

English summary

Introduction

Most organisations employ both women and men. Still, gender is often seen as something irrelevant in the everyday life of organisations. Gender is not being highlighted in the daily, gender neutral work – it is difficult to express gender related problems when there is no natural language available (Czarniawska, 1994b). Discussing gender and coping with it is seen as an insult to the integrity of individuals.

There are probably many reasons why gender is not registered in organisations. One important reason might be that, for a considerable period, organisation theory has been totally gender blind. The scholars of organisation theory have been male who have been writing for business leaders who often have been male. This unconsciousness concerning gender has had an injurious influence on how research areas and theories have been formulated. The picture of organisations as gender neutral is both misleading and insufficient (Wahl, 1994).

This qualitative research project aims to study how gender is organising activity in the everyday life of organisations and how gender is constructed in this context as well as which regularities direct these processes. Over different research projects, I have noticed that gender is being constructed in similar ways in very different organisations and I would like to search for explanations for this stability in the construction process. To obtain answers to my questions, I decided to turn to the professionals that most likely cope with these kinds of issues – these are the human resource managers or human resource executives. (In the following text I will call them HR-leaders). The aim of this study is, accordingly, to describe how gender is being constructed from the point of view of HR-leaders. I assume that there is some kind of a local gender order directing the construction process and my aim is also to search for details in this order. I employ new institutional theory and institutional pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, 1995) as tools to help me explain the stability in the construction process.

A theoretical frame of reference

The aim of this work is to describe how gender is constructed in organisations from the point of view of HR-leaders and how different factors affect this construction process. Important components in the theoretical framework will be theories of gender order and construction of gender, institutional pressures affecting the construction process and social actors in action.

Construction of gender and gender order

In many works, the term construction of gender is used as a concept on an abstract level in the sense of constructing gender as structural differences; for example as numbers and/or positions (Kanter 1977, Wahl, 1992). In this work, I have chosen to shift the concept of construction of gender to a more practical level and consider construction of gender to be the process in which every individual is constantly involved – collaborating in gender constructing processes, consciously or unconsciously, creating or recreating gender (Eriksson, 2000).

The concept of gender order has undergone a similar enlargement during recent years. Earlier, concepts such as gender order primarily illustrated concepts on a more abstract societal level (for example Harding, 1986, Hirdman, 1988) but lately the concept of gender order has been used on an organisational level depicting the local, social order that conducts the gender construction process of the respective organisation (Eriksson, 2000, Wahl et al, 2001).

Institutional pressures

There are three types of institutional pressures; coercive, normative and mimetic pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, 1995). I have chosen to operationalise these three types of pressures in the following way:

Coercive pressure in this study will take the form of the Finnish Equality Act as the most imperative tool influencing how individuals construct gender.

Normative pressure could be described as influence from professional organisations on the gender construction process in organisation. The most obvious operationalisation of this category is the professional organisation of the Finnish HR-leaders – an association called Henry.r.y.

Mimetic pressure will be operationalised in the form of two opposite models; the diversity model and the gender blind model.

Social actors

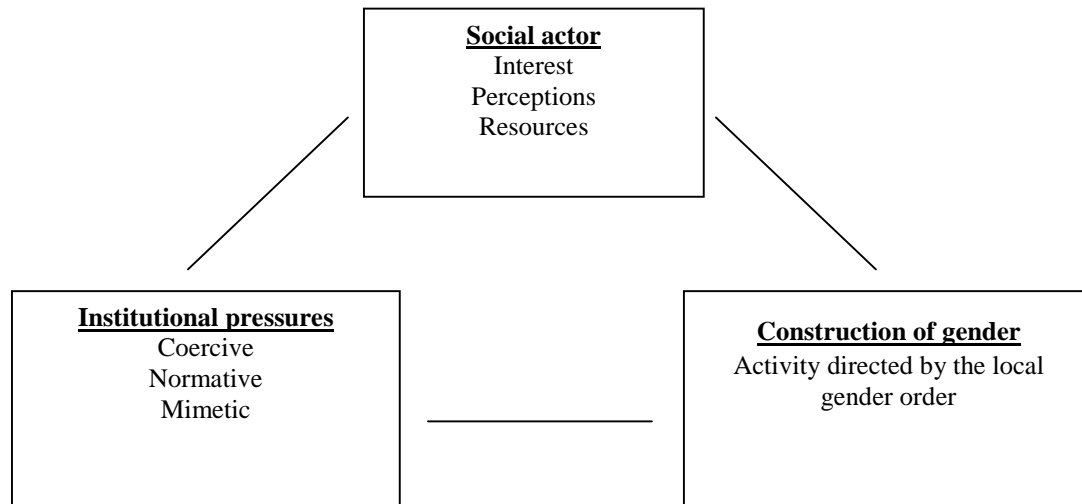
I have chosen the social actor approach to get close to my interviewees (Sandberg, 1982, 1995, Bäckström & Sandberg, 1996). During the interviews I discussed several issues concerning gender construction and in my analyses I have focused on whether these individuals are interested in issues connected to gender, on the interviewees' perceptions of gender representations and what resources these leaders access in order to influence how gender is constructed.

The theoretical model of the study

The model that influences how gender is constructed in each organisation will be called the local gender order. This model will emerge in interactions between social actors in the organisation. This bargaining and these negotiations over the local gender order will be affected by several factors; for example by the dominating gender order on a society level but also by how other similar corporations are organised according to new institutional theory.

The model I will be using in the analysis could be described as follows: the main research question in the centre of the picture surrounded by appropriate theoretical islands:

Why is gender constructed in similar ways in different organisations?



The model of the study

The central parts in this study will be the interviewees, the social actors, and their experiences of gender construction, which is directed by the local gender order in respective organisations and how different kinds of institutional pressures affect this process.

On methodological issues

This study is an example of qualitative research with a social constructionist view of how reality is constructed (Berger & Luckmann, [1967], 1998, Sandberg, 1999). This is also a work with a feminist approach or, to be more exact, with a gender approach (Alvesson & Billing, 1997). I started this project with an inductive research strategy but during the process this study design has turned into a sort of abductive study (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 1994).

From the population of HR-leaders I have chosen 14 informants; 8 female and 6 male informants from various lines of business, representing different age groups, levels of education etc. I started the investigation with an inductive design and interviews seemed to be an efficient method for collecting data. My aim was to take part in the everyday life of the interviewees by listening to their stories. The

interviews have been supplemented with observation protocols that were put down in writing directly after each interview. These different types of texts were later transcribed and coded into QSR Nud*ist, computer software used as a tool in the analysis of the study.

The first stage of the analysis was the listening phase in which I let the material speak for itself. Based on these first superficial results, I chose certain directions and emphases, for example the areas in which gender is constructed most clearly are the selection process, the distribution of tasks and social intercourse.

During the second stage of the analysis of these stories, I investigated the gender construction process by studying the social actors' interest in how gender is constructed, how they are representing gender and what resources they have at their disposal in influencing the gender construction process (Sandberg, 1982, Sandberg, 1995, Bäckström & Sandberg, 1996). At the next stage of the analysis of these stories, I investigated signs on how institutional pressures affect HR-leaders in their gender construction process and at the same time I sought common characteristics of a superior gender order.

Construction of gender

In the first part of the main analyses, I have discussed how HR-leaders construct gender by studying their interest in gender issues, their perceptions of how gender is constructed and their resources for influencing this process.

INTEREST

I have noted that there is considerable interest in gender related issues on the private level that are dependent upon circumstances during childhood and adolescence, especially among women who are mothers. Women without children and most of the male informants, fathers as well as non-fathers, seem to have no outspoken interest in how gender is being constructed. When it comes to experiences of gender discrimination as a reason for a personal interest in gender construction, almost all women have experiences of being discriminated against and this seems to activate their interest. Most of the male interviewees are aware that discrimination occurs but have no further motivation to take action to correct this unsatisfactory state of things.

When it comes to professional interest in how gender is constructed, the female interviewees show a greater interest for facilitating the reproduction process for their employees. Most men consider this phase as something of a necessary evil. When considering gender as a resource, most of the female informants see gender as a resource in certain situations. Very few considered male gender to be a resource; male gender is "the normal" in management and nobody registers masculinity as a resource.

On the other hand, almost all consider female gender (femininity) to be a resource in organisations. Women are deviants from the male norm and can therefore be considered as a resource on certain occasions.

PERCEPTIONS

Perceptions on how gender is being constructed occur especially frequently in three areas: in the selection of personnel (external and internal recruitment), in the distribution of tasks and in social intercourse.

RECRUITMENT. As far as the selection of personnel is concerned, gender becomes important as a category that entitles one to certain types of tasks or to elevated positions in the hierarchy. A segregated recruitment base serves as a restricting factor – most of the male informants are of the opinion that there are not enough women with technical training. This is the reason why there are so few female leaders – the top management is usually recruited from the technical sector.

Another factor that is affecting selection processes is the fact that it is common that the management choose a successor similar to the former employee, who was very often a man when management positions are concerned. This kind of filtering process will also segregate women and men.

There is also a third type of segregation keeping women and men apart. The requirements are usually raised when recruiting women to top positions. Women are expected to be more educated and to possess far more additional merits and these demands are visible among the informants: the female informants usually have more than one academic degree or post graduate training qualification.

DISTRIBUTION OF TASKS Segregation is also present in how tasks are distributed in the organisations: vertical as well as horizontal segregation. Female and male employees are doing different jobs on different levels of the hierarchy.

There are also differences in how the work of women and men is evaluated: male employees generally receive higher salaries than female employees and those

lines of business that are dominated by men are usually held in higher esteem and this appreciation is also visible in salary statistics (Statistikcentralen, 2001).

Biological predestination means that roles in the reproduction process put women and men into different positions on the labour market, which affects recruitment selection. Women are seen as a potential threat because of possible future motherhood and this fact will be an obstacle to a management career.

SOCIAL INTERCOURSE There are also perceptions on how gender is constructed in interaction between people in organisations. Homosociality, which means that people prefer to associate with people of their own sex, seems to occur more frequently among the male informants but can sometimes also be found among women.

Sexuality also segregates in this sample. Heterosexual roles affect social intercourse between men and women. Most male interviewees and several women consider men to be the dominating sex by law of nature; the man is the hunter.

Women are usually in a minority in management in the companies considered in the study. It is possible to distinguish several different strategies to cope with this minority position among women in this sample.

RESOURCES

Desire, knowledge and power are those three resources that emerge most distinctly in the data. When it comes to the question whether or not to influence how gender is constructed, all women + one man are favourably disposed to the idea. The majority of the male informants have no interest in affecting this process and this will probably lead to these people constructing gender according to a traditional model henceforth.

Six of the informants have some kind of knowledge of how gender is constructed in organisations: four of them have formal knowledge, two of these are women, two are men.

Power to influence how gender is being constructed is lacking. Only three of the informants – two women and one man – experience having the power to directly influence these issues but most of the HR-leaders still have considerable informal power, that they could use in recruitment processes or in regard to work appraisal.

It is possible to observe a dividing line differentiating the sexes in these results. Men and women seem to be segregated both regarding functions as well as hierarchies in the companies. Probably, as a consequence, women and men also construct gender in differing ways. Men construct gender according to traditional

patterns – except for one man who often constructs gender in a way that drastically differs from the prevailing gender order. Women, however, strive to adopt alternative patterns, that is, they try to influence the prevailing gender order to change. There seem to be an evident diversity between the sexes – female gender is constructed in different way from male gender.

This brings an issue to the fore that every now and then reoccurs in gender research (Wahl, 1996, Wahl et al, 2001): What is the reason for the fact that gender is constructed in differing ways? Is it a question of essence or conditions? In this context I would like to agree with Wahl et al (2001) that it is important to separate everyday descriptions of differences between sexes in the stories of the informants from the interpretation made by researchers. The everyday perceptions often explain differences between sexes in essence, while most of the researchers explain differences as disparity in conditions. These two diverging points of view lead to different explanations for the given order: according to everyday apprehensions of differences between sexes as something natural and normal as opposed to the researchers' interpretations of differences as a result of the dominating gender order (Wahl et al, 2001).

Institutional pressures in gender construction

In this chapter I will discuss three ways of affecting this process from a social point of view by using institutional pressures. In chapter 8 I have analysed and interpreted how institutional pressures affect construction of gender. I have studied how coercive pressure, normative pressure and mimetic pressure affect the informants in their gender construction.

I have operationalised coercive pressure as The Finnish Equality Act and analysed how this law influences construction of gender. The results show that this law has a very limited effect on how gender is being constructed in these organisations. The few positive effects could be categorised as support, endorsement and justification of women's demands for better conditions in working life. The Equality Act has no direct effects on the everyday life in the companies. None of the 14 participating organisations have an updated equality plan, that is, the most important tool that the Equality Act provides the companies with in the work for a more widespread equality between sexes.

In this study normative pressure is operationalised as influence from professional organisations like educational institutions, professional networks and filtering in recruitment. Because there is no vocational training alternative for HR-leaders in Finland at the moment that variable has been dropped. There are some professional networks with limited influence on how gender is constructed among their members. Filtering in recruitment refers to the way HR-leaders sort out prospective aspirants to the profession but as HR-leadership is not yet seen as a profession in Finland this variable has also been dropped. There are probably normative pressures but I cannot trace them using this method.

As mimetic pressure I have chosen to use two models that actually are the opposite of each other: the diversity program and the gender blind model. I have elevated the diversity program as a conceivable method to correct many problems concerning construction of gender. Even if I visualized the diversity program as being one effective tool in helping companies to cope with these kinds of problems, none of the organisations has shown any interest in this model.

The second model is, on the contrary, quite a good description of how gender is being constructed in contemporary Finnish business life. The gender blind model could be seen as the core element in the universal gender order that directs how gender is constructed in these companies. This model presents a pattern for handling sex and gender that companies have copied from each other. According to New Institutional Theory, companies are dependent upon obtaining legitimacy from their environment and the gender blind model has offered a safe alternative for most of the organisations.

The gender blind model seems to function as an isomorphic gender order in business life: it is according to this model that gender is constructed in the everyday life of business organisations. The gender blind model avoids problemizing gender in organisations, which leads to the situation where neither the over-representation of men in the management (where men are the invisible sex) nor the inequality concerning opportunities for women and men are brought to the fore. The conclusion to this cannot be anything other than that there are no efficient methods to influence these processes.