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The Gendered Construction of Technical Self-Confidence: Women's Negotiated Positions in Male-dominated, Technical Work Settings

Helen Peterson

Linköping University, Sweden

ABSTRACT

Studies show that in order to become a successful, respected and trusted, technical expert it is essential to display technical self-confidence, competitiveness and ambition. However, women in technical work settings often find it difficult to adjust to this work ideal. Rather than promoting themselves they choose to understate their technical competence. This article argues that the display of low technical self-confidence is a strategy used by women in order to become accepted in a work setting permeated by a technical and masculine work ideal. Women who try to conform to the competitive technical work ideal meet with disapproval since they fail to perform in accordance with gender-appropriate behaviour. Women in technical work settings are thus confronted with a double-bind dilemma that they need to develop strategies to cope with. By displaying lack of technical self-confidence they do not challenge the male supremacy and are hence accepted by their colleagues.

KEYWORDS

Work-ideal; Gender-appropriateness; Double-bind dilemma



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INTRODUCTION

"Women in general are much more inclined to tone down their own competence. Many studies have proved the same thing. In a job interview this is important to take into consideration - that they might not sell themselves to the same degree as the men".
(Peter)

The quote above is from an interview with Peter, a manager in a Swedish IT consultant company. Peter is describing the challenge with recruiting women IT consultants. Although his male-dominated company had the intention to employ more women their efforts were unsuccessful, partly because women lacked the appropriate education to work as IT consultants. Another problem, highlighted by Peter, was that many women also failed to perform in accordance with expectations of appropriate behaviour for a successful IT consultant. In a job interview the women thus risked being assessed as unfit for the job as their lack of technical self-confidence could be interpreted as a real lack of competence.

This article puts forward a non-essentialist analysis of women's lack of technical self-confidence and of their reluctance to sell themselves as competent technical experts. Drawing on interviews with women and men employed in two Swedish IT consultant companies the article does this in three steps. First, it describes the problems women IT consultants faced in a work setting permeated by an entrepreneurial work ideal. Second, it analyses how the double-bind dilemma that the women IT consultants experienced as a result of the work ideal influenced their career possibilities. Third, it suggests that the low technical self-confidence is a strategy used to cope with a work situation permeated by a double-bind dilemma. By looking into the empirical detail the analysis proposes that far from being a static, 'forever' state, women's lack of technical self-confidence is a product of workplace dynamics. Change is possible, but this change is not only the responsibility of the women themselves, but involves their relations with managers, colleagues and clients.

The concept 'work ideal' refers to an idea about the necessary qualities of a 'good' worker; knowledge, skills, personal conduct and behaviour. Work ideals are institutionalized in, for example, the formal design of assessment and ranking methods used by the management for recruitment, promotion and dismissal of employees. Moreover, work ideals are embedded in organizational culture and manifested informally in jargon, myths, stories, rituals, management style and informal socialising (Tienari, Quack and Theobald 2002). In this way work ideals create a notion of what behaviours

are 'suitable' and 'appropriate' for individuals who have certain roles and positions and of what performance is needed to fit into the organizational culture (Fournier 1999; Mumby and Stohl 1991). Those who conform to the 'proper' behaviour are rewarded and promoted while those who do not conform risk being deemed as unfit for the work (Bird 2003; Dryburgh 1999; Rees and Garnsey 2003).

As Joan Acker (1990,1992) highlights, although described in gender-neutral terms, work ideals are often gendered and based on traditional masculine traits and qualities, and on what traditionally has been men's way of life (see also Benschop and Doorewaard 1998; Tienari, Quack and Theobald 2002). In knowledge-intensive companies, such as IT consultant firms, the work ideal has been described as an entrepreneurial work ideal, i.e. a work ideal in line with the image of the successful, flexible, independent, aggressive, competitive, self-confident and self-reliant entrepreneur. Moreover, displaying initiative and an ability to sell oneself are important characteristics of an entrepreneurial work ideal. The entrepreneurial work ideal has been presented as more or less synonymous with qualities and traits traditionally perceived as masculine (Furusten 2004; Garsten and Jacobsson 2004; Kelan 2008).

In the next section of this article previous research relating to gendered work ideals and women's double-bind dilemma is introduced. The article then continues with a presentation of the methodology of the research project. Here the qualitative research approach, the empirical data and the interviewees are described in more detail. The research results and the analyses section focuses on three key themes. Firstly, the characteristics of the entrepreneurial work ideal in the IT consultant firms are discussed further. Following on from this discussion the interviewed women's different experiences of the work ideal are delineated and analysed in relation to the double-bind dilemma. The article concludes with some summarizing remarks and suggestions for future research.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Gendered Work Ideals

Gendered work ideals prescribe the appropriate behaviour, competence, skills and qualities for women and men at work in relation to an occupation's gender typing, i.e. 'the process through which occupations come to be seen as appropriate for workers with masculine or feminine characteristics' (Britton 2000, p.424). Gendered work ideals are thus linked to norms about femininity and masculinity, i.e. characteristics or qualities culturally associated with the categories 'female' and 'male' (Fondas 1997). Jobs are hence not gender neutral, but coded as suitable for women or men just as particular skills are not gender neutral, but strongly associated with the gender of workers (Acker 1992; Rasmussen 2001).

What is understood as 'appropriate' behaviour for women at work is

traditionally embedded in work norms concerning feminine emotional competence involving empathy; caring; co-operation; helpfulness; listening; interpersonal sensitivity; attentiveness of others and responsiveness to their needs; and, a focus on work relationships and collaboration (Fondas 1997). This feminine work ideal puts women in service work and care and nursing occupations that demand concern for people's needs and relations (Leidner 1991; Rasmussen 2004). Furthermore, Silvia Gherardi (1994) emphasizes that these attributes of femininity are characteristic of individuals that are marginalized or dependent in a subordinate relationship. According to Gherardi, these attributes: 'are the attributes of the powerless' (p.597).

The specific behaviour that the employees are rewarded for showing in a work setting permeated by a masculine work ideal is associated with stereotypical, 'appropriately masculine' behaviour. The traits culturally ascribed to men include an ability to be self-interested; efficient tough-minded; assertive; taking charge; and, control (Bird 2003; Britton 2000; Dryburgh 1999; Fondas 1997; Robinson and McIlwee 1991). Work settings dominated by a masculine work ideal are also often characterized by 'aggressive displays of technical self-confidence and hands-on ability [...] and devaluing the gender characteristics of women' (Wright 1996, p.86).

When masculine work ideals influence organizational processes of recruitment, evaluation and promotion they reinforce men's dominance in workplaces and favour men's career development (Bagilhole and Goode 2001; Knights and Richards 2003). For women the situation is radically different. The masculine work ideal signals to women that the rewarded and promoted ideal worker is a man, and that masculine characteristics and traits are prioritized and favoured (Katila and Meriläinen 1999). Using Rosemary Wright's (1996) way of expression, in these work settings, women: 'do not fit the cultural mould' (p.91). This might put women in a position where they feel uncomfortable and deviant (Adam et al 2006; Davies-Netzley 1998; Robinson and McIlwee 1991). As Wendy Faulkner points out, in engineering, women are invisible as engineers but visible as women (Faulkner 2007, 2009a). She uses the term 'gender in/authenticity' to refer to how the normative pressures: 'lead people to expect the gender norm (in this case, the man engineer) and to notice when they see something different (the woman engineer)' (Faulkner 2007, p.332). The consequence for many women is that they are forced to make:

'[...] severely constrained choices between accommodation and resistance. Those who wish to be successful often make the realistic assessment that this requires taking on, to the extent possible, the attributes of their successful male colleagues [...]' (Britton 2000, p.427).

However, taking on masculine attributes and trying to become 'one of the boys' is not a straightforward solution for women (Davies-Netzley 1998; Kvande 1999). The display of aggressive and assertive self-confidence, which

is prescribed by a masculine work ideal, is a: 'role with which most women are uncomfortable, even when they're capable of its performance' (Wright 1996, p.87; cf. also Adam et al 2006).

Women's Double-Bind Dilemma

A double-bind dilemma presents a person with two incompatible, mutually exclusive, but also desirable alternatives. According to Angela Trethewey (1999), the existence of masculine work ideals means that: 'Professional women are caught in a double-bind' (p.425). The double-bind dilemma was first described as experienced by women in management, but is applicable for women in general in male-dominated work settings (Jamieson 1995). The double-bind dilemma is a 'no-win' situation for women who want to adjust to a masculine work ideal since they also have to regard expectations on appropriate feminine behaviour, qualities and conduct (Bagilhole and Goode 2001; Sabattini 2007).

Women are thus measured against a double yardstick of gender appropriateness and masculine work ideals, which creates an untenable double-bind. If women act in ways that are consistent with appropriate femininity (e.g., by co-operating and showing empathy) they are considered as less competent and ineffective. If women instead act in ways that are consistent with the masculine work ideal (e.g. by displaying ambition and self-assertiveness) they are regarded as unfeminine and too aggressive (Jamieson 1995; Sabattini 2007).

According to another double-bind, women who speak out are immodest and will be shamed, while women who are silent will be ignored or dismissed (Sabattini 2007). In addition, previous research has pointed out that women's double-bind dilemma in technological work settings conveys the message that being identified as technically skilled is contradictory to being identified as feminine and as a woman (Cockburn 1992; Kendall 2000; Sundin 1998; Wajcman 1991). Women are thus never just right.

Adjusting to a masculine work ideal provokes disapproval from colleagues and managers if it entails women being perceived as too masculine and not appropriately feminine (Bagilhole and Goode 2001; Bird 2003; Dryburgh 1999; Kvande 1999; West and Zimmerman 1987). This means that even when women are behaving in ways that match a work ideal, this behaviour may not be perceived as positive or rewarded if this also means that they fail to fulfil expectations on gender-appropriate (or gender authentic) behaviour (Faulkner 2009a; Forseth 2005; Martin 2003). Thus, women could be forced to balance between conflicting masculine work culture and expectations on appropriate feminine behaviour (Sabattini 2007).

EMPIRICAL MATERIAL, RESEARCH METHOD AND ANALYTICAL APPROACH

This article draws on a qualitative study of working conditions in the Swedish

IT business. Twenty four interviews were performed in 2003 and 2004 with employees (10 women and 10 men) and managers (4 men) in two Swedish IT consultant companies. The largest company was founded in the 1980s, and employed approximately 250 employees in 2003. The smaller company was founded in the 1990s and employed about 50 employees. They were quantitatively male-dominated. Roughly 10-15 percent of the employees were women. The two companies were also dominated by men on a management level.

The IT consultants were employed as programmers, systems developers, systems architects and application architects. They worked on a consultant basis whereby they charged customers per hour for providing them with IT-related services. The informants were between 27-46 years old and their average age was 31.5. No more information will be given about the informants or the companies in order to preserve their full anonymity.

The interviews were based on open-ended questions encouraging the interviewees to tell a story. In 60 to 90 minutes long, semi-structured interviews, the informants were asked questions regarding their work; working conditions; work atmosphere; career possibilities; necessary qualities of a successful IT consultant; and, experiences of working in a male-dominated business and company.

The quotations have been translated from Swedish into English and they have also been slightly edited in order to enhance readability. Moreover, some shortening of the quotes, marked by; '[...]', has sometimes been necessary due to considerations of confidentiality. In the quotations; '...' implies a pause.

Quotes from 7 of the 10 interviewed men and all of the 10 interviewed women are reproduced in this article. Focus is on the interviews with the women. The quotations illustrate patterns in the empirical material concerning themes understood as essential, prominent aspects of the IT consultant work ideal. The dominant, normalizing and institutionalised way of talking about the qualities of the ideal worker is understood as reflecting, but also constituting, a normative work ideal (cf. Barry and Elmes 1997; Meriläinen et al. 2004). Notwithstanding the search for the dominant discourse and the prominent themes within the work ideal, irregularities, discrepancies and divergence from the pattern are also delineated in the analysis.

The fully transcribed interviews were analysed by a combination of narrative and discourse analysis in the search for the image of the ideal IT consultant (Liamputtong and Ezzy 2005). Narrative analysis emphasizes the interviewee's use of rhetoric in the creation of meaning and coherence. Interviews, understood as narratives, provide thematic, sequenced accounts of people's versions of events, of reality and of themselves (Dunford and

Jones 2000; Polkinghorne 1988). The specific kind of narrative focused upon in this article concerns the composing of self-narratives, i.e., how people define and present themselves and their social position (Liamputtong and Ezzy 2005; Wood and Kroger 2000). Self-narratives often involve so called positioning. Expressions like 'I am' aim to position the speaker and influence how others perceive them (Davies and Harré 1991). Positioning implies reference to belonging or non-belonging to a specific collective and could entail a speaker's affirmation of a certain position, but could also involve the speaker's rejection of another position ('I am not') (Davies and Harré 1991; Humphreys and Brown 2002; Meriläinen et al. 2004).

Positioning is not always formally defined, such as in the expression: "I am an IT consultant". Like all human activity that takes place within social relationships, positioning is complex and multifaceted. Moreover, it is not possible to claim any position. Positioning is an interactive activity since we do not only position ourselves, but also other people, and they position us (Davies and Harré 1991). As a result positioning can lead to some people being marginalised as powerless. The position of women is, for example, sometimes made explicit through categorising remarks using concepts such as 'girl', 'seducer', or 'beautiful' (Katila and Meriläinen 1999). By using these concepts the lack of other capacities or qualities is emphasized. Actors may also adopt or be forced to adopt multiple and shifting positions, something that might lead to a struggle with tension and experiences of fragmentation (Jorgensen 2002; Meriläinen et al. 2004).

In a work arena we position ourselves in relation to a work ideal that constitutes the most desirable position and the position that receives most positive consequences and rewards to posit. The primary goal when we position ourselves in a work arena is hence usually to claim the position of an ideal worker (Hardy, Palmer and Phillips 2000). Women's double-bind dilemma renders women's positioning as ideal workers difficult in work settings permeated by a masculine work ideal.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The Entrepreneurial Work Ideal

The interviewed IT consultants described a work ideal constituted by two different parts. A quote from the interview with Eric illustrates these two parts; one involving technical competence and one involving social competence (cf. Faulkner 2000, 2007). He described the necessary 'consulting competence' entailing appropriate behaviour in front of customers:

"You need to have social competence to read the mind of the person who you meet, to talk to the customer. You simply have to conduct yourself among people. Not everybody can do that. Before all you needed to be employed was the

technical competence. Today it is different since you also need this other competence". (Eric)

In other interviews the manner in which a successful and professional IT consultant should interact with customers was identified as to involve being able to sell. Elisabeth was asked what distinguished a successful consultant, highly valued by the managers, and she pointed out the consultant's ability to sell to customers:

"You are a successful systems developer if you meet a lot of customers and display: '*Look at me!* I am strong and skilled at communicating with customers. I am a good sales person'. It is important to be able to sell. That is almost the most important skill, I would say. It is all about selling hours". (Elisabeth)

Linda emphasized that the managers clearly encouraged the employees to act in a self-promoting manner: "Our managers say that it is more and more important that consultants have the ability to sell themselves". To be able to sell thus included selling your own competence as a consultant, and the consultant company's services, to customers in order to generate more profit for the consultant company. This capacity has also been put forward as important for the consultant business by other researchers. Staffan Furusten (2004) found, in his study on management consultants, that those consultants who managed to sell succeeded while those who failed to do so had limited career possibilities irrespective of their technical or documented competencies:

'To have the capacity to sell oneself and the firm one represents is also said to be one of the most important criteria that has to be met by anyone who wants to work as an expert on a consulting basis' (p.231).

The ability to sell was also described as important for building social networks not only with customers outside the company, but also with people inside the company. Carl remarked on why this kind of social competence within the company was so important:

"You need to promote yourself and create a good name in the company. [...] You need to keep yourself to the fore and be on the look-out for new projects. You could say that you have to sell yourself. Otherwise you will not get any project assignments". (Carl)

This internal sales process was also depicted by the interviewees as creating internal competitiveness between consultants. When Thomas was asked what it took to be a successful consultant he drew attention to the importance of self-promotion and selling to customers: "You need to have a lot of drive, and be very go-ahead". The work ideal for IT consultants thus involved self-enhancement and self-reliance, traditionally described as masculine traits. The field of sales has been described, for example by Damian Hodgson (2003), as an environment in which masculine values dominate such as autonomy, aggression and assertiveness. Daniel also linked this kind of behaviour to specifically men's conduct:

"I think that it is men who make most noise and take up most space. [...] Of course they have more influence". (Daniel)

To summarize, the crucial dimension of the work ideal for IT consultants was described as demonstrating an ambitious and enterprising attitude, but also the ability to promote and 'sell' oneself in a competitive work environment. To learn how to present oneself in accordance with the work ideal was important in order to gain the trust and confidence of both customers and employer (cf. Dryburgh 1999). This is a work ideal consistent with the characteristics of a masculine, entrepreneurial work ideal.

How then did the women and men manage to adapt to the consultant work ideal? There was an obvious difference between the interviews with the women and the men. The men did not reflect over the work ideal, but reported, in a fairly unproblematic way how they adjusted to the work ideal. When asked about their strengths as consultants they emphasized how they managed to juggle both social and technical demands. Michael answered the questions about his strengths as a consultant in the following way: "I have displayed a power of initiative and completed the tasks I have undertaken". Hugo explained how he had made himself "indispensable for the company" by using the strategy to be involved in as many projects as possible. To succeed with that strategy he explained it was essential for him to "sell himself". Alexander emphasised how he mastered another quality important for a successful IT consultant - to be able to learn how to work with unfamiliar technical tools:

"You learn as the project progresses. And you hope that no one will notice that you don't know what you are doing. It's a bit cynical actually. Of course I don't lie... but I might not mention that I lack the specific technical competence needed. I know I will learn quickly". (Alexander)

The women however disclosed quite a contrary picture. The remaining part of this article will focus on the women's positioning in relation to the work ideal.

I am not... as Good as the Guys?

In the interviews the women repeatedly reported problems with adjusting to the work ideal. The women, for example, opposed the demands to sell to customers and to promote themselves. Camilla was asked if she could describe a quality she possessed, which she thought was valuable in her work as an IT consultant and she answered as follows:

“I think it is important, for a consultant, to be able to listen to the customer and what they want. And I think I am quite good at that. But I am not a seller type. I don't have a business talent and I am not that kind of person who constantly thinks about generating new projects. I know that they want us to be more like that. They emphasize that we should have this consulting competence so that we can sell all the time”. (Camilla)

Camilla perceived herself as a good listener, which has been seen as a quality associated with femininity (cf. Fondas 1997). However, she also recognised: “I am not a seller type”. She thus negatively positioned herself vis-à-vis this aspect of the IT consultant work ideal. Like Camilla, Eva described problems fitting into a work environment where the employees were forced to promote themselves and make themselves ‘visible’:

“I am not a person that talks a lot just for the sake of talking. But that is very much what is needed to fit in, that you make a lot of noise and that you make yourself very visible”. (Eva)

This quotation also contains an example of explicit negative positioning: ‘I am not a person...’. Madeleine explained in a similar manner that the selling the consultants were forced to engage in involved: “a special way of thinking” which she thought was: “awfully difficult”. Annika also declared her insecurity in relation to the demands on selling themselves:

“It is very difficult for me to sell myself in that manner. I absolutely don't see myself as an expert. It is tough”. (Annika)

Annika thus hesitated when faced with the demands to market herself as an expert. She further delineated what she perceived as problematic:

“[...] that I have to... what I really dislike, to sell myself somehow... that I almost have to lie... [to sell myself]”. (Annika)

To sell oneself meant for the consultants to speak well of their own competence and promote themselves in order to win the customers' and employers' confidence. However, the interviews with the women consultants were dominated by stories about a lack of self-confidence regarding their technical competence. These stories could be explained as an expression of women's feelings of being uncomfortable with a distinctly masculine work ideal in a technical setting (cf. Adam et al 2006).

One specific type of positioning that the women in the study engaged in therefore, due to their lack of self-confidence, implied subordination in relation to their male colleagues. A quote from the interview with Linda illustrates this type of subordinated positioning. She was asked to talk about her experiences of working in a quantitatively male-dominated work environment, and she answered:

"I have worked a lot with guys and I think it has been... I am still on a lower technical level than them. And I knew that from the beginning. But they have been very understanding and explained everything to me". (Linda)

Linda thus positioned herself as an IT consultant with a weaker technical competence than her male colleagues. But she also positioned the men as helpful, friendly and eager to help. If the quote is interpreted as if Linda here positioned herself in relation to a consultant work ideal, this is a description both of subordination and belongingness (cf. Davies and Harré 1991). Linda's subordinated position is expressed as she played down her technical competence while her belonging is reflected in the accepting attitude of her male colleagues (cf. Dryburgh 1999; Iversen 2006).

Women's problems with making a career within the occupation were explained with this lack of self-confidence and with their hesitation to promote themselves. Jenny spoke of her own career progression in the following manner:

"I am afraid that I lack self-confidence. I feel that my colleagues are much more competent and I am always grateful if someone else takes responsibility. I think I have reached my position thanks to good luck. But the reason for that could be my lack of self-confidence and that I don't feel that I am good enough". (Jenny)

Jenny hence did not position herself as a competent consultant with a lot of ambition and self-drive. Rather she positioned herself as passive and powerless (depending on luck). In relation to her colleagues she positioned herself as subordinated since she experienced them as more competent.

However, Jenny seemed to negotiate a better position when she also suggested that she, in reality, might not be less competent, but only less self-confident.

Susan reflected explicitly over her own insecurity and other women's lack of self-confidence in relation to a male-dominated work setting. She answered the question about experiences of working in a male-dominated work setting in the following manner:

"Women are very careful. We don't really dare to believe that: '*I can!*'. In my experience many women don't really dare to stand up... We take a step back and think that: 'They don't listen to me'. And in a male-dominated environment you have to be tough and say: '*This is how it is!*'. Not many women do that". (Susan)

Women's unwillingness to stand up for themselves contributed, according to Susan, to making women invisible (cf. Solbrække 2006). Susan also used the word "tough", a word that was repeatedly used by the consultants to describe the work ideal and the work environment. It is a word that researchers have used to summarize masculine work ideals that celebrate aggression, self-sufficiency and competitiveness (cf. Fondas 1997; Metcalfe and Linstead 2003). Previous research has also identified 'toughness' as central to the computer culture and the confident image of the professional engineer (Wright 1996; Dryburgh, 1999).

Linda gave voice to an apprehension similar to Susan's, about differences between the conduct of women and men, in the continuation of her answer to the question about her experiences of working in a male-dominated business:

"Women and men are different in that way. Women are more shy... or not shy, but we find it hard to express our opinion, particularly on very technical topics. We think: 'Yes, this is probably right'. But we are not 100 percent certain. While guys, they always say: '*This is how it is!*'. And they don't give a damn if it is right or not. But women are much more careful". (Linda)

Linda here uses the expression: '*This is how it is!*' in order to portray men's self-confident conduct, an expression identical with Susan's description of men's toughness in the previous quotation. Linda thus emphasized women's feeling of insecurity regarding technical tasks as something that restrained women's ability to display self-confidence. Linda delineated further on women's insecurity:

"We perhaps think that we are not quite as good [as the guys]. Guys are very go-ahead and dare to say what they think. But women don't... at least I don't, and in my experience, many women don't". (Linda)

These narratives are in line with theories proposing that women engage less in self-promotion than men (cf. Martin 2003; Rees and Garnsey 2003). Women's hesitation to display self-confidence affected their career possibilities and their wages, as Jenny explained:

"I think that many women lack professional self-confidence. They don't believe that they are just as good [as the guys], which is tragic, because it influences their wages in a negative way. They don't grab the opportunity, but wait for it to come to them instead". (Jenny)

Jenny thus considered a lack of self-confidence as typical for women and something that held back wage increases. Ulrika also reflected over a low wage as a consequence of not promoting herself. She answered the question about her experiences of working in a male-dominated business:

"I think my wage could be higher, but I find it very difficult to brag about my competence and even to think that I am any good. I still feel like a trainee, who knows very little". (Ulrika)

When feeling like a trainee, in spite of many years in the business, it is difficult to promote and sell yourself although this was important for career progression and for wage increase. Previous research has highlighted the risk that managers base employees' raise in wages on subjective assessments of the employees' ability to 'brag' about their accomplishments rather than on their actual achievement. Such assessments favour men who promote themselves more effectively than women irrespective of their technical or documented competencies (cf. Solbrække 2006). The challenge for managers is to be well-informed about the employees' performances and not let themselves be impressed by the employees' own accounts.

Madeleine gave an example of how important it was for the consultants to learn the field's 'lingo' (technical language and jargon) in order to communicate with the customer in an appropriate and successful way. In line with the other interviewed women consultants, Madeleine emphasized that women were unsuccessful in promoting themselves:

"Sometimes it is smart to let people think that you know more than you actually do, because

you can often exceed your own expectations. You can manage much more than you dare to promise the customer. This is a disadvantage especially for women when we meet the customer, because we don't have the confidence to promise the customer the moon and the stars. Although the customer wants to hear that, because they believe that is how you sell". (Madeleine)

To sum up, Camilla, Eva, Madeleine, Annika, Linda, Jenny, Susan and Ulrika all underestimated and minimized the value of their own competence in a manner quite contrary to the work ideal. In different ways they all negatively positioned themselves in relation to the work ideal. Adam et al (2006) report on similar results from their study of women in IT work. They found that women '[...] often downplayed their technical knowledge when talking about their work in general terms [...]' (p.373). The women IT consultants also positioned their male colleagues as ideal workers as the men were described as successful at promoting themselves. In addition, Linda and Jenny explicitly placed themselves in subordinated positions in relation to their male colleagues' technical competence.

It is important to emphasize the lack of similar subordinated positions in the interviews with the men. As previously mentioned, the men did not talk about any insecurity. Nor did they use the expression 'I am not'. Men's positioning thus appeared uncomplicated, in accordance with the interviewed women's stories about their male colleagues' conduct, while women's positioning was complex and problematic.

Woman and IT Consultant – an Impossible Combination?

As was underlined in the previous section, women hesitated to promote themselves and sell their competence in an aggressive and self-reliant manner, and the explanation they gave for this was their lack of self-confidence. This lack of self-confidence also led to women's subordinated positioning in relation to their male colleagues, who they believed to be more skilled. This section focuses on another reason for women's subordinated position and for their unwillingness to promote themselves; the expectations on the women to conform to appropriate feminine conduct. The women were positioned as subordinated by their surroundings; employers, colleagues and customers. Also they were unwilling to position women as ideal IT consultants.

Eva answered the question about experiences of working in a male-dominated business by depicting how customers behaved differently towards her and her male colleagues:

"In this business it is perhaps a disadvantage [to

be a woman]. Many times it feels like the customer prefers that a man talk about technology. [...] Customers have a preference to turn to my male colleagues with questions about technology, something which can create quite a funny situation if he doesn't have the technical competence, as was the case with my previous colleague". (Eva)

The situation, described by Eva, reflects the consequence of men being viewed as more technically competent than women. Without any knowledge about two people's technical competence, the customer in Eva's story had confidence in the male consultant's competence. Hence, gender and competence was confused here. The situation for the woman consultant was considerably different. This implies that women were forced to put in an extra effort to gain the trust of the customer (cf. Gherardi 1995; Kelan 2008).

The different expectations of women and men were also delineated in the interview with Camilla. She answered the question about experiences of working in a male-dominated work setting:

"At two different group meetings my manager has declared that the customer has phoned to let him know: '*Camilla has done a great job!*' I have never heard him say that about any other consultant and I think it is because I am a woman. Therefore I don't take it as a compliment, but almost the opposite. As if they are surprised [that I have done a great job]! I don't think he reflects over this. As if I need special confirmation, which probably is true". (Camilla)

Camilla experienced women and men being treated in different ways. The quotation could be interpreted in accordance with previous research that has highlighted how women are regarded as less technically competent than men and therefore are not expected to excel in technical work (cf. Cockburn 1992). Although certainly with the best intentions, when the manager singled out Camilla in this way he also belittled her in front of her colleagues. Preferably he should have given her the same kind of appreciation usually given to (male) consultants that performed well.

Unlike the women quoted above, Sophia had no problem with claiming the position of entrepreneurial IT consultant. However, she also reflected over her visibility, as a woman, in a problem-oriented way:

"I think it is terrible when I leave a meeting and feel: *'Oh no, now I have talked that much again!'*, because it is not seen as something positive, but I think that it should be". (Sophia)

Sophia perceived that she was not positioned as an ideal consultant by her colleagues and managers when she talked a lot at meetings, and she was dissatisfied with how she did not obtain a powerful position. Sophia returned to further outline the negative reactions to her behaviour from her colleagues later on in the interview:

"It is not understood as something positive. If you talk too much, then you hear that you, as a woman, are a bitch. This is *very much* the case". (Sophia)

The problems described by Sophia could be interpreted as reflecting women's double-bind dilemma in work settings permeated by a masculine work ideal. Women consultants, according to this interpretation, experienced both that they should conform to the entrepreneurial work ideal and behave ambitiously, but also that they should conform to appropriate, passive femininity. Failing to conform to gender appropriate conduct can provoke the disapproving reaction described by Sophia, evoking the pejorative epithet and being called 'bitch' (cf. Forseth 2005; Dryburgh 1999; Trethewey 1999). The work ideal for consultants, involving the ability to display an entrepreneurial spirit, be self-confident, competitive and ambitious appears to be conditioned, i.e., dependent on whether the consultant is a woman or a man (cf. Hochschild 1983; Woodfield 2000). Women seem to be unable to compete with men in work settings with an entrepreneurial work ideal. The solution for the women was to juggle appropriate feminine behaviour and professional conduct.

Notwithstanding these problem-oriented interpretations, the quotations from the interview with Sophia could also be interpreted as if women had the possibility to position themselves as ideal IT consultants. However, women had to be prepared to meet and manage others trying to position them in opposition to the work ideal (cf. Humphreys and Brown 2002; Meriläinen et al. 2004). A further example of how women could adjust to the work ideal, but with the disapproval from others as a result, was given in the interview with Jenny. She described her male-dominated work setting where only two of her consultant colleagues were women. Jenny described one of these women colleagues in positive terms. With her Jenny experienced friendship and fellowship, as they were two women in a male-dominated work environment. Jenny explained: "Actually we are very much alike". She continued:

"There is another woman here. She is

completely different and really... as a masculine forceful... She doesn't care a damn about all of this [friendship between women] I think and she has a more aggressive style. Women are sensitive and co-operative, but she has more of an aggressive style, to step on others in order to get ahead. I prefer to step aside". (Jenny)

The quotation illustrates that not only men disapproved of women who adjusted to the competitive work ideal, requiring an 'aggressive style'. Also women colleagues could blame a woman if she failed to conform to appropriate feminine conduct. To prefer to step aside and not compete, as Jenny described, is a conduct similar to women's unwillingness to adjust to the entrepreneurial work ideal, delineated in the previous section in this article.

Annika answered the same question, concerning her experiences of working in a male-dominated work environment, in a similar way to many of the other women interviewed. Again, this answer positioned her as subordinated in relation to her colleagues:

"I have never pretended to know more than I actually do. I am not particularly skilled at some technical tasks and I admit that. I have often required help from the guys. Since I have been so open about it I have not given them [the male colleagues] any reason to trash-talk me. I have not tried to reach up to any... or primarily I have not tried to hide anything. Guys are better at promoting themselves while I prefer to tone myself down rather than admit fully what I think I know. I prefer to have lower expectations on me rather than have high expectations and then have to struggle to achieve them. I think that is typical for women". (Annika)

This quotation reflects the analyses in the previous section. Here Annika, just as Linda and Jenny, positioned herself as less technically competent than the men. However, Annika also explained that her explicit subordinated positioning in relation to the male colleagues was a conscious strategy in order not to provoke a situation where her male colleagues 'trash-talked' her. In this way, Annika took responsibility for her male colleagues' reactions (cf. Davies and Mathieu 2005). The strategy was used in order to avoid the situation Sophia depicted above, being referred to as a 'bitch'. Explicitly and strategically positioning oneself as subordinated regarding technical competence, as these women did, could therefore be a way to negotiate a position they otherwise risked being excluded from, in this context; the

position as an IT consultant. This analysis implies that women are forced to accept and assume a subordinated position (as an inferior, less successful IT consultant) and not to engage in promoting themselves too ambitiously or too aggressively, in order not to provoke the men (or women).

When the men answered the same question as the women, about experiences of working in a male-dominated work setting, some of them emphasized their wish to have more women colleagues. They explained that women had a positive influence on the work environment. Carl, for example, explained that women changed the atmosphere, and the otherwise 'tough climate' was 'softened'. This is a common explanation used to argue for a gender mixed work environment (cf. Kelan 2008). However, taking into account the analysis regarding women's subordinated positioning this argument does not so much reflect women's essential 'softness', but rather their difficulties in being competitive. By this interpretation, women can change a competitive work environment in what men may view as a positive manner, since they are effectively prevented from competing with men due to their double-bind dilemma.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This article highlights that the career progression and advancement of a successful IT consultant depended on the consultant's ability to display an entrepreneurial spirit, i.e., to gain the trust of customers and employers by being self-confident, competitive and ambitious. However, the women found it difficult to adjust to the work demands and chose to understate their technical competence in relation to their male colleagues rather than promoting themselves and demonstrating self-assurance. The reason for this was their lack of self-confidence, but also the reactions from colleagues, customers and employers. When adapting to the work ideal and displaying ambition, initiative and go-ahead spirit, the women were met with disapproval, both from other women and from men.

The problems described by the women consultants could be interpreted as reflecting the double-bind dilemma for women in work settings permeated by masculine work ideals. Women consultants, according to this interpretation, experienced that they should conform to the entrepreneurial work ideal and behave ambitiously, but also in line with appropriate femininity. If they failed to perform in accordance with expectations on gender-appropriate behaviour they risk evoking pejorative epithets such as 'bitch'. The women consultants were therefore forced to balance between expectations on 'appropriate' feminine behaviour and professional, masculine, work conduct.

The masculine work ideal contributed to women's subordinated position and circumscribed their career possibilities. The article highlights how women's lack of technical self-confidence is an expression of the appropriate feminine behaviour being constituted by: 'the attributes of the powerless' (Gherardi 1994, p.597). Women's lack of self-confidence could therefore be interpreted

as a strategy used by the subordinated and powerless to position themselves in relation to the powerful and superior in order to avoid confrontation and provocation and create a professional position (cf. Katila and Meriläinen 1999). By using this strategy the women avoided situations where the men criticized them, denigrated them, 'trash-talked' them and called them 'bitch' (cf. Davies and Mathieu 2005; Gherardi 1994). However, this is also a strategy that inhibits women's career possibilities.

Moreover, the results could be interpreted as supporting previous research that has put an emphasis on differences between women and men concerning their willingness to promote themselves. The women's double-bind created a self-fulfilling prophecy when those with great expectations and career possibilities (i.e. men) displayed self-confidence and almost exaggerated their competence while those with restricted career possibilities (i.e. women) understated their competence and limited their ambitions (cf. Adam et al 2006; Kanter 1977).

Men related to the work ideal in distinctly different ways. While the women interviewed talked about problems with adjusting to the work ideal, none of the men interviewed reflected on this. Nor did the men mention any lack of self-confidence. In this context the work ideal and the appropriate masculine behaviour was conflated. As a result, the men did not face a double-bind dilemma, but gained a powerful and favoured position. Men's display of self-confidence could be interpreted as a strategy aiming to improve their own more powerful position and to confirm women's subordinated position. The concept of 'position' is central in the analysis since it draws attention to dynamic aspects of gender relations at work and prevents the discussion from resulting in essentialist or static interpretations (Jorgenson 2002).

It is important to note, however, that although the men that were interviewed did not mention a lack of self-confidence, it does not mean that all the men were genuinely confident about their own technical competence. A less simplistic interpretation is that men's possibilities to express doubts or worries concerning their professional career were circumscribed by considerations about which gender-appropriate, masculine positions were available for them. Some men might therefore also experience powerlessness in relation to work ideals. More research in this area is needed in order to avoid (over)generalisations about men and women, and to illustrate more of the diversity amongst women and men (cf. Landström 2007). It is obvious that not all men in technical occupations are aggressive or over-confident about their ability, and that only some men are successful in gaining senior positions (cf. Faulkner 2009b). We really do need to pay as much attention to the men as to the women if we are to understand the workplace dynamics.

Looking to the empirical details given in this article, it is also obvious that the loss of confidence amongst women is not evenly experienced by all and should definitely not be understood as a 'forever state'. It can be influenced

and shaped by many factors, for example by the attitudes of their managers or women colleagues as illustrated here. An important challenge for future research is to provide more empirical details that might further reveal the dynamism and diversity we need to increase our understanding of how such things may be changed (cf. Faulkner 2009a). This article has given some clues to how the world may be changing by pointing to some specific situations in which women are made to reflect over their technical competence and where they are told not to display it in a self-confident way.

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