woman manager juggles with maintaining simultaneously an identity as ambitious manager *and* mother. However, both positions are only partly reconciled in her identification with a discourse about ambition as drive or commitment. This connection between ambition and commitment only partially succeeds in breaking down the connection between ambition, motherhood and number of hours worked. In trying to break down the connection, it is also reproduced:

Excerpt 9

I have a child, but as I am ambitious, I do not want to work part-time.

(Woman, employed, middle-manager, R6)

The interviewees make a distinction between working part-time on account of an additional job and working part-time on account of a care task. In the latter case, the price of part-time work is high: one is labelled as a quitter. This may explain the struggle of men and women who are seeking the right balance between work and care, not only in terms of time devoted to either, but also partly at a psychological level. That the clash observed between the two domains may have a psychological component is also suggested by the following excerpt. The excerpt is illustrative of the discourse about women and ambition as evidenced in the interviews. In addition, the male manager makes it seem as if it has general validity.

Excerpt 10

1. You only notice that er with young women, the career er commitment vanishes into thin air
2. the moment children arrive. And that is simply because their interest at that moment is in a
3. totally different area. And that does not mean that as a result it is completely removed, that
4. career drive, but it does come to quite a standstill. And not just because there is a child, but also
5. because the mind set has changed (. . .).
6. *And the same does not go for men?*
7. Not as far as I've noticed. (.) It is true that there is a more conscious er emphasis like, what am I
8. doing in my work, and how do I redress the balance between privacy and work, so more
9. attention for the surroundings. And more attention for the home. But you see, with women it is
10. quite striking how that changes and that's a fact. The question is only when would you be able
11. to pick it up where you left off.

(Man, employed, HR-manager 13)

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'Doing ambition' 17

This man claims that 'with young women' the commitment to make a career 'vanishes into thin air the moment children arrive' (lines 1, 2). He presents this state of affairs as taken for granted. It is common sense that women, as soon as they have children, are turned into mothers, but not men into fathers. By presenting the solution as a trifle, as evidenced by 'the question is only' in line 10, this man trivializes the problem.

What is also striking is that he is talking about '*young* women'. It is precisely young women who are looked upon as a risk factor because they are the age to have children. At the same time, especially young people qualify for jobs with prospects, for fast and steep career curves. If you start your career at 40, you're too late. But because of the risk, young women are not seen as potential climbers. This results in the paradoxical situation that a woman has to be young to have a career and at the same time must have passed the age of 40 to escape the generalization that she is bound to have children and lose all interest in her career.

Double bind

The automatic assumption of managers in this organization that women are likely to get married, have children, want part-time jobs and so drop out can have various adverse effects on women, as we will see below. The excerpt below shows how hard it is for women to escape this generalization.

Excerpt 11

1. *Do you think men and women have equal opportunities to reach top positions?*
2. Er er (negative)
3. *No?*
4. No. [. . .] Unless, you could prove that you are never going to have any children (laughs). That's
5. why I think ja.
6. *You think that because women are supposed to have children*
7. No, because they think they will have children, they become emotionally so dependent on the
8. family, that they not going to work any more as they did before.
9. *Mm.mm. So you think only when women can prove that's not going to happen,*
10. (Laughs). They could, but nobody is going to ask for that proof, right.
11. *So, it's not an option then.*
12. Are you sterilized? (laughs). No it's not an option. Because if you would come with a form or a
13. statificate² from the doctor, she is sterilized, then the men would be offended. So
14. you can never do it, if you're fifty maybe. Then you have a child but then ja, ja, too old for Enir,
15. not for being a woman but.
16. *They would be offended?*
17. Yes, that you, because then you imply that they think of that they wouldn't give

² This excerpt is in the original English text taken from an interview conducted in English by a Dutch interviewer and German interviewee.

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18 A. M. Sools et al.

you the same

18. chance. That's why. They always (unintelligible) they have the same chance, but I don't think

19. they do.

(Woman, employee, middle-manager, R6)

In this excerpt, the female manager introduces a hypothetical situation in which women and men would presumably have equal opportunities to reach top positions. By using the second and third person speech, she establishes a general validity of her description. In order to make equal opportunities possible, women would have to overcome stereotyped expectation ('they think', line 7) by proving that they will never have children (line 4). The question *who* would presumably hold these stereotypes remains as yet implicit, but becomes further articulated when the nature of this proof comes up. By laughing at the suggestion of producing such proof (lines 10 and 12) 'no-one is going to ask for that proof, right?' (line 10) and 'Are you sterilized? (laughs) No, it's not an option', she reinstates the boundaries of normality that are breached by the hypothetical situation she proposed (cf. Bruner, 1986, 1990). Although this woman manager is actively engaged in discursively pushing the boundaries of normality, she ends up smoothing the breach of normality she herself initiated. This example makes visible the complex interplay between the reflexive positioning (Van Langenhove & Harré, 1999) of an individual female manager who sees herself positioned in an organizational context where the 'men would be offended'.

The 'proof' that would be required could never be given, because 'the men would be offended' (line 13). The word 'the' in 'the men' has the rhetorical effect of implicating all men, men as group and thus contributes to the inevitability of the paradox. This inevitability is further reinforced by the assertion that 'it's not an option (line 12) and that 'you can never do it' (line 13-14) and by her laughter at her own suggestion of producing such evidence. Thus, this woman presents herself and other women as caught in a double bind, a pragmatic paradox from which there can be no escape.

The double bind presented here is structurally similar to the paradox of ambition identified earlier in this paper. In both cases there is at the same time a requirement to show unambiguous ambition and a prohibition to make one's ambition too explicit. However, the tacit assumption that women are predisposed to have children and consequently lose their ambition, makes this paradoxical demand all the more pernicious for women. Although this assumption is presented by several women as one particularly held by 'the men', the accounts of female managers in our research show that women themselves are not immune to this stereotyped expectation. This is evident not only in the expressed ambivalence around part-time work, but also in the way the stereotype is presented by women as part of the way they have come to look at themselves (excerpt 8).

Conclusions and discussion

The aim of this study was to obtain more insight into the tenaciousness of the underrepresentation of women in the higher echelons of management, in general, and the total absence of women in the top positions of Enir in particular. To achieve this aim, we analyzed the discourse on career making and especially on ambition in this organization. We have chosen an ethnomethodologically informed discursive approach that is centrally concerned with dynamic rhetorical positioning and 'membership competences'. By attempting to uncover 'hidden' or 'underlying' patterns in the

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'Doing ambition' 19

discursive accounts of our interviewees, we also tried to avoid the pitfalls of an overly relativist constructivism. The problem of the 'glass ceiling' for women in management demands explanation and not merely a nonconsequential analysis of discursive 'versions' of reality.

We have shown that the ambivalence both men and women demonstrate is not just a matter of definition. On the contrary, 'doing ambition' in the culturally 'right' way, described in terms of an underlying mechanism we called 'the paradox of ambition' is difficult for both men and women. On the basis of this paradox, we understand better what is required for managers to be successful at 'doing ambition'. To make visible the difficulties (wo)men encounter when 'doing ambition', we then identified a double bind that seems to be unique for women's position in management. Women get stuck in this double bind situation when 'doing ambition' because of a taken-for-granted discourse on the magical disappearance of ambition.

Gendered paradoxes in career practices

Several authors argue that the position of women in management is inherently paradoxical. As put forward in the introduction, social role theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) posits that the female gender role and the leader role are (in most contexts) inconsistent. When women act according to leader role prescriptions (that are typically masculine, cf. Schein, 2001), they violate gender role prescriptions and consequently face discrimination (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Similarly, when female managers adhere to female gender role prescriptions, they are not seen as a 'proper' leader (Eagly & Karau, 2002), suitable for promotion to top leadership positions (van Engen & Vinkenbug, 2005).

Our data suggest that discourse around career strategies and ambition is no less paradoxical. However, we think that a discursive and action-oriented approach may cast a new light on the question of how such paradoxes become an intimate part of women's own aspirations and why they are so impervious to reflection and critical evaluation. We propose that the unease some (wo)men experience in demonstrating their career drive and ambition can be understood as arising as a consequence of the paradoxical demands of 'doing ambition'.

Normalization of the double bind

The concept of a 'double bind' was introduced by Bateson (see Bateson, 1972) and by Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967). Crucial in their argument is that double binds usually go unnoticed, because of the impossibility of the participants to address the nature of the paradoxical demands by means of meta-communication. Double binds emerge in the context of power or dependency relations, when the 'victim' is confronted with two negative, yet contradictory injunctions, as characterized by the double imperative 'damned if you do, damned if you don't' and a third negative injunction that prohibits her to escape the situation. Ignoring or denying the contradictory nature of the demands then becomes one of the few ways that are left open.

Our interviewees seem articulate as far as their experience in the organization is concerned, but they are unable to step outside the dominant modes of discourse within the organization. Although we have talked about the competence of 'doing ambition', it is important to realize that this inability does not necessarily indicate a lack of competence on the side of individual managers. Competence was defined by us in terms

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20 A. M. Sools et al.

of the way members constitute their membership of a social group. Ironically, it is precisely their competence to express themselves in terms of the dominant discourse of the organization that keeps them (particularly women) caught up in the double bind. This differential outcome for men and women in discursively dealing with the paradox, can be illustrated by returning to the analysis of excerpts 1, 3, 4 and 8. Whereas the men (excerpts 1 and 4) distance themselves from ambition, the women (excerpts 3 and 8) carefully but decisively position themselves as ambitious. We would argue that the men are anticipating being perceived as hierarchically ambitious, but they do not require to make their ambition explicit. The women on the other hand have the double task to counter both the assumption that they lack ambition, and at the same time have to counter being perceived to 'do ambition' in the 'wrong' hierarchical way. Illustrative is how the woman in excerpt 3 inevitably manoeuvres herself into the position of 'doing ambition' in the 'wrong' too explicit way, which might result in being perceived as 'Streber'. This example shows how 'doing ambition' is not a matter of individual capacities, but truly a double bind, that arises in gendered interactional processes.

This situation is further complicated by discursive strategies employed to normalize gender inequalities. These inequalities - although often perceived and condemned - are seen as unavoidable and caused by external forces rather than by policies and decisions made by individuals in the organization. Examples of such externalizing accounts for perceived inequality were observed, among others, by Acker (1990, 1992), Benschop *et al.* (2001), Collinson and Hearn (2000) and Doorewaard *et al.* (1997). The statement that women's ambition will *inevitably* disappear once they have children is an example of such an externalization. Other examples from our own data are frequent references to statistics or classical role patterns in society, and statements like 'arguments, not gender should settle the matter', 'it is a typical Dutch situation', 'this is a historical development', 'this is just the way it is, the culture is the same in all companies' and 'there is nothing you can do about it, whether you like it or not'.

Externalization accounts serve to normalize the situation, even where the situation is perceived as wrong or unfair. They further reinforce the impossibility for meta-communication and thus of the possibility of critiquing social wrongs in the organization. Moreover, the effect of putting forward such arguments is that the possibility is precluded that the women in this organization do not get the same opportunities as the men because of a conscious difference in treatment. Finally, placing the cause of the inequality outside the scope of their own action does not encourage members of the organization to take an active stance in changing the situation. Thus, externalization accounts contribute to the further production and reproduction of the gender inequalities in this organization.

Negotiating 'new' careers: Doublethink or double bind?

Managers' accounts of ambition and getting on in the organization, as analyzed in this article, open up an interesting new perspective on the possibility for the development of 'new' careers that break through traditional gender inequalities. From our data it becomes clear that gender inequalities in the organization are acknowledged and normalized at the same time. El-Sawad *et al.* (2004) have proposed that in their actual accounts people may often be contradictory without these contradictions ever becoming the subject of reflection. If there are indeed profound paradoxes underlying organizational discourse, as we propose, these contradictions should come as no surprise. El-Sawad *et al.* put forward that

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'Doing ambition' 21

'doublethink' may well be an essential skill in the practice of doing career, since it facilitates the required political manoeuvring, while simultaneously denying the process as political. Their conclusion has certainly a close affinity with our own, as it acknowledges that even the highly articulate managers in studies such as ours may not be primarily motivated by a need to create consistency in their accounts. However, in our view the problem with their interpretation is that it neglects that the denial of the political nature of 'doing career' may be precisely what maintains the double bind for women in management. Again we are confronted with the paradox that women's competences may in the end also be conducive to the persistence of the glass ceiling. More in general it can be argued that problemizing paradoxical situations can itself 'lead to dilemmas that are hard to reconcile' (Bicknell & Liefoghe, 2006).

By approaching the accounts of our interviewees from an action perspective, as performances in a social realm, we were able to analyse the problem as one of a discursive and communicative nature, rather than as a problem of individual skills or intentions. In our view, such an analysis is required both to understand the mechanisms involved in the reproduction of gender differentials and to find solutions without casting blame on either individual managers or on the organization as a whole. We propose that what makes women hit a glass ceiling in their career perspectives is not a lack of skills or drive, but their success in maintaining a corporate discourse that can only help them get on to a limited extent. El-Sawad *et al.* (2004) raise the question how doublethink can be largely outside awareness and yet often strategically directed at the advancement of personal careers and their answer is one in terms of what Bargh and Chartrand (1999) have called 'the automaticity of everyday life'. Without denying the potential importance of conscious and unconscious cognitive mechanisms, we offer an alternative explanation by focussing on social performances and competences in the context of an organizational discourse. Making a career may both be facilitated and limited by one's competences to constitute one's membership of the organization. In fact, the competences that may help a male manager get on in the organization may work to the contrary if embodied in a female worker. The managers in this study discursively (re)negotiate their own ambition in terms of keenness, drive, learning, showing what you stand for, achieving goals, facing challenges and self-realization. However, their possibility to develop 'new' careers may well be dependent on the ability of the organization to sufficiently facilitate the meta-discourse required to break through the paradoxical demands and stereotypes of the organization itself. These tenacious, stereotypical expectations, which, for that matter, have already been described by Kanter in 1977, concern both men and women. Kanter believes that the observation that men are more reliable, more dedicated, more predictable and free from conflicting home and work loyalties causes 'men managers [to] reproduce themselves in kind' (see also Liff & Ward, 2001). This reproduction of 'male kind' managers has not only detrimental effects on women's space to 'do ambition', but also on men's space to negotiate alternative identities. Not all men live up to the scenario destined for them: they also do not constitute a homogeneous group (Collinson & Hearn, 2000; Wajcman, 1998).

Putting the paradox at work: Doing ambition differently?

There are no easy solutions, as Wajcman (1998) concludes when discussing the role of power distributions in organizations and within the family. As we have argued, it is not a

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22 A. M. Sools et al.

simple matter of individual managers distributing their loyalty over work and family. The development of new careers and a more equal power distribution can only be effective when attempts by men and women to negotiate different ways of 'doing ambition' are supported by the family context and embedded in the organization. How employees balance work/nonwork demands should be a shared responsibility of both 'the organization' and its employees. For instance, organizational practices and policies concerning performance rewards, promotion opportunities and pay should incorporate how work and outside work responsibilities (e.g. children, care of older relatives) are balanced (see also Maniero & Sullivan, 2005).

Given the importance of meta-communication it seems of obvious importance that organizations deliberately cultivate a critical and self-reflective discourse. Recognizing conflicts and contradictions within the organization can be seen as a potential source of corporate growth and development. However, even when critical reflection is made into a cornerstone of corporate strategy, this might not automatically result in self-reflective everyday practices. It is important to realize that corporate discourse is itself part of the practices it may reflect on. As argued, this is precisely what gives rise to pragmatic paradoxes and what makes these paradoxes so resistant against change. The paradox of ambition may potentially become a source of renewed perspectives on what it means for both men and women to make a career. However, it will become so only if stakeholders of organizations are genuinely willing to give up some of their most deeply shared presuppositions.

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'Doing ambition' 23

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