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Negotiating Selves: Gender

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Organizing in Action Nets



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Abstract

This paper suggests a way of framing gender production in workplaces as a negotiation with varying results. The basis for such a frame is a combination of the notions of "positioning" (the discursive production of selves, as suggested by Davies and Harré, 1990), "doing gender" (gender as an accomplishment, an achieved property of situated conduct: West and Zimmerman, 1987), "negotiation of identities" (which take place when positioning is contested: Pavlenko and Blackledge, 2004) and "coercive gendering" (ascribing gender to people through discriminatory action: Czarniawska, 2006). One could then distinguish a self-positioning from an attributive positioning and observe their interplay. Using examples from the field, the paper then reviews varying outcomes of such negotiations in workplaces. Although the examples start with gender, the same frame can be successively applied to various instances of intersectionality.

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[They] are pigeonholed, labeled, and they will be judged by how true they are to their labels (of course, that and that alone is what's emphatically called "being true to oneself")
(Milan Kundera, *Ignorance*, 2002: 204)

Negotiating selves: An analytical frame

The concept of "negotiating selves" is suggested here as a potentially useful frame for analyzing events in the workplace in terms of social dynamics. The examples in this paper primarily focus on gender. But both the inspiration for the frame and its possible applications are closely related to the intersectionality perspective introduced by Crenshaw (1989; 1994) as a concept highlighting the connections between race and gender in violence against black women, but later extended to many fields and populations. The frame suggested here is a hybrid, grown from a combination of several concepts that I have found useful in understanding, describing, and conceptualizing negative discrimination in workplaces.

Positioning, or the discursive production of selves

One view on the character of the self would see it not as an essence to be located or expressed, but as an image of "I", produced and reproduced in interactions (Mead, 1913). Such a self would be stable insofar as there persists a memory of past interactions. Thus a person who finds herself in an environment that does not share her memories experiences a "cultural shock". As contemporary people move around and constantly remake their nets of relationships, they often experience their selves as fragmented and multiple, which is counteracted by a mediating effort of self-narration ("What I just did may seem strange to you, but you see, in my culture..."). The act of self-narration has already been present in what could be called a pre-modern and a modern era, but different functions were ascribed to it then and now. Self-narration was seen as a simple report of life's events in the pre-modern era and as an account of these events against a life project in a modern era; and it is conceptualized as a collage-like activity aimed at producing coherence in our times (Czarniawska, 2001). Accordingly, it has been suggested that "[s]elf ... must be treated as a construction that, so to speak, proceeds from the outside in as well as from the inside out, from culture to mind as well as from mind to culture" (Bruner, 1990, p.108).

After all, says Rorty (1991), the human self is just a self-reweaving web of beliefs, which are revealed as habits of action. This web is centerless and contingent, connecting the self "to those with similar tastes and similar identities" (p.192). The self is historical, and is both constituted by and constitutive of a

community. If the community conceives of itself as an abstract system, as is the case with formal organizations, the resulting selves will also be conceived of in abstract terms, a feature that often baffles an outsider witnessing organizational presentations. "I hold a Chair in Management." "Oh, you are the head of your department." "Oh, no, gods forbid!" Thus proceeds a constructivist spiral: I present myself in abstract, systemic terms, as the convention requires, but in order to make them understandable, I have to resort to the history of a particular community: "You see, in Sweden, professors are not the heads of departments anymore".

What becomes clear is that "[i]dentities are performed in conversations. ... what we achieve in conversations is positioning vis-à-vis other people" (Davies and Harré, 1990: 44), and against the background of a plot which is negotiated by those taking part in the conversation. Whether this background is the history of the community or one's life project may vary from one conversation to another. Thus, the Self is produced, reproduced and maintained in conversations, past and present. It is community-constituted, as Rorty says, in the sense of being created by those who take part in a conversation; it is historical, because past conversations are evoked in the course of present ones.

Although I completely accept Davies and Harré's reasoning, I would like to point out that some aspects need to be added to make it more complete. In the first place, a construction of the self may not, in fact, start with an identity, but with an alterity construction: "How am I different?" As Gabriel Tarde put it, to exist is to differ (Czarniawska, 2004). The present emphasis on the issues of identity is due to the fact that we live in "an identity paradigm" (Brooks, 2005). Peter Brooks suggests that at the turn of the 19th century, exactly when Gabriel Tarde noticed that more and more attention is paid to identity than to alterity, the western states encountered two types of control problems. One was caused by too many differences (as witnessed in the fictional figure of a master criminal in a variety of disguises); the other, by too few differences (as in the case of the "antives" in the colonies, who were indistinguishable from one another). The will to trace down the criminals and to maintain control over the colonies contributed to the growing focus on identification and therefore identity, which continues to this day.

I do not think, however, that such an extension of their concept would be opposed by Davies and Harré; after all, they speak of "discursive construction of selves", not of identities. The selves are constructed in an interplay of alterity and identity. "How am I different? From who? How am I similar? To whom?"

Another extension concerns the adjective, "discursive". I believe that selves are shaped by much more than conversations alone; there are body forms and clothes, gestures and physical acts. In case of gender, ethnicity, physical handicap, and age they all play a significant role. Thus an expression that might cover all these aspects would be "an interactive construction of selves".

One result of such an interaction may be gendering.

Coercive gendering

In their famous article, ethnomethodologists Candice West and Don H. Zimmerman (1987:126) suggested that we need to see gender "as an accomplishment, an achieved property of situated conduct". Their appeal has been widely accepted in organization studies by, for example, Gherardi (1994), Bruni and Gherardi (2001), and Yancey Martin (2003). West and Zimmerman's reasoning can be extended to a situation in which gender is not an accomplishment, but a coercive ascription, a forced property of a situated conduct (Czarniawska, 2006). One of the most obvious ways of such "doing gender to the other" is to ascribe gender to people through discriminatory action. Such discriminatory action, even if coercive, may be perceived by both the target of the action and the society as justified by the situation and therefore legitimate. An example would be to oblige men and women to go to two different toilets (although it should be added that what is justified and legitimate changes with time and place, like any other social construction; unisex toilets do exist). Other discriminatory actions may be seen as unjust and harmful, by either the target or by observers. Furthermore, such discrimination may openly refer to gender as its basis ("women are not allowed in pubs") or be hidden, at least according to some opinions, behind some other criteria ("she lacks leadership qualities"). It is this last case that is of greatest interest for gender and organization studies, because of the moral imperative to fight against harmful discrimination and injustice in workplaces and because silent actions that form the core of gendering practices in society are taken for granted to such an extent.

Negotiation of identities

An interactive production of a self could go smoothly and successfully, or not at all. A positioning might be contested: if I am not chairing a department, this means that I am not a chair! What happens when a position is contested? Aneta Pavlenko and Adrian Blackledge (2004) focused just this type of situation in the context in which they are most likely to occur: a multilingual (which is often also multiethnic) context. Inspired, like I am, by the work of Davies and Harrè, they selected for their attention situations in which people "resist, negotiate, change, and transform themselves and others" (p. 20). They distinguish between reflective positioning, which I later call *self-positioning* (to avoid inclusion of a situation in which a reflective attribution is taking place) and interactive positioning, which I rename *attributive* as I see all positioning as being, by definition, interactive. They consequently define the negotiation of identities as "an interplay between reflective positioning, i.e. self-representation, and interactive positioning, whereby others attempt to position or reposition particular individuals or groups" (p.20).

Pavlenko and Blackledge remain focused on identities (which, perhaps, are more salient in multilingual context, in which the difference is obvious from

the start and it is the similarity that needs to be established) and on linguistic interactions (again, this is given by their initial interest). Still, I do not believe it is unjustified to extend their terms to other types of contexts, in which both issues of alterity and identity – that is, a complete construction of a self and non-linguistic interactions – come to light. Additionally, I, too, will be forced to limit myself primarily to discursive examples, because of the confines of the means of expression I am using.

An interactive production of selves

In order to inspect the negotiation of the selves in various types of organizing practices, I introduce two main types of positioning acts: self-positioning and attributive positioning. They may both end successfully or be contested, and I am trying to illustrate various outcomes of such negotiations of the self with examples from my own field studies, other field studies, and fiction (on the legitimacy of using fictive examples in scientific writing, see Czarniawska, 2006).

Table 1. Types of positioning acts and their possible results

	attributive positioning	self-positioning
positioning accepted	1. maintaining position ----- 2. shifting position	3. managing position ----- 4. losing position
positioning contested/ resisted	5. refusing definition ----- 6. re-positioning (intersections)	7. performance faulted ----- 8. performance unrecognized (divergent definitions)

1. Attributive positioning accepted, position maintained: "The Polish Mother"

The position of Polish women in the labor force in the years 1945-1989 differed from that of many other European countries. In 1974, they comprised 46.2% of the work force, and only 6% worked part-time. Magdalena Sokolowska, who did a study of Polish women in decision-making elites, noticed that they often held extremely high positions in professional terms; but rarely, if ever, held positions of formal power (Sokolowska, 1981).

According to the women themselves, they tended to decline positions of power. They could not afford it because they were also fully employed at home with their families. Much to her surprise, Sokolowska discovered that the historical ideal of "the Polish mother" was still alive among these professional women. I was even more surprised to learn that the city of Raciborz ordered a monument of the Polish Mother to be built after 1989 (www.polenia.raciborz.pl).

This peculiar ideal was born in the years 1795-1918, when Poland was deprived of its sovereignty and partitioned by three foreign forces: Russian, German, and Austro-Hungarian. The Roman Catholic Church and the family were the only institutions that remained free from the occupants' intervention, and were thus the main sources of survival for Polish nationalism.

Polish conditions demanded fortitude. Polish wives and mothers were often their husbands' advisors; and compelled by circumstances, when the husband was at war, in prison, or in exile, or if he had perished, the woman often became head of the family, conducted affairs, and directed the children's future. The idea of woman was praised to the skies: fortitude and adherence to duty were demanded of her; her importance in bringing up the children and in the household was emphasized. Feelings of public responsibility arose among women and embraced ever-widening circles of them. Wives and daughters of the gentry secretly taught Polish language and history in villages, opened nurseries, and conducted courses in household management and hygiene for rural women (Sokolowska, 1981: 107).

This ideal was consecrated in the short period of Polish independence between the wars (1918-1939). Although such heroic efforts were no longer required, the time had come to collect the laurels. As modernity approached, however, new types of ideal woman were imported: *la garçonne*, the flapper, the New Woman, and even the suffragist. At the turn of the century, the literature was dominated by two women; the poetess, Maria Konopnicka, and the novelist, Eliza Orzeszkowa, acquired a thoroughly modern Zofia Nalkowska and thoroughly satirical Gabriela Zapolska (a playwright) and Magdalena Samozwaniec (a parodist). Witold Gombrowicz complained that literary critique was completely dominated by women.

All this came to an end with the Second World War, when the need for "the

Polish mother” arose again, as men left to fight. Forty years later, Sokolowska found the situation unchanged:

The majority of Poles in the 40-65 age group today stems from the peasantry of working class and was deeply imbued in their childhood and youth with a prevailing ‘ideal’ image of women. In conversation on this question with men in leading positions one is struck by the fact that their conception of woman is still so similar to that ‘ideal’ model. It is an image encompassing all ‘female wisdom’. She is brave, hardworking, economical, self-denying, and devoted; the guardian angel of the children, the aged, and the sick in the family; the ruler of pots, pans, and the washtub; the confidante of man’s troubles; and his life companion. It is difficult for them to accept a different idea of woman – not that she should not have an education and a washing machine, but that she is a true and equal partner in family, professional, social and political life instead of someone’s ‘life companion’ (Sokolowska, 1981: 108-109).

It is impossible to assess situation now, twenty five years later, as feminist and gender studies are not favored under the new regime. Most likely, the situation resembles that in many other fields, where there is a kind of ”automorphism”: a conscious re-enactment of realities from 1918-1939 (Czarniawska, 2002). Construction of the Polish Mother’s monument is only one symptom of the general situation, characterized by the central role of the Catholic Church, a glorification of the family, and an encouragement of nationalistic sentiments. Young women use the expression ”the Polish mother” as a self-description – albeit with a dose of self-irony. Apparently, ”it is a tradition irrevocably related to the identity of the majority of Polish women of today” (Witkowska, 2001). The position has been maintained for something like two hundred years.

2. Attributive positioning accepted, position shifted: Fiammetta

One situation in which a self needs to be re-negotiated is a change of job in the same place of work. Silvia Gherardi (1995: 115-116) quotes the following story of ”Fiammetta”, an official in a municipal administration who changed her position in her office:

I first came to work in the town hall when I was 20 years old. And I always had a simple life in this office. I got on well with my colleagues, and the boss was a good man. He took care of everything, and we just attended to wages, pensions and so on. (...)

My boss had taken an early retirement. (...) his job was advertised and everyone in the office was asking who would take his place. It began as a joke when a colleague and then all the office asked me why I didn’t apply. (...) I sent in my application and began to study for the exam – but mostly

so that I wouldn't make a fool of myself, not to win. I knew that to get to the top someone had to pull strings for you.

[She got the job].

They greeted me like a bad smell, and they treated me like the book-keeper they had always known. They thought I would continue to take orders and be obedient. (...) The more I dug my heels in with the other section heads, the more they treated me as an enemy and the more they saw me as a "snake in the grass". (...) They would have granted a man the right to disagree, even to be an enemy, because he was their equal. But they expected me as a woman to understand quickly without asking questions, and not to bother anyone.

As indicated by the part of the story in which it was suggested as a joke that Fiammetta apply for the manager's job, she has accepted the position attributed to her previously: "to understand quickly without asking questions, and not bother anyone". She did not believe she would get a job, and was probably right: it was a reform of the Italian public administration that made it at all possible for her to get it. She expected, however, that the attribution would automatically shift as a result of changing the job. It did not. Her self-positioning changed, ("It took me a long time to get a complete picture of the situation and when and how I could start to change things. And it also took a long time to persuade my town councillor to back me up", p. 116); but others people's positioning of her did not. In the intersection of job position and gender, gender won. Fiammetta ends her story saying that "she has no intention of playing Joan of Arc", but that she is not going to give up. The reader does not know how her story ended, but it is most likely that, in order to change the attributive positioning, she would have to change her place of work. Repositioning rarely works in the same place; the pattern of interactions is too stable to be re-negotiated.

3. Attributive positioning contested, definition refused: "I have work!"

This is an excerpt from my field notes taken during the study of management in Warsaw (Czarniawska, 2002). It is a meeting of top management. Among others, the following are present: Vice Mayor 1, Vice Mayor 2, Women Lawyers 1 and 2 (upper-level staff positions), and a Woman Economist (in a high executive position).

The meeting cannot begin, as a quorum is lacking.

VM 1 (says in a dreary voice): Either we wait for our colleagues for God knows how long or we meet once more on Saturday.

VM 2: Maybe we could meet at 11?

WE (enters just in time to hear the suggestion): Christ!

VM 2: You'll have to cancel your date at 11 and send your lover away.

WE: I don't have a lover, I have work.

VM 2: Everybody has work.

Was "Everybody has work" conciliatory, or did it mean "everybody has work but only you have a lover"? I do not know, as the exchange ended at that point. Vice Mayor 2 was, to me, visibly "doing gender to women", by introducing constant sexual allusions in the most improbable contexts. But only I considered it to be coercive and unpleasant. The women I shadowed spoke in fact about "doing gender to them", but they would refuse my critical interpretation of such scenes as this if the offender was someone they liked. If it was somebody who was disliked, the interpretation would still steer clear off the issues of gender, as the following example shows.

4. Attributive positioning resisted, re-positioning: "Don't treat us like children!"

Same meeting in Warsaw.

Woman Lawyer 1 (60ish), who is standing across the table from VM 1 and listening to his complaints, smiles at him. I would call it a gracious and understanding smile.

"Will you erase that stupid smile from your face, madam", he says.

The smile fades from her face. She tries to explain: "Nothing of the kind, I was smiling with understanding ..."

VM 1: There is nothing funny in this situation.

WL 1 returns to her chair like a scolded girl. Her chin shakes.

...

VM 1: As to the last suggestion, shouldn't it have an appendix with the division of duties?

WL 2: As long as it does not say how to formulate legal acts, because it's nonsense.

VM 1: You are not listening again. Nobody said anything about legal acts.

WL 2: I am listening, but for heaven's sake stop treating us like children!

While VM1 was considered to be a generally unpleasant person, he discriminated between men and women in his way of being unpleasant. He was simply aggressive toward men, while being condescending toward women. In my eyes, he was not so much doing gender as doing age-on-gender: treating men badly, albeit as adults, and treating women like children.

"Girlification" is a common way of attributing gender, and one that is perhaps less contested than a direct "sexualization". The two are often placed in interplay, the former as a way of making light of the other. I do not believe that the Woman Lawyer in the scene above could have said "Do not treat us like women", although that was an alternative interpretation. The following fictive example from a Swedish police novel, *The Smashed Tang Horse (Den krossade*

tanghästen, Tursten 1998), makes the point vividly. Andersson is the Chief Inspector, the boss of the two Detective Inspectors, Birgitta and Jonny. Bobo Torsson is a witness in the case they are solving. Birgitta storms Andersson's office:

- The bloody conceited fool! Such a... yokel!

- Who? Me?

- No, of course not! Bobo Torsson!

Chief Inspector's first reaction was relief, the second, surprise. He asked, cautiously:

- Has he irritated you in any way?

That was when she exploded. Tears ran down her cheeks while she cried out:

- Irritated? He pushed me against the wall, put his hand between my legs and bit my breast! I am going to report him!

Andersson was speechless. The situation did not improve when he heard Jonny's teasing voice from the corridor:

- So our little Birgitta has been noticed by the fashion photographer! I hope you showed him the goodies?

He stood in the open door, leaning nonchalantly against it, a smug smile on his lips. He and his big mouth! was all Andersson managed to think. And then all the hell broke loose. Half-choking with anger, she hissed:

- Here come the goodies!

Birgitta flew over the floor that divided them. Jonny reacted too slowly to see her knee coming with full speed and strength between his knees. He collapsed with a stifled groan. Birgitta was triumphant:

- A personal record! Two guys with blue balls in less than half an hour!

With shoulders straight and head raised, she stepped over Jonny's body and marched out. It was then that Andersson regained his speech.

- Birgitta! You are not going anywhere! What the heck are you two up to? Fighting like two children! You are two adult police officers!

She turned her head to him very slowly and he could see her tear-covered face. It was difficult to understand when she whispered in an upset voice:

- You do not seem to understand. I have never been so humiliated in all my life! Perhaps as a woman, but not as a professional!

(Tursten, 1998: 170-172, translation BC)

In this excerpt, Tursten portrays three threats in the young woman inspector's work. First, she is not treated by the witness as a professional, but as a woman, to be humiliated and sexually exploited at will. This is what I called a coercive gendering, with a content repulsive to the target. Second, there is sexual harassment from a male colleague; again a coercive gendering with a repulsive content. Third, but not last, is the uncomprehending attitude of her boss. To a Swedish reader, Andersson's portrait is all too recognizable. Full of good intentions, he treats women as "mysteries", in a way that is perhaps typical for his generation. A democratic Swede, he accepts the women's entrance into the

police force, but this does not prohibit him from seeing it as a nuisance, as he is also prone to avoiding conflict. He would rather classify it as "childish behavior" than a "sexual harassment", and by doing so, he places the perpetrator and the victim on the same level. Birgitta refuses all the definitions imposed on her, rather forcefully. She also repositions herself as a professional.

5. Self-positioning accepted, managing position: "The Marlboro men"

Magnus Mörck and Maria Tullberg (2005) have studied dress codes during the annual general meetings of publicly owned companies in Sweden. The pattern was clear. The male managers and board members who took their places on the stage wore something that can be described as a "corporate uniform": a dark grey suit with single button line, soft cut, in light and lusterless fabric. The shirt is usually white or pale blue; the tie, until recently, red (George Bush's launch of blue ties in February 2006 might change that). Private shareholders and managers in smaller firms were freer in their dress codes. The higher up the hierarchy, the stricter is the male code. This makes women conspicuous, and they choose one of two strategies: mimicry (imitating a business suit; hair in a bun or cropped short) or femininity (high heels, make-up, different colors, long loose hair).

The situation that Mörck and Tullberg described in great detail was the annual meeting of a large Swedish corporation that had been shaken by a series of financial scandals involving the previous management group.

In the company of two female board members, the new Managing Director is awaiting the arrival of the other people. He is dressed in the corporate uniform, whereas the two women represent the two styles described above: one proper; the other flamboyant, with long blond hair. The atmosphere is expectant, and the flash bulbs soon identify the expected person: the nominee for the new chairman of the board. A well-built man in his sixties approaches the stage, and on his way grabs the arm of the "feminine" woman, turns her towards the photographers, and says "We better stay together!" with a big smile. The blond hair caresses his arm, inserted in a sleeve belonging to a suit that is cut from a fabric that is both lighter and coarser than the corporate uniform. The shirt is impeccably white, and the tie has only a touch of color. A suntanned face framed in a wave of grey hair makes Maria Tullberg, the observer, think of the Marlboro man. Later the same day the chairman is interviewed in a fitness center, where he promises, among other things, to promote women if they are competent. As the annual meeting comes to its end, the feeling of relief and promise of the better future is palpable. Mörck and Tullberg conclude that this was an obvious example of the homosocial seduction, evoking the term launched by Michael Roper (1996).

A more dramatic case has been described by Humphreys and Brown (2002),

in their study of changing dress codes at a Turkish university. The two dress codes signal belongingness to two different groups – those faithful to the ideals of Atatürk (and the modern, westernized Turkey) and those representing Islam. While the self-positioning is mutually accepted, the management is a battle. The 2000s are reversing the process that occurred in the 1920s when the western code was in ascendance and the Islamic one was descendent; now it is the other way around. Which group will manage its position longer? more successfully?

6. Self-positioning accepted, losing position

A story of losing a position that has been accepted has been told by Deirdre McCloskey in her account of changing sex, *Crossing: A memoir*:

[Deirdre McCloskey] was back in Cambridge ... and decided to go over to her old private school ... One of the women offered to give her a tour of the school. In the library Deirdre asked if her books were there – she thought she had remembered sending a pile some years before ... The librarian looked in her computer under "McCloskey."

"We have two by 'Donald', but none by you," she said perkily, adding with irony common among women, "Unless you are 'Donald!'"

"Uh . . . but I *was* Donald." The librarian face went white and then red. (McCloskey, 1999, p. 253)

It seems that this is a situation that is well known to transsexuals, although it comes in several variations. In the movie, *Transamerica* (Tucker, 2005), the protagonist, a transsexual, believes that she has been "unmasked" after hearing two women complaining about some men trying to enter a women's toilet. The director suggests to the audience that, in fact, they are addressing the transsexual not as an impostor but as one of them – inviting her to join their outrage. This is a good example of how even the classification of the positioning acts – am I losing position or maintaining it? is my self-positioning contested or accepted? – is a matter of interpretation. The present classification does not describe reality, but offers a tool for conceptualizing it.

7. Self-positioning contested, faulting performance

Were the protagonist of *Transamerica* right in believing herself to be unmasked, it would have meant that her performance was found faulty. Here, I quote another fictive example, which also comes from a police novel, or rather a police TV series: *Prime Suspect 1* (Lydia La Plante, 1991). Jane Tennison talks to her boss, trying to convince him of her merits as a policewoman.

'Look, Jane, if you want a transfer then put in for it through the right channels.'

She was spitting mad, but managed to control herself. 'I don't want a transfer, I want to do the work I have been trained for, and I want you to

give me your word that I will not be overlooked again.’
 Kernan gave her the same speech he had spouted at her the last time she had complained, and she sighed. She had the distinct feeling that he couldn’t wait to get her out of the office. She looked down at her shoes and seethed as he continued, ‘It takes time, Jane. If you are not prepared to wait then perhaps you should consider asking to be transferred. As I have said to you before, we all appreciate your record, and your obvious abilities. . .’
 ‘But you are not prepared to let me put them into practice, right?’
 ‘Wrong. Just bid your time, don’t rush things.’
 ‘Rush, sir? I’ve been here eighteen months.’
 ‘I’ve said all I intend saying at this point. I am sorry you feel the way you do, but until a case comes up that I feel is right for you, then. . .’
 ‘Then I carry on as before, is that what you were going to say, Mike? Oh, come on, don’t fob me off again. You gave me the same speech last time. You know I’ve been treated unfairly; all I am asking for is a chance to show you, show everyone here, what I’m capable of.’
 ‘You’ll get it, I give you my word.’ Kernan looked pointedly at his watch.
 ‘Now, I’m sorry, but I have to get on. Just be patient, I’m sorry I can’t be more positive, and your turn will come.’
 She walked to the door, depressed that she had failed yet again to convince him. (La Plante, 1991: 77)

While Jane is certain that she is being omitted from job assignments because of her gender, Kernan would probably deny it if asked. The official reason is that he is not convinced that she could have acquired her merits in what he considers too short a time. Although the example is not particularly dramatic, this kind of failed negotiation over presumed competence is probably the most frequent gendered situation that occurs in job places.

8. Self-positioning unrecognized, diverging definitions

A somewhat similar situation occurs when the definitions of merit differ between the negotiating parties. This time, the example does not come from the negotiating parties themselves, but from commentators, who suggest reasons for a failed negotiation. In a small study that Marta Calás and I conducted, we gave students in Sweden, Finland, Poland, Italy, Puerto Rico, and the USA descriptions of five events that were grounded in real-life experiences, told by women involved in the situation. All these episodes were all interpreted as discriminatory by their narrators. The students received a following instruction (Czarniawska and Calás, 1998):

Cultural Differences in Interpreting Social Episodes

We are looking for cultural differences in interpreting social episodes. A series of such episodes follows. Please, interpret what is happening in each of them. They are rather vague and incomplete so that you will have to introduce certain assumptions in order for your interpretations to make sense. While you are interpreting each episode, try to figure out what is happening and why. Describe the meanings and consequences of each action, and indicate why you think that it is so. In other words, indicate your assumptions behind each interpretation. At the end, suggest what the person in the story should do next. In each case the protagonist is a professional woman between 35 and 45 years old. The episodes take place in different countries.

Episode No. 5 was the least ambiguous of the episodes presented, and most closely related to a workplace.

EPISODE 5: Tenure Denied

An engineer joined a foreign company seven years ago. During that time she became a top figure in the research and development department at the company headquarters. She has produced several innovations, has published several articles in journals within her specialty, and has developed several professional ties with her mostly male colleagues. Now she is taking a short vacation, visiting for a few days with a friend in another country. Sitting in the friend's living room she confides that she has just been denied the customary tenure and promotion that comes after seven years with the company. Instead she has been offered an extension in her contract for another five years. She does not know what to think about all of this.

Most students asked themselves whether this was a case of negative gender discrimination or not. Those who decided it was (a majority did) saw several reasons for it. First, it could have to do with the woman's profession: women engineers are still rare. Second, it could have to do with the position of power: the men were unwilling to share it with "an Other". Third – a reasoning most common among readers from the two Scandinavian countries – the company was afraid of the potential maternity leave. Fourth, gender discrimination could have been strengthened by xenophobia: foreigners are not given important positions, or the managers in the company simply believe that the woman may want to go back to her home country. In a sense, all these are cases of diverging definitions – as to who the person fit for that job is to be.

The students who decided that this case was not one of discrimination offered comments that are especially relevant here. Most of them decided that the woman saw herself as competent, whereas her bosses had a different definition of the competence desired (or at least a different judgment of her level of competence). "This is to me a case where a woman is fixated on the idea that she is a woman in a male world rather than ask herself whether she deserves the position" (2fsF30). Those who decided that the professional defects were the reasons for the failed negotiation pointed out that sometimes it might happen that a woman is incompetent for a given job, much as men are. "Not everything goes as one wanted it" (3smF38). And a very sharp comment from a man: "Perhaps her innovations were not as innovative as she herself believed? Besides, the best proof for how stupid she was is that the poor cow was surrounded by men only and yet was so surprised by the results!" (5trM27).

The story of the "woman engineer" is very close to the story of Valerie the Engineer in Yancey Martin (2003: 349-350). Valerie's boss says that she is not "gregarious enough", whereupon Valerie, who believes in the value of education and job experience, cannot understand what "gregariousness" has to do with success in engineering profession.

Some reflections

As I pointed out repeatedly during the presentation of different negotiation situations, the suggested typology is not an attempt to classify social life, but to facilitate analysis. Why should such help be needed? As I have noted on other occasions (Czarniawska, 2006), it is difficult to study actual negative discrimination at workplaces. People do not start to discriminate because a researcher wishes to see it, and are often unaware of the discriminatory character of their actions. After all, discrimination, as the word indicates, means telling one kind from another, and this is the most common operation, performed by everyone at all times (Bowker and Star, 1999). How to tell if, and who is to say that discrimination hurts? What is taken for granted is difficult to see, and therefore microscopic tools might be used. The typology I suggest is obviously under a strong influence of ethnomethodology, but less formalized; it gives more interpretative freedom to the researcher.

Open or not, all typologies reify and simplify. Actual life events are of course much more complex, which can be seen even in the examples above. Various positioning acts follow one another, negotiations are broken and returned to, and intersectionality is perhaps the main resource in such negotiation. A refused positioning – self or attributed – maybe tentatively replaced by another: if not gender than perhaps class? if not class, perhaps ethnicity? if not ethnicity, perhaps age? All these can be used to repair an unintentionally damaged interaction, or, to the contrary, to produce humiliation. Also, as Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004) among others, have shown, people are not only "doing gender", but also "doing class", "doing ethnicity", "doing age", etc.

What if a researcher's classification according to the categories suggested above is refused by the field actors? Another negotiation starts, which could be of interest to the researcher but also instructive for the field actor in question: the same situation can be perceived in many ways. How come?

Last but not least, I would like to remind the reader that positioning is not only discursive, as we have seen in the case of the Marlboro men and Turkish academics. Bodies play an important role, as do dress codes and various types of ornaments. Intersectionality concerns not only categories, but also symbols that denote them: they can be put to multiple uses, turning intersectionality into intersymbolicity and the other way around.

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