Master Degree Project in Management

Executive Search or Exclusive Search?

In between practical- and discursive consciousness

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Abstract

The background of this paper is a set of recommendations for recruitment developed during the project "Women to the top" (W2T) (2003-2005) funded by the European Union (EU), aimed at including more women in the processes of recruitment to top positions. Drawing upon this, the purpose of this paper is to investigate how gender-related barriers that may hinder female candidates to reach top positions are unfolded in the executive search process. Research has shown that search consultants in executive search firms in general are aware that there is an exclusion of women in their processes. However, a high level of consciousness does not necessarily mean that it is translated into the practices. In this paper, this is studied in relation to executive search practices by revealing gaps between practical- and discursive consciousness. Distinguishing between the two levels of consciousness has been argued to open up for critical learning opportunities.

Introduction

The underrepresentation of women in executive committees and boards is a subject of increasing debate in Western societies today (McKinsey, 2012). Increasingly emphasized is also that talented and capable people have become the central source of competitive advantage in our knowledge driven, information-based and service intensive economy (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 2002). The need for superior talent is increasing and companies that seek to exploit this competitive advantage make it a strategic priority to be at the battle front in the 'war of talent' (Chambers, Foulon, Manfield-Jones, Hankin & Michaels III, 1998; Bartlett &

Ghoshal, 2002). In this fierce 'war of talent', executive search firms have gained a power position (Faulconbridge, Beaverstock, Hall & Hewitson, 2009). Search consultants, or more commonly referred to as headhunters, devote their time and resources to find and contact top potential candidates in particular industries and market niches. Considering the best candidates to be 'hidden' or not actually looking to change jobs, headhunting has been argued to be an advantageous way of finding them (Finlay & Coverdill, 1999). The mission to find the right candidate or the 'right match' for a client has however, also been problematized (Coverdill & Finlay, 1998; Faulconbridge et al. 2009; Hamori, 2010; Tienari, Meriläinen, Holgersson & Bendl, 2013; Meriläinen, Tienari & Valtonen, 2013). It remains unclear what the 'right match' actually is; an ambiguity that will be further discussed in this paper.

In response to the issue of finding the 'right match', it has been argued that executive search firms possess the power to define the selection criteria of candidates. Their decision of what is the 'right match' has been argued to be influenced by perceived social similarities between the interviewer and the candidate (Coverdill & Finlay, 1998). Researchers and consultants in executive search firms have further been described as 'gatekeepers' to elite labor networks, holding the power to define what a talent is and thereby determine who is permitted access to the network and the executive positions. Through these positions of power executive search firms have created a hierarchical and exclusive 'new boys' network' in elite labor markets (Faulconbridge et al. 2009). In similar vein, Tienari et al. (2013) showed that the practices of executive search are gendered. Analyzing how gender was done in executive search, they found that certain core practices constrained the consultants in their efforts to include female candidates in the process and that the image of the 'ideal' candidate as male was reproduced (Tienari et al., 2013). This reproduction of the 'ideal' executive as male was also revealed by Meriläinen et al. (2013) whom argued that it made many individuals, among them women, end up in a disadvantaged position.

The statistics confirm this unequal power structure in the top spheres of Swedish organizations. Despite the fact that Sweden had the highest number of women participating in the labor market in the EU in 2012, the management teams were still male dominated. In the private sector 2013, 73 percent of the management teams were male dominated and 14 percent of the management teams solely consisted of men (SCB, 2013).

Tienari et al. (2013) suggested that search consultants in general are aware that there is an exclusion of women in their processes. However, a high level of consciousness does not necessarily mean that it is translated into practical action (Mathieu, 2009). Tienari et al. (2013) questioned why the conviction that it is important to promote women did not unfold in the search practices in executive search firms. Based on this, they argued that there were differences between what was discursively known and valued and what seemed to actually be permeated in the practices. Therefore, they called for more research on gaps between practical- and discursive consciousness.

Departing from a set of recommendations for recruitment developed during the EU project "Women to the top" (W2T) (2003-2005), interviews have been conducted with participants from the project as well as search consultants and researchers working in executive search firms in Sweden today. Investigating how the different actors worked with the gender question, it was concluded early on that there were no differences among the firms that had participated in W2T and the firms that had not. Accordingly, the focus shifted

towards studying patterns within the executive search industry in general. The purpose of this paper is hence, to investigate how gender-related barriers that may hinder female candidates to reach top positions are unfolded in the executive search processes. This is done by revealing critical gaps between practical- and discursive consciousness which could raise awareness and open up for critical learning opportunities (Mathieu, 2009). Following this, the research question is: In what way do gender-related barriers for female candidates unfold in the executive search process in Sweden?

The disposition of the paper is as follows: In the next section, previous research in the field is presented in order to give the reader a background. Further, the theoretical framework and what can be conceptualized as practical consciousness and discursive consciousness is presented. Secondly, the methods used to conduct the study are described. Third, the empirical material follows a structure in accordance with the most interesting themes identified: the search for the 'right match', evaluating the 'right match', the ambiguous question of responsibility in finding the 'right match'. Based on the previous research and the theory of critical gaps between practical- and discursive consciousness the empirical material is then analyzed. At last, a conclusion and a summarized contribution of the paper is presented together with suggestions for further research.

Frame of Reference

A guiding assumption in this paper is that gender is socially constructed and that individuals in society actively participate in 'doing gender' through socially guided perceptual, interactional and micro-political activities (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Marini, 1990; Martin, 2003). In a highly influential paper, West and Zimmerman (1987, p.137) defined doing gender as "creating differences between girls and boys and women and men, differences that are not natural, essential, or biological". In this way, the typical roles of 'masculine' and 'feminine' conduct, or differently put, the dominant and subordinate statutes of the sex categories were argued to be produced and reproduced. The allocation of power and resources in the interpersonal arena as well as the domestic, economic and political domains makes 'doing gender' unavoidable. This is a problem that needs to be tackled both through changing institutionalized structures and interactional behavior (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

This chapter begins with a presentation of the research field and is followed by Mathieu´s (2009) theory 'the critical gap between practical- and discursive consciousness'.

Gender-Related Barriers and the Challenge of Reaching the Top

Gender differences in organizational behavior and occupational segregation, leaving women in an inferior position and the power in organizations in the hands of men; have been studied by many scholars (Acker & Van Houten, 1974; Kanter, 1977; Curran, 1988; Acker, 1990; Lyness & Thompson, 1997; Höök, 2001; Holgersson, 2003; Stainback & Kwon, 2012; Holgersson, 2013). Numerous explanations and causes for this unequal power structure in the labor market have been identified, among them, gendered career paths, (Kanter, 1977; Wilson, 1998) organizational policies and structures as well as organizational practices of recruitment and selection (Acker & Van Houten, 1974; Bielby & Baron, 1986; Bartol, 1978; Curran, 1988; Martin, 1990; Acker, 1998; 2009; Holgersson, 2003; 2013). Understanding the

problem as a custom of 'following old norms' (Kanter, 1977) the need for structural changes in the organizational- and private domain, have been emphasized in order to make the workplace more equal (Kanter, 1977; Bielby & Baron, 1986; West & Zimmerman, 1987; Martin, 1990; Ragins, Townsend & Mattis, 1998; Oakley, 2000; Wahl, Holgersson, Höök & Linghag, 2001).

Investigating the scarcity of women in top management, many scholars have studied the so-called 'glass ceiling', hindering women from advancing to higher positions in organizations (Cannings & Montmarquette, 1991; Powell & Butterfield, 1994; Ragins et al., 1998; Oakley, 2000; Acker, 2009). The construction of informal networks was suggested to be one of the explanations for why males succeeded to reach the top in the organizational hierarchy. In the lack of informal networks, it was shown that women relied more on formal attributes such as bidding for promotion, performance scores and post-employment schooling (Cannings & Montmarquette, 1991). Melamed (1995) found that men competing for executive positions were more likely to rely on the societal opportunity structures and their personality profile whilst women´s chances depended on their education, skills, experiences and domestic responsibilities, to a greater extent. The glass ceiling has also been studied in terms of promotion opportunities where it was found that gender bias favoring men could be reduced through greater openness in decision-making and more standardized criteria and procedures for promotion decisions (Powell & Butterfield, 1994).

To shatter the glass ceiling, scholars have emphasized the need for top management commitment (Ragins et al., 1998) and to change social structures and procedures in organizations (Powell & Butterfield, 1994; Ragins et al., 1998; Oakley, 2000; Bartol, Martin & Kromkowski, 2003; Weyer, 2007). Oakley (2000) argued that practices of recruitment, selection and promotion, that in many cases benefited men, needed to be looked over thoroughly. Still, to reach the deep cultural and structural roots of gender biases, the dynamics in the leadership-followership relationship and the stereotypical traits valued in executives would also have to be modified and challenged. Bartol et al. (2003) discussed that both organizational- and gender norms influenced the upward mobility of women in hierarchical organizations. They found that the ability to engage in leadership behaviors of importance to the organization was a key to rise in the hierarchy. Building on the assumption that female managers got fewer training opportunities, this was argued to be a problem organizations needed to solve in order to shatter the glass ceiling. Modification of social structures was also emphasized by Weyer (2007) who stipulated that women have to be assigned greater social significance and competence and that the unequal power relationships between women and men in organizations needed to be reduced.

Gender-related barriers for women to advance in the academic world, during the academic education and in the processes of recruitment and evaluation of professorial candidates, have been a recent topic of research (Van den Brink & Stobbe, 2009; Van den Brink, Benschop & Jansen, 2010; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012). Investigating how representation numbers in academia may become more gender equal, emphasis has been put on increasing transparency and accountability in the processes of recruitment and selection. These measures, however, showed to be almost impossible to attain due to unintended gender practices and micro-political activities (Van den Brink et al., 2010). Such subtle gender practices were also discussed by Holgersson (2013) who suggested that homosociality was

done in the recruitment process through two main practices; (re)defining competence and doing hierarchy. (Re)defining competence was described as when the acceptability criteria are defined in a way that highlights what a man does as 'important' and what a woman does as 'less important'. Doing hierarchy was described as when senior men had the privilege to define competence as well as identify and select younger potentials. It also involved younger men making themselves visible and available and conforming management norms, which in turn reproduced a masculine managerial culture (Holgersson, 2013).

In summary, recent research has moved away from deliberate exclusion of women in executive positions towards more subtle barriers. The challenges women face have been suggested to depend on organizational policies and structures as well as organizational practices such as recruitment, selection and promotion (Acker & Van Houten, 1974; Bielby & Baron, 1986; Bartol, 1978; Curran, 1988; Martin, 1990; Powell & Butterfield, 1994; Ragins et al., 1998; Oakley, 2000, Acker, 2009; Holgersson, 2003; 2013). It has also been suggested to depend on more subtle barriers, deeply rooted in cultural assumptions, interaction patterns and other micro-level activities (Oakley, 2000; Bartol et al., 2003; Weyer, 2007; Van den Brink et al., 2010; Ibarra, Ely & Kolb, 2013). Acker (2009) showed the complexity of reducing inequality in organizations by pointing at how beliefs, images and stereotypes based on gender, shape actions. In a similar vein, Van den Brink et al. (2010) showed that unintended gender practices and micro-political activities might interfere with the improvement of organizational practices. Hence, the scarcity of women in top management positions has seemingly a myriad of interwoven explanations.

The Critical Gap between Practical- and Discursive Consciousness

In an attempt to reveal how gender-based barriers unfold in the executive search processes, both through what is 'said' and what is 'done' as Acker (1990) explain it, or differently put through discourse and practice (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Marini, 1990; Acker, 1992; Martin, 2003; Mathieu, 2009), the authors of this paper have chosen to make a distinction between how gender barriers are expressed in discourse as well as in practices. Mathieu (2009) suggest that critical opportunities can be opened up for learning through analyzing gaps between practical- and discursive consciousness. Hence, this paper departs from Mathieu´s (2009) explanation of practical consciousness as social appropriateness and discursive consciousness as deliberated awareness. Our practices and what we effortlessly do in interaction with others is not always in line with our discursively expressed values and beliefs. Likewise, if a practice does not 'feel' right, it might be questioned and thus discursive consciousness is employed. Drawing upon Mathieu´s (2009) distinction, the authors of this paper conceptualize discursive consciousness as the way the interviewees talk and express themselves according to their values and beliefs, and practical consciousness as what they say that they actually do in practice. By collecting verbal statements from the two levels of consciousness and comparing them, critical gaps between what said and done in everyday activity and flow of interaction may be exposed, gaps which otherwise often go unseen. Revealing such inconsistencies between how we enact without reflection and contrasting verbal statements one could create learning possibilities and pave the way towards discursive penetration. These possibilities often go unseen for the informants but researchers, with the transcripts of verbal statements at hand, have the opportunity to raise awareness (Mathieu,

2009). The disjunction between reflection and action was also stressed by Eriksson-Zetterquist and Styhre (2008). After evaluating W2T it was concluded that "overcoming glass barriers identified in organizations and society is not a matter of reflection, but of practical action" (Eriksson-Zetterquist & Styhre, 2008 p. 22). Hence, it was argued that both elements were necessary to reach substantial change. Nevertheless, this was described as complex since activities tend to continue along the path of reflexivity rather than the path of action.

On Practice...

In introducing a way to conceptualize organizational practices leading to inequality situations, Acker (1990) argued that institutional structures were organized along lines of gender. Using the term 'gendered institutions' she suggested that gender was present in a wide range of processes, practices, images and ideologies and power structures in society. Since men were the historical developers of influential institutions and the institutions had been defined and shaped by them, women ended up in a subordinate position (Acker, 1992). The production and re-production of this understructure was found in organizational processes and practices, some highly visible and other deeply embedded and invisible; such as practices to control, exclude and segregate based on gender, constructions of images and the internal processes of individuals when they construct identities in line with the institutional settings (Acker, 1992; 1998). Marini (1990) further concluded that gender differentiation and stratification on a micro-level happened through socialization and allocation. Socialization happened when individuals adopted gender-specific behaviors, attitudes and traits and acted and interacted upon social roles within a society. Allocation was the way other individuals adopted gender-stereotypic behavior and attitudes to the allocation of individuals into certain positions on the basis of sex (e.g. the workplace). Martin (2003) additionally described gendering processes in formal organizations as a two-sided dynamic constituted of 'gendering practices' and 'practicing gender'. Gendering practices were described as a set of activities available culturally, socially, narratively and physically for people to enact in a situation in accordance with, or in violation of the gender institution. For instance, this could be to 'act' in line the stereotypic views of a man or a woman (Martin, 2003). Practicing gender on the other hand was described as the doing, performing and mobilizing of gender through micro-interactional practices (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Martin, 2003). Through such processes women and men socially constructed each other at work and routinely practiced gender. It was found that practicing gender often was informed by liminal awareness and reflexivity. Thus, people engaged in practicing gender did so without being fully aware of it (Martin, 2003). In contrast, Czarniawska (2006) discussed how gendering also could be seen as a coercive action; in other words, coercively done unto other people through engaging in subtle discriminatory behavior (Czarniawska, 2006).

Sprung from West and Zimmerman´s (1987) influential article 'doing gender', the importance of identifying ways of undoing gender through social interactions has been emphasized (Butler, 2004; Deutsch, 2007). The importance of going beyond documenting how gender continuously is done, to instead reflecting upon how social interactions can be a source of change, was stressed. It was hence, suggested that it for instance would be fruitful to examine when and how interactions become less gendered and how structural and interactional factors together may produce change (Deutsch, 2007). Nevertheless, gender is

always performed (West & Zimmerman, 1987) and it has thus been argued that an undoing is another version of doing (Nentwich & Kelan, 2014).

On Discourse…

The term 'discourse' has been used in a variety of ways in organization- and social studies. The definitions of it and the understandings of what it actually means are, however, diverse. It has been argued that there are two main approaches to discourse in organization studies; "the study of the social text (talk and written text in its social action contexts) and the study of social reality as discursively constructed and maintained (the shaping of social reality through language)" (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000, pp. 1126). The former approach assume that discourse is analytically distinct from other levels of social reality such as meaning and practice, while the latter approach, also applied in this paper, assume that discourse may structure and frame subjectivity, practice and meaning and in that way determine social reality (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000). In conformity with the latter, Fairclough (2005) stated that the underlying assumption that social phenomena are socially constructed through people´s concepts of the world they live and act within. In that way discourse may contribute to both reproduction and transformation.

Analyzing discourse in organization studies has become increasingly popular (Tienari, Søderberg, Holgersson & Vaara, 2005; Vaara, Tienari & Laurila, 2006; Tienari, Holgersson, Meriläinen & Höök, 2009; Vaara, Sorsa & Pälli, 2010), where discourse has been studied in relation to gender and national identity constructions (Tienari et al., 2005) how representations of gender and management are affected by contemporary market discourse (Tienari, Holgersson, Meriläinen & Höök, 2009) and how organizational discourses constitute subjectivity during processes of recruitment (Bergström & Knights, 2006).

In line with West and Zimmerman (1987), Gherardi (1994) studied how we in our discursive construction of gender devalue females as the second sex, which is manifested in occupational sex segregation. Departing from her own experience, she stipulated that equal opportunity programs are bound to fail if they are implemented in an organizational culture where women are seen as the second sex and where the symbolic orders of gender constantly are being reproduced. Tienari et al. (2005) went further studying how male senior executives justified the absence of women in top management. They identified recurring discourses among the executives that widened inequality between the sexes. Still, in general, Swedish executives considered themselves as being aware of the importance of gender equality issues in the larger societal context. In relation to this prevalent discourse on gender equality in the Nordic countries Tienari et al. (2013) questioned why the conviction that it is important to promote women not unfolded in the search practices of executive search firms. It was argued that search consultants generally failed to see how their search practices reproduced gender and actually contributed to the exclusion of women. Following this, more research on gaps between practical- and discursive consciousness was called for.

Research Methods

In order to create a deep understanding and uncover what lies behind the phenomenon of study, a qualitative approach has been used (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The field material

collected for this paper departed from a number of recommendations for recruitment written during the EU-funded initiative W2T; a program aiming to increase gender equality in top management positions, which ran 2003-2005, out of which recruitment agencies were one of many actors (Eriksson-Zetterquist & Styhre, 2008). Departing from these recommendations it has been investigated how gender-related barriers that may hinder female candidates to reach top positions are unfolded in the executive search processes. The collected field material consists of documents, material from homepages and 22 interviews, which all were conducted within the period of February and March 2014. At first, the participants from the W2T project and other representatives from these recruitment agencies were contacted. Then, using the snowball method, search consultants and researchers at other executive search firms holding strong positions in the Swedish market today were contacted. The interviewees were chosen to represent the professional categories within the executive search firms as well as diversity in age and gender (11 women and 11 men). Representation of the professional categories included search consultants, partners, and researchers (responsible for carrying out fundamental research on potential candidates). All the interviewees have been treated anonymously and a complete list of interviews can be found in appendix.

In qualitative interviewing the respondents are viewed more as meaning-makers rather than passive channels transferring knowledge from already existing sources. Accordingly, the aim of using qualitative interviews was to get closer to, and make sense of the actors' interpretations and meanings from the way they talk (Warren, 2002). In order to assure that the structure of the interview supported the purpose of the qualitative research; questions were posed to elicit nuanced descriptions or 'stories' of different aspects of the subject´s life, specific situations and action sequences (Kvale, 1996). Since eliciting narratives can be challenging depending on the person that is subject of the interview and the situation (Czarniawska, 2014), an interview guide was created to assure that certain topics would be brought up. These topics were inspired by the recommendations for recruitment written within W2T project. During the process, new topics emerged and questions were developed, enabling the authors to conduct the interviews in a fluent manner and gain a deeper understanding of the studied phenomenon. This has, as Kvale (1996) suggests, required preparedness and knowledge about the topic as well as an idea of the conceptual issues of producing knowledge through conversation. Furthermore it has required strict attention to what is said during the interview. All of the interviews have been recorded and transcribed in verbatim. Notes have been taken throughout the interviews, both as a security if the recording would fail but also as a reminder about topics mentioned that needed to be further explained later in the interview (Czarniawska, 2014). To exploit the interview as a technique in full, Czarniawska (2014) claimed that one has to be aware that interviews have limitations and that they are merely interactions that are recorded and transcribed. Hence, the field material has not provided information about 'what actually happened' but rather opinions, meanings and interpretations of the subject´s world. However, interviews are still useful since the interviewer may assume that it is these interpretations and accounts that inform their actions (Czarniawska, 2014).

In order to analyze the field material, the interviewees were divided into three groups; the ones who wrote the recommendations for W2T; the companies today who were involved in W2T; other main actors of the market today. Techniques inspired by grounded theory were

used in order to simplify the analysis of the considerable amount of field material (Martin & Turner, 1986). The essential part of grounded theory is to carry out the analysis by categorizing the field material into themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Martin & Turner, 1986; Czarniawska, 2014). Hence, transcribed interviews and notes have been turned into themes which captured the main ideas with a higher level of abstraction (Martin & Turner, 1986). After breaking down the qualitative data, 13 themes were initially identified. Recurrent themes of interest were responsibility, subjectivity and the 'right match'. The same categorizations were made for the three groups of interviewees which enabled an analysis of how the recommendations were developed, communicated and how the groups of executive search firms conceptualized and said that they worked with gender questions today. However, when searching for similarities and differences among the firms that participated in W2T and the firms that did not, no differences could be identified in how the executive search firms conceptualized and worked with search. Thus, the initial grouping of executive search firms was only used to a certain point. After that, it proved more valuable to identify similarities and differences among all interviewees, irrespective of firm and let that guide the empirical findings and discussion. As the themes developed had a higher level of abstraction than the field material itself, the same paragraphs in the material have in most cases fitted into several themes. Even though a high number of core themes were identified, all of them did not possess the same utility. In line with what Martin & Turner (1986) suggested, the themes that appeared several times have been more useful than the ones that appeared at first sight.

In accordance with grounded theory, promoting a 'constant comparative analysis' (Czarniawska, 2014), previous material and themes have been used as a guidance when collecting further field material. Examples of this have been to remove irrelevant questions for forthcoming interviews and to add discussed themes, which have not been visible or interesting until the categorization of previous material. Additionally, the authors engaged in continuous comparisons of the field material with relevant theory. That procedure revealed that there was a difference between how the interviewees talked about the problem, and what they said that they actually did. This inconsistency could be captured and understood best through Mathieu´s (2009) theory on critical gaps between practical- and discursive consciousness. This theory allowed for identification of critical opportunities that in daily life often go unseen. Being aware of the fact that discourse also can be seen as a practice and something that is done, a distinction between practical- and discursive consciousness has been made in the analysis of the field material. Hence, discursive consciousness is in this paper limited to the way the interviewees talk and express themselves according to their values and beliefs, and practical consciousness is what they say that they actually do in practice.

Findings

This paper departed from a set of recruitment recommendations developed by a group of recruitment agencies during the initiative W2T which was an EU-funded project aiming to increase the number of women in top management positions in the private as well as the public sector. W2T ran as collaboration between Greece, Estonia, Denmark and Sweden, and was completed in 2005 after 15 months activity (Eriksson-Zetterquist & Styhre, 2008). One of the actions within the initiative was to include the recruitment sector by letting five

recruitment agencies, which by that time had vital market share, write recommendations about how recruitment agencies can work to include more women in their recruitment processes. The agencies developed the recommendations through analyzing the processes and practices within their sector, with a focus on finding improvements. The final document included recommendations such as 'walking the extra mile' in the search for female candidates, designing deliberate search profiles as well as acknowledging and discussing equality goals with the clients. The recommendations were published on the W2T webpage and as the initiative received immense media attention the findings were expected to have reached major stakeholders within the private and public sector, as well as other recruitment agencies. It was expected from the participated agencies to communicate these recommendations within their recruitment agencies, even though it was not stated as a requirement in order to participate (Project coordinator, W2T, 2014).

According to the ones that participated in the writing of the recommendations, the discussions about the recruitment agencies own experiences involved both what was done good, but also earlier mistakes and learning opportunities related to the gender question. The participating consultants only vaguely remembered the aim of the project as the program ran nine years ago. In general, however, it was perceived as an honest attempt to ensure and improve gender equality in their practices. The overall understanding was that it was not about finding a concrete solution but rather to raise consciousness and ensure that a higher number of female candidates were included in the processes. Three of the participants stated that the recommendations were transferred to the other recruitment consultants in the respective agencies through intranets and e-mails, lectures and discussions. Other did not remember exactly how, or if it was done at all and none of the consultants knew if the recommendations had been communicated to other recruitment agencies and executive search firms. Considering that the questions were raised and the experiences from the different recruitment agencies were accumulated, the interviewees perceived the initiative to be successful. Still, no real evaluation of the project was done to their knowledge other than some e-mail contact with the Equal Opportunities Ombudsman (JämO). This was argued to be unfortunate by one consultant, who said that people were very enthusiastic while the project was ongoing but as time passed it was forgotten.

Studying the recruitment agencies today, no differences could be identified between how the group of recruitment agencies that had been involved in the writing of the recommendations, and how the other main actors in the Swedish executive search sector said that they practically worked with the gender question in their processes. Neither were there differences in the level of awareness. None of the executive search firms actively or knowingly used the document with recruitment recommendations to guide their practices. Only one consultant knew that such recommendations had been written and he had also participated in person in the writing of the recommendations. Based on these findings there is henceforth, no distinction made between the two groups of executive search firms. Instead, similarities and differences have been identified among all interviewees, irrespective of recruitment agency. Although the processes and definitions of practices varied among the agencies, a summarized illustration of the executive search process is presented in figure 1.
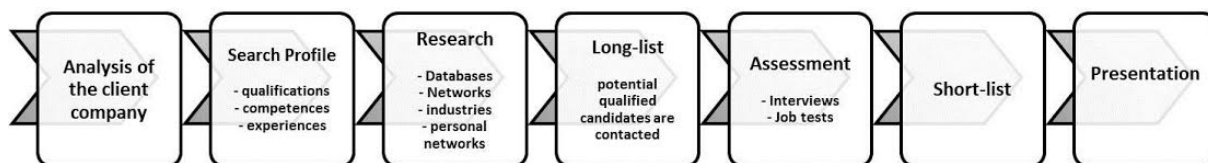
Figure 1. The executive search process (Summarized by the authors)

Even though the recruitment recommendations were not used in any of the executive search firms today, the information given through interviews, homepages and ethical guidelines indicated that none of the studied recruitment agencies showed an active and deliberate engagement in discriminatory behavior against female candidates. Seemingly, there was no direct will to exclude women from the recruitment process. Instead the problem was expressed in more subtle ways. In the next section, this is illustrated by distinguishing how the search consultants and researchers conceptualized and talked about gender and how they described that they actually conducted their practices, according to the three following themes; the search for the 'right match', evaluating the 'right match' and the ambiguous question of responsibility in finding the 'right match'.

The Search for the 'Right Match'

It was a shared perception among headhunters that the main purpose of their job was to find the best and most competent candidate, or the 'right match' as many expressed it. When practicing the search, however, time pressure and convenience seemed to constrain the consultants and researchers to 'walk the extra mile' in order to find female candidates. This inconsistency is presented below, starting with how consultants and researchers talk about the 'right match', followed by their description of the search practice.

Conceptualizing the 'Right Match'

In relation to the search for the 'right match', the question of supply was a topic raised frequently by the interviewees. The perceptions whether the supply of qualified women on the labor market was lower than the supply of men, were diverse. The interviewees agreed upon that the supply depended heavily on both industry and function. For instance, consumer products and retail were examples of industries mentioned frequently where the supply of women was not considered as a 'problem'. In similar vein, communication, human resources and marketing were functions described as 'unproblematic'. On the other hand, heavy industries, finance and technology were often exemplified as very challenging in terms of finding qualified female candidates. The 'limited supply' of women was often explained by a lack of experience of possessing higher positions and that women often stop climbing the career ladder at generally lower levels than men. Still, the vast majority emphasized that women are competent. This was visible in expressions such as "Damn it, we are as equally competent as men!" (Consultant, female, Company 2, 2014) and "the women are out there, trust me" (Chief of executive search, female Company 3, 2014). Yet, there were also exceptions from this view. A male consultant stressed that the ambition to find the best candidate was one main argument against quotation.

A general pattern identified was that men who were interviewed talked about the supply of women as an obstacle to a greater extent than what the interviewed women did. One

of the male interviewees considered the supply to be the critical factor arguing that women do not 'pop up' as often. Asking the same questions to women, previous successful experiences of finding women in doubtful industries were emphasized. A female interviewee also stated that there were a lot of 'chosen truths' circulating about women; ideas based on stereotypical views and behavior taken as truths. Examples given were that women do not have the competence and that they do not want to work under those premises. Such chosen truths, were argued to have their explanation in a too limited search process. When asking a male interviewee where in the process the women were filtered out, he answered; "The women don't want to. Or it happens that they don't want to" [...] "Because then they have to compromise with other things and family […] I've seen this many times; even if I know they can do it" (Partner and Consultant, male, Company 11, 2014). Similarly, another idea that was raised was that "Many are not prepared…or in majority, women are not prepared to sacrifice so much time away during the children's first years"[...]"and you know, you can't have the cake and eat it…" (Partner and Consultant, male, Company 7, 2014).

Despite the diverse views of whether the supply of qualified women is lower than the supply of qualified men, the majority of the interviewees asserted that if they would improve their methods for search and dedicate more time and effort, the chances of finding women with the right competence would increase. In relation to this, it was exemplified how women that possessed the required competence most often could be found at levels further down in the hierarchies or in similar industries which normally was not included within the 'given framework' the researchers searched within. Therefore, it was stated to be important to look outside the 'box' and search extensively. One female consultant argued that to get more recommendations and to 'actually do the job that they are hired for' depended on search methods. She stipulated that;

> "In the search world I believe it's a question of finding new behaviors. To pose the right questions, push for it when sourcing and to actually talk to clients and candidates out on the market "[...]"All to get a better picture of the market, because I think it's a lack of knowledge. It's all built up by accustomed behaviors and it's easy to return to your own networks" (Consultant, female, Company 5, 2014).

In other words, to find the women and 'walk the extra mile' in the search process, was often expressed as necessity. However, the way of talking about it differed. As some asserted that the effort of searching broader and further down in the hierarchies was meaningful, others expressed it differently;

> "To run a business is not a democracy or question of justice [...] If you look at this from a Swedish perspective, one can say that we don't take advantage of half of the citizens' potential of managing companies…sure you can say that, but then you could ask again, have the business gone bad? No, Swedish companies haven't done badly." (Partner and Consultant, male, Company 7, 2014)

Another recurrent theme in discourse was that women were more invisible and not as good at supporting each other through networks in comparison to men. "They are not really that good at socializing... and then I think that they, in general, are bad at recommending each other. I don't know why it is like that" (Consultant, female, Company 2, 2014). The lack of strong networks for women was often raised and a potential explanation for this, discussed by some of the interviewees, was that boys historically and in their childhood had consorted more together in groups through military training and soccer teams. Girls on the other hand, often turned to one or two very close friends.

In summary, the consultants and researchers in general talked about women as a valuable resource that could be found more easily if extra time and effort was dedicated to the search. This was stated to be necessary as there was an idea that competent women are out there, but also because the supply of women in certain industries and sectors was perceived as limited.

Finding the 'Right Match'
When discussing the search methods more practically, the consultants and researchers own networks, larger internal networks and databases were described as the most important tools. Networks were used both to find suitable candidates, but also to a great extent to get recommendations about other potential candidates. It was stated by the majority of the male consultants that their personal networks naturally included more men than women and it was a common perception that the internal databases predominantly contained men. One of the partners argued that even though the number of women had increased compared to fifteen years ago, "it's not possible to force that process" (Partner and Consultant, male, Company 7, 2014). In contrast, three executive search firms took initiatives and actions freestanding from client commissions; such as mapping industries to identify women and include them in their networks and databases.

The importance of long-lasting relationships with clients and candidates was further emphasized. One of the female consultants explained how they tried to meet up with candidates, outside commissions, since it was important for them to know their pool of candidates. It was also described that it sometimes happened that someone at the agency already were familiar with the candidates before the search process started. Still, when describing the executive search sector as such, the extensive use of the search consultants and researchers own networks were considered as an essential part of the problem. Using those networks was considered to be safe and trustworthy, which was described as an advantage under the pressure of time. One of the interviewees emphasized this, stating; "The firm is for-profit-business and we do what is most profitable for us" (Partner and Consultant, male Company 6, 2014). The time pressure problem was also raised by another interviewee who stipulated that; "I don't have the possibility to dedicate more time just to find a woman; that's the problem" (Partner and Consultant, male Company 10, 2014). It was further noticed by one of the consultants that if a search profile fitted several commissions, the same candidates easily ended up on the lists. "If four out of five were men on the previous list, there will be four out of five men on the next one as well" (Consultant, female, Company 5, 2014).

When discussing possible pitfalls in the search in practice, one consultant stated that it is easy to talk about the larger question of equality in recruitment but that there is always a

risk to make stupid choices when just pressing yes- and no-buttons in a computer system. He argued that when there are 200 CVs waiting to be scrutinized, the desire to finish often became stronger than the analysis behind the CV. Another male consultant talking about pitfalls in the networking practice stated that; "For example I am, not because I want to but because I have to, a member of Royal Bachelors Club. Only men patting each other's backs" [...]"It's like a nonconformist church, you keep together and help each other" (Partner and Consultant, male, Company, 10, 2014). Still, he clarified that he thought this network should be open for women as well. When talking about corresponding networks for women, he mentioned a specific network for women although he could not remember its name.

Discussing a more extensive search to find women, one of the male consultants asserted that one has to consider the risks when searching in other industries and at lower hierarchical levels. Nevertheless, in that question another consultants reasoned differently; she stated that there was a need for internal objectives in order to create incitements for less routinely dictated search. "If you as a researcher have 10-15 perfect candidates; what is it that will push you to search even more when we have other commissions waiting?"[…] "What you measure is what you get" (Consultant, female, Company 5, 2014). At this firm, internal objectives had not yet been introduced but future plans for internal goals on the long-list were investigated.

The composition of the long- and short-list was argued to depend heavily on the industry and function of the position. Still, the interviewees considered the problem to be that few female candidates entered the long-list in general and that it 'naturally' was a predominant part of male candidates. Clients more often stated 'we would like to see some women on the list', than 'we would like to see some men on the list', because that was often a given. Yet, examples of the latter were provided for positions in female dominated sectors. The scarcity of female candidates on the lists was further made visible when one consultant talked about incitements for searching more extensively for women, "you have to find a rationale behind it [...] that's actually when you can 'surprise' the client, because as a consultant, you cannot only deliver what the client expects, but something more" (Partner and Consultant, female, Company 8, 2014). Another eloquent example stressed by one male consultant was that it would be 'good' if one out of three final candidates was female.

In sum, the importance of finding the 'right match', based on competences, was strongly emphasized. Still, it was explained how time pressure and convenience affected the search process and that the idea to 'walk the extra mile' to find female candidates, often failed to unfold in practice.

Evaluating the 'Right Match'

After identifying a number of qualified candidates, these were evaluated through personal interviews and, in some firms, job tests. It was emphasized that evaluation ought to be based on competences and what that person can contribute with in the new position. Thus, the importance of objectivity in evaluation was raised. Still, subjectivity showed to be prevalent in practice. This ambiguity is presented below, starting with the importance of objectivity in the way they talked, followed by a description of how subjectivity affected their practices.

The Importance of Objectivity

When talking about evaluation of candidates, the question of objectivity and subjectivity was raised. Ideas that objectivity was important and that one always must consider what is best for the client were shared by the interviewees. Once again, it was maintained that it was all about finding the 'right match' and that evaluation should be made based on what value, in terms of competences, the person can bring to the specific role. In many cases, this put pressure on the consultant doing the interviewing because female candidates were explained to sometimes devalue and not fully emphasize the competence they possessed. This was identified by the majority of the interviewees. In contrast, men facing the same situation tended to believe in themselves and emphasized their achievements to a greater extent. In order to illustrate the different ways of marketing oneself, one of the female interviewees exemplified with an interview situation where one woman and one man were the final candidates. When asking about driver's license in the interview, which in that case was vital for the job, the male candidate confirmed that he had a driver´s license, while the female candidate said no. In reality, none of them had a driving license. The man, however, said yes since he planned to get the license before the employment started. This was further argued by the same interviewee as a potential pitfall since it is the job of the consultant to be conscious about how people express and market themselves in different ways. In line with this, it was highlighted how important it was to see the person behind the CV when evaluating candidates and not only judge on the way they talked about themselves. One of the female interviewees emphasized the importance of discussing among search consultants whether the same demands really were put on female candidates and male candidates. In other words, she questioned if female candidates had to 'tick every box' in the search profile in order to advance in the process, while men advanced just because you knew them better beforehand.

Struggling with Subjectivity

In the evaluation practice, the use of competency based interviews, psychometric tests and well-defined search profiles were claimed to make it easier for the search consultants to be objective. Still, it was described how they sometimes wrestled with subjectivity and that it was almost impossible not to be subjective. "We're only human, so that's the way it is" (Partner and Consultant, male, Company 6, 2014). The same consultant argued that it is important to keep in mind that you choose for the sake of the client and that even though one has a personal favorite, the client might favor someone else. Another consultant said "sometimes you may think that you are objective, but in reality you're affected unconsciously" (Researcher, male, Company 1, 2014). A similar thought was raised by another male consultant stating that when he scrutinized his primitive conceptualizations of a final candidate, he pictured a man and saw a woman as an exception. Subjectivity in their practices was not, however, raised as problematic by all. On the contrary, one of the consultants claimed that it is actually his job to choose a person that he likes, not a friend he assured, but a person that appealed to him. He argued that, it was vital since he wanted to know whether the candidate was a good match and would fit in the company culture. It was further argued that there was no difference in the evaluation of male- and female candidates, at least not for a 'skilled' recruitment consultant. Yet, there were exceptions. One male consultant said that while he, himself, did not find it problematic to evaluate female

candidates, he had a co-worker who felt that it was hard because he was easily charmed by women and risked to lose the ability to evaluate in such situations.

Many of the contracts for these types of positions included long working hours and a high number of travel days. Therefore, factors such as family life and children were explained to be essential to discuss in the evaluation practice, both for the sake of the client and the candidate. Some asked these types of questions straight out while others asked more about the private life and spare time in general, which usually made the interviewees bring up the topic themselves. The majority stated that family life needed to be taken into consideration in order to assure that the candidate could fill the role and balance work- and private life. Some of the interviewees, however, stated that this question weighed heavier when it came to women than men. It was argued that, in that aspect, it was still very conservative. This was confirmed by a male researcher stating that he "'even' ask men about what their wife is working with, how many children they have and how old they are; that is an important element, but maybe not to the same extent" (Researcher, male, Company 1, 2014). Consistently, one consultant stipulated that "I'm awful, so I ask about children and that stuff; I can raise that question with men as well" (Consultant, male, Company 11, 2014). A female consultant further argued for the importance of this factor in relation to the aim of finding the 'right match', stating that: "Of course I can't present a candidate who is going to be at home for nine months, irrespective of how good she is" (Consultant, female, Company 2, 2014). When asking if she thought similar when a male candidate was about to have a child, the answer was no. In contrast, a female consultant maintained the possibility to make a difference by not taking it into account when a female candidate was newly married, pregnant, or had one child and might want another. If the focus is to find the best possible candidate based on competences, factors such as family life should not affect the decision, she argued. According to her, even though it might be more challenging, there were a lot of examples when strong female candidates had advanced in the process.

In sum, to be objective and always focus on competences and what is best for the client when evaluating candidates was stressed. However, subjectivity in the evaluation practice was revealed, especially visible in questions concerning family life and children.

The Ambiguous Question of Responsibility in Finding the 'Right Match'

When discussing the 'right match' and how the candidates were evaluated, the question whether the consultants and researchers felt that they had a responsibility as an industry, or individual firm to promote a greater inclusion of female candidates, evoked. This sense of responsibility was in general pervasive in the way they talked but was not reflected in their practices.

Do we have a Responsibility?

Everyone agreed that they had a main responsibility towards the clients, whom in turn, put their trust in the executive search firms to find the right match. However, the opinions differed whether they as an executive search firm and industry had a responsibility to enhance the process of recruiting women to top positions. The majority argued that they had some sort of responsibility either to highlight the question at their own firm and with the clients or to actively enhance the chances for women through a more extensive search process. One of the

interviewees believed that there was an indolence built into the structures that needed to be counteracted and that improvements could be achieved through tackling the problem on a local level. She expressed it as follows; "If we deliver a long-list without female candidates, the client has no chance to choose a female candidate either; and that is something that we and the entire industry needs to understand" (Consultant, female, Company 5, 2014). Another female interviewee asserted that, as a main actor, they have a responsibility, not only to highlight the question on the market, but also to be consultative and convince the client to not continue to follow old habits. Another male consultant partly disagreed, stating that they did not have a responsibility in the perspective of society; however, they did have a responsibility to counteract discrimination. This was also emphasized by another consultant;

> Consultant: "I don't think we have a responsibility in society…other than what an ordinary organization has"
> Interviewer: "But that's quite a lot. Isn't it?"
> Consultant: "Yes, when it comes to environmental questions. But if you start a company today, you can't say that you have a responsibility to hire a certain number of people… that's just not right." (Consultant, male, Company 8, 2014)

A frequently discussed theme was if change needed to be provoked through client demand or if they as an executive search firm could speed up the process. It was argued that the process could be forced by a combination of both 'push' and 'pull' factors; meaning that the executive search firm could push through establishing internal goals, challenge the client and not be too comfortable when searching for candidates. At the same time, the process could be forced more effectively if there was a 'pull' from the market and if the client demanded a greater mix of candidates on the lists. However, there were also disagreeing voices, stating that their main and only responsibility was to serve the client and that they therefore could not have an own agenda, such as internal goals on the long- or short-list. One of the interviewees expressed it as follows; "Then I have to ask myself again; what's really my mission; to diversify the business world or to serve my client? [...] the basic idea is not to find women in particular" (Researcher, male, Company 1, 2014). Irrespective of if they felt responsibility or not, the majority believed that the process of enhancing women to top positions required a 'pull' effect from the clients.

Do we take Responsibility?
Looking at it from a practical point of view, there were diverse perceptions of how far the 'pull' effect had come today. According to two of the interviewees, the clients' demand for female candidates on the lists had become increasingly common. One female interviewee stipulated that during the last five years every one of the clients had made such demands either on the long- or short list, while another male interviewee said that only one of ten clients made such demands. Some meant that far from everyone made such demands.

Looking at it from a 'push' point of view, one of the executive search firms had the ambition to include at least one female candidate on the long list. Otherwise, there were no executive search firms which had set internal goals or created incitements for a more extensive search. It happened that potential female candidates were mapped in industries

where it was a scarcity of women, but otherwise it was up to each consultant in each commission to 'walk the extra mile' to find female candidates.

Almost all of the interviewees talked about the problem as a development that will take time and cannot be changed over a day. The difference was that some of the interviewees expressed that they thought that the development could be forced up in speed, while the majority claimed that time will solve the problem. It was further stressed that the question was complex and multifaceted and that many different actors in society needed to take responsibility. A recurrent idea was that the client companies hold the main responsibility in the question since they are the ones that take the ultimate decision. Other actors whom were assigned responsibility were women themselves who needed to be at the forefront and improve their networking, parents in how they raised their children, couples in how they designed their lives and companies in how they established corporate cultures and supported women to advance in the corporate ladder.

Hence, a sense of responsibility as an industry or individual firm was in general prevalent in the way the consultants and researchers talked, but not reflected in their practices.

Discussion

The development of the recruitment recommendations written during W2T (2003-2005) was considered to be successful since the project raised awareness and made the consultants dedicate time to reflect upon the question. However, the participants only vaguely remembered if and how the recommendations were integrated into the practices. None of the firms actively utilized the recommendations as guidelines in their recruitment process today. As Eriksson-Zetterquist and Styhre (2008) stated, reflection is of high importance but practical action is needed in order to reach substantial change. The question thus remains if more progress could have been made if the recommendations would have been communicated and integrated to a greater extent.

Although none of the consultants and researchers (henceforth recruiters) in the firms showed to engage in direct discriminatory behavior, gender-based barriers for female candidates showed to remain in the studied executive search firms today. By revealing and manifesting gaps between practical- and discursive consciousness one may detect actions of doing gender but also raise awareness necessary to bring about change (Mathieu, 2009). As previously mentioned, discursive consciousness in this paper is limited to the way the interviewees talk and express themselves according to their values and beliefs and practical consciousness is defined as what they say that they actually do.

The Critical Gap in the Search for the 'Right Match'

West and Zimmerman (1987) conceptualized gender as socially constructed and that individuals in society participate in 'doing' gender each time differences between the sexes, which are not natural, essential and biological, are created. When doing this, typical 'masculine' and 'feminine' roles are produced and reproduced (West & Zimmerman, 1987). In general, the executive search firms considered the 'limited' supply of female candidates to be an impediment, especially in certain industries and functions. Thus, participants of the executive search industry appeared to unconsciously identify the man as the 'norm', while the

woman was considered to be something 'new'. This was for instance visible in the idea that women do not 'pop up' as often as men. Hence, female candidates were portrayed as exceptions or, as one female consultant expressed it, a way to 'surprise' the client.

Based on the idea of 'doing' gender, it has been argued that it is also essential to acknowledge ways of 'undoing gender' in micro-level activities (Butler, 2004; Deutsch, 2007). In an attempt to do this, the authors of this paper reveal differences in what people express discursively, their conceptualizations and beliefs, and what they say that they actually do in practice, often unconsciously and reflexively (Mathieu, 2009). In the case of executive search firms it was discursively agreed upon that their mission was to find the candidate that was the right or the best match for the client. It was also stated that women possess a great part of the competence and that they are a valuable resource. Within the frame of discursive consciousness, it was further recognized that there was a need to search extensively and 'walk the extra mile' in order to find the right competence, as it might be so that the 'perfect match' does not exist in the networks that are the most obvious or the 'closest'. However, looking at the practical consciousness, the aim of finding the 'perfect match' was in a way abandoned. It was described how potential candidates often were found in the executive search firm´s own databases and networks. These networks and databases normally contained more men and in combination with the time pressure, experienced by many of the recruiters, it seemed to lead to continuation of old habits. This was evident in expressions such as: "The firm is for-profit-business and we do what is most profitable for us" (Partner & Consultant, male, Company 6, 2014) and "I don't have the possibility to dedicate more time just to find a woman; that's the problem" (Partner & Consultant, male, Company 10, 2014).

Even if the supply was argued to be dependent on the industry and function, male candidates were in general in majority both on the long- and short-lists. The structure of the lists showed, in conformity with Tienari et al. (2013) and Meriläinen et al. (2013), that men indirectly are accepted as the 'right match'. Still, it was ensured that women possess a great part of the competence and that they are 'out there'. In order to find this competence, it was discursively held that extensive search was necessary. In practice, however, time pressure and indolence were explained to inhibit a more extensive search. Nevertheless, one consultant stated that he 'had' to be a member of the Royal Bachelors Club and accordingly had time to go to its gatherings. Seemingly, there was time to network at such gatherings but not to 'walk the extra mile' to find female candidates. A possible explanation for this could be that this type of networking is known to the recruiters and limited in time while the frame for walking the extra mile is more indefinite. Still, it can be argued to be a pitfall where the best candidate risks going unseen.

What is revealed above is a critical gap between an advanced discursively held awareness and level of reflection and a practical consciousness indicating that the recruiters are caught in old patterns. Eriksson-Zetterquist and Styhre (2008) found that reflection and action were separated when examining W2T. In line with their reasoning, it could be argued that even though the recruiters have reflected upon the issues, there was a lack of practical action. To reach substantial changes, practical action would be needed (Eriksson-Zetterquist and Styhre, 2008), which is not visible in this case.

Nevertheless, there were also exceptions from the advanced discursive consciousness, for instance visible in the following statement; "To run a business is not a democracy or

question of justice [...] If you look at this from a Swedish perspective, one can say that we do not take advantage of half of the citizens' potential of managing companies…sure you can say that, but then you could ask again, have the business gone bad? No, Swedish companies have not done badly." (Partner and Consultant, male, Company, 2014). In line with West and Zimmerman´s (1987) reasoning, gender is in this case reproduced by distinguishing between the statutes of sex categories, assuming that it is 'not as meaningful' to search for female candidates. According to him, men have performed well before and are a safe choice since they surely will do it good also in the future. What was remarkable, however, was that the consultant did not question if Swedish companies might have done better if more women held top management positions.

Similarly, gender was done in the creation and confirmation of chosen truths such as; women are unwilling, do not possess sufficient competence and that they are not prepared to sacrifice the time required for these types of positions. Believing in and taking such ideas as truths might affect the recruiters in how they carry out the search practices. In that way, it can be argued that gender, as West and Zimmerman (1987) state, is done and that men and women are separated in terms of attitudes and readiness for a position already before the process starts. Chosen truths can hence be argued to inform the recruiters to take the 'easy way out' and accordingly 'legitimize' practices that excludes women.

Summarizing the critical gap, the search for the 'right match', there is an advanced awareness and reflection over the fact that fewer female candidates enter the long- and short-lists in general. Further, there were many ideas of how the situation could be improved. Still, time-pressure and the custom of following old habits when conducting the search practices seem to hinder the recruiters to include more female candidates. As the persistency and reflexivity of following old habits is hard to break, the problem is complex and the man continues to be reproduced as the 'norm' for top management positions. It can be argued that the inexistence of practical action also unfolds an action, which in this case will inhibit change and chances for improvement (see also Eriksson-Zetterquist & Styhre, 2008).

The Critical Gap in Evaluating the 'Right Match'

The custom of following old norms and the prevalence of gender biases in organizational practices (Kanter, 1977; Acker, 1992; 1998; Martin, 2003; Ibarra et al., 2013) is also evident in the second gap identified.

People engaged in practicing gender do so without being fully aware of it and without engaging in it deliberately (Martin, 2003). To reach the roots of subtle gender biases the dynamics in the leadership-followership relationship and the stereotypical traits valued in executives, have to be modified and challenged (Oakley, 2000). In line with Martins (2003) and Ibarra et al. (2013), no deliberate and direct will to exclude or discriminate female candidates in the evaluation practice was noticed. However, subtle gender-based barriers for female candidates were revealed.

In the discourse of the majority of the interviewees, the immense importance of objectivity in the evaluation was emphasized based on the notion that it is important to always see what is best for the client. Thus, a candidate should be judged on qualifications and competences only; this because their main mission, once again, is to find the 'right match' or the most qualified candidate. In practice, the search consultants stated that they used

competency based interviews, psychometric tests and well-defined search profiles to ensure objectivity in evaluation. Still, subjectivity showed to influence the evaluations. This had been recognized and thought of by a few, visible for instance in the statement: "we are only human, so that's the way it is" (Partner & Consultant, male, Company 6, 2014). However, subjectivity was also revealed in expressions by persons who regarded themselves as being objective. This was evident in questions regarding family situation and children, which according to three consultants weighed heavier in the evaluation of female candidates. This was further pronounced by a male researcher and a male consultant who stated that they 'even' ask men questions about children sometimes and a female consultant talking about finding the 'right match' who said; "But of course I cannot present a candidate who is going to be at home for nine months, irrespective of how good she is" (Consultant, female, Company 2, 2014). That, however, was according to her not as important when a male candidate was about to have a child. In contrast, one female interviewee stated that since their focus is to find the best possible candidate, factors such as family life should not affect the decision. According to her, even though it might be more challenging, there were a lot of examples when strong female candidates had advanced in the process at her firm, despite being newly married or pregnant. This however was an exception. In general, it could be argued that in the evaluation of female candidates not only competences mattered, it was also more important for her to be able to balance home- and work life. This could be seen as an example of doing gender (West and Zimmerman, 1987), since the typical roles of 'masculine' and 'feminine' conduct, were reproduced. It is also consistent with Melamed´s (1995) findings that domestic responsibilities when competing for higher executive positions weighed heavier for women. According to Mathieu (2009), this further constitutes a critical gap, where the interviewees talked about the importance of objectivity in the evaluation of candidates while simultaneously practicing subjectivity in the questions they asked during interviews and the differential valuation of answers.

The above described gap reveals subtle gender-based barriers for women that lie embedded in cultural assumption as well as organizational structures and practices (Acker, 1992; 1998; Martin, 2003; Ibarra et al., 2013). Another example where gender showed to be influential was in the practice of assessment. The majority of the recruiters assured that no more women than men risked to be filtered out in the evaluation process. Still, during the discussion on assessment and evaluation of female candidates, it was frequently mentioned that women tended to devalue their competences when they presented themselves. This put pressure on the search consultant who had to try harder to 'see the person behind the CV' and encourage women to a greater extent. To assess and evaluate a female candidate was, however, argued not to be a problem if the search consultant was 'skilled'. In line with this, one consultant asked herself whether the same demands really were put on female- and male candidates or if women had to 'tick every box' in the search profile while men just happened to advance. What can be deduced from this discussion is that they found it easier to evaluate men because they were perceived as being better at 'marketing' themselves and in assessment situations of top managers that way of talking is seemingly what the search consultants are used to. This might be as Kanter (1977) suggest; a result of following old norms and an indication that gender influence organizational practices (Acker, 1992; 1998; Martin, 2003; Ibarra et al., 2013) of assessment and evaluation. The way of conducting the practice, was,

however, not questioned by any of the interviewees. Instead they considered the female candidates inability to market themselves, to be a part of the problem. In relation to the discussion on subjectivity and objectivity it could therefore be argued that the recruiters indirectly are subjective. This is revealed when they state that they have to be more 'skilled' to foster- and objectively evaluate female competence as well as in the idea that they have to try harder to see the person behind the CV.

To sum up, there is a critical gap in the practice of evaluation where the interviewees discursively expressed the immense importance of being objective and focusing only on competences in the evaluation of candidates, while they simultaneously practiced subjectivity in the questions they asked during interviews and in the valuation of the answers.

The discussion on the two previously described gaps in the search and evaluation practice can be argued to capture the complexity of the problem; women´s challenges in reaching the top spheres depend both on organizational structures and organizational practices (Acker & Van Houten, 1974; Bielby & Baron, 1986; Oakley, 2000, Acker, 2009; Holgersson, 2003) that are informed by and produced and reproduced in conjunction with more deeply-rooted and subtle barriers (Weyer, 2007; Acker, 2009; Van den Brink et al., 2010). To bring about change, actions on different levels, both structural and interactional have been suggested to be a solution (Kanter, 1977; West & Zimmerman, 1987; Martin, 1990; Wahl et al., 2001). This would also require a change in mindset and an effort to challenge the stereotypical views valued in executives (Oakley, 2000). The question of who holds responsibility to enhance change is, however, ambiguous and responsibility seems to be easier to talk about than to take.

The Critical Gap in the Ambiguous Question of Responsibility

All of the interviewees stated that they had a responsibility towards the clients, as they put their trust in them in their mission to find the 'right match'. However, in the question of responsibility to enhance the progress of recruiting women to top positions, the opinions differed whether the interviewees considered themselves, as an executive search firm or an industry to have a responsibility. The majority argued that they had some sort of responsibility, either to highlight the question at the firm and with the clients or to actively enhance the chances for women through a more extensive search process. The discursively held values and beliefs of the majority was hence that they as an executive search firm and sector needed to take responsibility in the question.

Still, in practice none of the interviewees claimed that they actively took responsibility. As described earlier, there were many ideas about how they could improve their search practices and one female consultant even discussed the possibility of internal goals on the long-list. Still, no one really took action. Instead they argued that they most probably would put in more time and effort if there was a 'pull' effect from the clients and if there was a greater demand for female candidates on the lists. As Eriksson-Zetterquist and Styhre (2008) suggest, it seems easier to continue along the path of reflexivity rather than the path of action. This is also what Mathieu (2009) call a critical gap between practical- and discursive consciousness. The sense of responsibility expressed discursively by the majority of the recruiters was not in line with how they said that they conducted their daily work.

On the other hand, there were also a few that emphasized that they did not have a responsibility to speed up the progress, because their only mission was to satisfy the client. One interviewee expressed it like this; "Then I have to ask myself again; what's really my mission; to diversify the business world or to serve my client? [...] the basic idea is not to find women in particular" (Researcher, male, Company 1, 2014). Not surprisingly, they also argued that a 'pull' effect from the market would make them more interested in including more female candidates on the long-list. The views of how strong the 'pull' effect actually was today were, however, diverse. Some argued that there were always such demands while others said that it was rare, or far from everyone that made such demands. The strength of the 'pull' effect goes beyond the frame of this analysis. What can be said however is that those who think that they do not have a responsibility and neither do anything to actively speed up the progress are not a source of what Mathieu (2009) would call a critical gap of practical- and discursive consciousness. Instead they could be argued to contribute to the confirmation and acceptance of a male candidate as the 'right match', consistent with Tienari et al´s (2013) findings. The reproduction of that norm, however, can also be argued to prevail among the ones who claimed responsibility but did not take action.

Almost all of the interviewees expressed the problem to be multifaceted, and that women, as individuals, need to take responsibility themselves to be at the forefront and network. Other actors assigned responsibility were parents, schools and organizations. It was also a common perception that it will take time. Since the problem is multifaceted and consists of invisible barriers arising from cultural assumptions, organizational structures and practices and interaction patterns (Ibarra et al, 2013) this might be the unfortunate truth. It could, however, be discussed whether the way of conceptualizing the problem as multifaceted and time-dependent might legitimize not taking responsibility.

Further, it could be questioned if the executive search firms can contribute to speed up the progress, or not. On this matter, there were different views irrespective of if they had expressed that they need to take responsibility or not. The majority however, thought that they themselves could not do much. Instead it was commonly stated that the real responsibility lied in the hands of the client companies who took the ultimate decision on whom to recruit. Only one consultant directly expressed that they, in that way, might be a part of the problem stating that: "If we deliver a long-list without female candidates, the client has no chance to choose a female candidate either; and that's something that we and the entire industry needs to understand" (Consultant, female, Company 5, 2014).

Summarizing the ambiguous question of responsibility, a gap has been revealed. Responsibility to include more female candidates was considered to be a given by the majority, still, no one said that they actually took action. There were also those who disclaimed responsibility and neither did anything to speed up the progress. The absence of practical action could be argued to contribute to the acceptance and confirmation of the male candidate as the 'right match'.

Conclusion

Departing from a set of recommendations for recruitment developed during the EU project W2T (2003-2005), it has been investigated in what way gender-related barriers for female

candidates unfold in the executive search process in Sweden. Even though none of the executive search firms utilized the recommendations as guidelines, no firm showed a deliberate engagement in discriminatory behavior against female candidates. Despite this, men in general, turned out to be in majority on both the long- and short-list of qualified candidates. By exposing critical gaps between practical- and discursive consciousness (Mathieu, 2009), possible explanations for the prevalence of favoring men in the search process, were identified. Three critical gaps were discovered.

The first gap, the search for the 'right match', revealed that recruiters believed that female competence was of great value and that women were to be found among possible candidates. Discursively it was also stressed that there was a need to search extensively and 'walk the extra mile' in order to find the 'right match'. However, within the frame of practical consciousness, the aim of finding the 'right match' was in a way abandoned as the recruiters stated that they did not dedicate the extra time and effort to search for female candidates. This implies that men continuously are accepted as the 'right match' or as Tienari et al. (2013) expressed it, reproduced as the norm for top management positions.

In the next gap, concerning the evaluation of the 'right match', the recruiters discursively expressed the immense importance of being objective and evaluating candidates based on competences. However, the results from the study simultaneously revealed that the recruiters practiced subjectivity in the questions they asked during interviews and in the valuation of answers. This was particularly evident in the question of family life and children, which in practice seemed to have greater implications for female candidates compared to the situation of male candidates.

The third gap, highlighting the question of responsibility in the search for the 'right match', revealed that the majority of the recruiters discursively expressed a sense of responsibility, either to highlight the question or to actively engage themselves in a more extensive search process. Still, within the frame of practical consciousness none of the recruiters seemed to actively take responsibility by applying actions for how to change the current situation. Even though a lot of ideas flourished about how they could 'push' to include more female candidates, the majority demanded a greater 'pull' effect from the clients.

The gaps identified indicate, in line with Eriksson-Zetterquist and Styhre (2008), that the recruiters have reflected upon the issues, but that there is a lack of practical action, necessary to bring about substantial change. This was also revealed in the case of the recruitment recommendations written during W2T that raised awareness but did not show to permeate the practices of executive search firms today. The lack of practical action indicates that the persistency and reflexivity of following old habits is hard to break (Eriksson-Zetterquist and Styhre, 2008). It has been concluded that the inexistence of practical action also unfolds an action, which in this case inhibit change and chances for improvement. Hence, the lack of action or the 'non-doing' contributes to the acceptance and confirmation of the 'right match' as male.

In this paper practical consciousness has been studied in accordance with what the interviewees say that they actually do. Others, like Czarniawska (2014) suggest that studying practices as such could be made for instance through observations. Following this, further research on their 'actual' way of working would contribute to the research on how gender unfolds in the practices of executive search. Another suggestion for research is to more

closely investigate the strength of the 'pull' effect from the clients and their possible demand for the executive search firms to more actively 'push' to include more female candidates.

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Appendix

List of interviews

Company	Group	Name	Labelled
W2T		X	Project Manager W2T, female
1	Participating recruitment agency	X	Partner & Consultant, female
1	Participating recruitment agency	X	Partner & Consultant, female
1	Participating recruitment agency	x	Researcher, male
2	Participating recruitment agency	X	Consultant, female
2	Participating recruitment agency	X	Partner & Consultant, male
3	Participating recruitment agency	X	Chief of executive search, female
4	Participating recruitment agency	X	Consultant, male
4	Participating recruitment agency	X	Director, male
5	Other executive search firms today	X	Consultant, female
6	Other executive search firms today	X	Partner & Consultant, male
6	Other executive search firms today	X	Researcher, female
7	Other executive search firms today	X	Partner & Consultant, male
8	Other executive search firms today	X	Partner & Consultant, female
8	Other executive search firms today	X	Consultant, male
9	Other executive search firms today	X	Partner, female
10	Other executive search firms today	X	Managing Director, male
2	Participant W2T.	X	Participant A, female
4	Participant W2T.	X	Participant B, female
3	Participant W2T.	X	Participant C, male
2	Participant W2T.	X	Participant D, male
4	Participant W2T.	x	Participant E, male