

## **Rethinking gender, work and organization – thinking about organization**

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Abstract – The discussion surrounding the gendering of organizations seems to have reached a turning-point. Whereas up to now the conviction that organization and gender are inseparably linked has been the central and uncontested one, in recent contributions the focus has turned with greater intensity towards change, contextualization, contradictions and lack of simultaneity of gendering and degendering in work and the organization. This will also be emphasized here on the basis of an empirical study of the reorganization process in an insurance company: while there is a strong vertical gender segregation, on the horizontal plane of everyday working life, gender differences are not systematically made relevant. The key to this contradiction is found in the way in which personnel decisions are justified and legitimized, since in decision-making processes, taking place within the framework of shared norms and interpretations, gendered and degendered elements are “contingently coupled”. One central conclusion of the study is this: in order to make any progress towards a more precise empirical and theoretical engagement with the concept of the gendered organization, the current broad focus of the discussion will have to be more finely adjusted, and move from an analysis of social inequality using the example of the organization to a closer analysis of the organization from the perspective of gender.

Apparently, the question of organization and gender, i.e. the role that gender plays in organizations and how gender is incorporated into organizations has long since been answered – and in highly contradictory ways. The answer is either: it doesn't at all; gender differences are neither constitutive of organizations, nor do they play a systematic role, as an attribute of members of organizations, in organizational processes. Or else the answer is: it's absolutely central. As in all other social constellations, in organizations gender is a highly relevant criterion of social differentiation and structuration. In comparison to men, women are asymmetrically positioned and should be given every opportunity in the interests of upholding egalitarian and democratic structures and the principle of equal shares for all. Organizations are structurally gendered; they simply do not function on the basis of formal, gender-neutral processes, but operate under the auspices of both inner and outer organizational structures and institutions, rules and resources, norms and assumptions, which are inextricably linked to gender.

Yet “how do we know a gendered organization when we see one?” This key question, put by Dana Britton to the Gender, Work and Organization Conference in 1998, is still unanswered. To put the question like this implies that – in contrast to the assumptions of ‘mainstream’ organization theories – organizations are or at least may be gendered. Our task is to recognize them, to describe and to analyse them. There is one clear and, as Britton herself put it, “testable” criterion by which to identify a gendered organization – social inequality between men and women: “I argue that we should see policies or practices as gendered to the extent that they sustain and reproduce stratification and/or gender based inequality.” (Britton 1998: 12)

This clear conception puts the strengths, but also the weaknesses, of advanced approaches in Gendered Organizations research in a nutshell. From the perspective of Women’s and Gender Studies, the analytical focus on the ‘gendered organization’ is embedded in the analysis of gender relations as such, and in a wider analysis of gender-specific social inequality.<sup>1</sup> With this broad vision, the research perspective thus has the advantage of being able to show the interlocking of social and organizational conditions and of analysing them accordingly. The things – *organizational* structures, processes and actors – are always seen in relation to the bigger picture - the *social* structures, processes and actors – as they needs must. Nevertheless, one disadvantage of this broadly-based approach to the debate has emerged: it runs the risk of losing sight of the specific object of the analysis, the organization. As a result, empirical variety and contradictions related to the relevance of gender in organizations can’t be satisfactorily explained, nor can organizational processes and operations be precisely enough grasped: which means, finally, that there is still no sufficiently sophisticated theoretical analysis of the relationship between organization and gender. Britton (2000) has also pointed out these problems with the gendered organizations approach in the analysis of professions and occupations on the one hand and organizations on the other. Regarding organization and gender as inextricably linked, as the approach does, has proved fruitful for analysis thus far; however, when confronted with the task of explaining how change in the context of gender, work and organization comes about and can be induced, it reaches its limits. Britton thus calls for a stronger contextualization of the analysis of gender differences in work and organizations, and em-

phasizes that the levels of this analysis need to be more clearly set out, both theoretically and empirically. In such a clarification and theoretical differentiation of the relationship between organization and gender more attention must, I would argue, be paid to the ways in which the organization *as such* functions. Without disputing the advantages of a broadly-based analytical perspective, it is necessary to focus on organizational ways of functioning in a narrower sense, in order for research to make any progress. I now propose to set out this argument in two steps. First, I will present the empirical results of my case study of the reorganization process in an insurance company, in order to illustrate once again just how varied and ambivalent the empirical side of organization and gender can be.<sup>2</sup> Then I will go on to show that these diagnoses can be very well described and discussed within the framework of an organization model based on Giddens' theory of structuration. Finally, I would like to invite discussion on this suggestion.

### *Gendering and de-gendering in an insurance company*

The central questions in my research are where, how, by whom and with which effects gender is made relevant in organizations. To analyse these questions, I conducted a case-study of the restructuring process in a large, nationally operating insurance company which mainly deals with private health-insurance. This company is of special interest for the following reasons: 1) The highly skilled jobs of commercial clerical work are mixed in terms of gender, i.e. women and men do the same work and are equally well qualified. Thus, they are formally equal; there is no – formal – horizontal segregation. 2) Moreover, the company itself subscribes to an internal policy of gender-equality. For this purpose, it has e.g. created a working-group on equal opportunities and tries to take the different life-situations of men and women into account in its staff policy. Consequently, the company offers flexible time schedules and other mechanisms designed to ease the combination of family and work, such as a pilot project with telework. In fact, a well-known women's journal has awarded the company its equal opportunities award. 3) Nevertheless, the job and career opportunities of men

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview, see for example Acker (1991, 1992), Britton (2000), Calás/Smircich (1996), Gottschall (1995), Hornung (2000), Mills (1992), Müller (1999), Witz/Savage (1992).

<sup>2</sup> See Wilz (2001).

and women are unequally distributed. There is a strong vertical segregation, visible in the fact that the executive positions are almost completely occupied by men. This calls for an explanation, especially considering that the executive personnel is recruited within the company itself, based on the criteria 'performance' and 'qualification'. 4) Finally, the company has been in a constant processes of reorganization since the mid 1980's (which means 'lean management', 'functional integration of tasks', 'interdepartmental internal organization' and 'customer orientation'). Such processes lead to tensions between new orientations on the one hand and the guarantee of continuity on the other hand. They produce diverse contingencies, opening space for a variety of actions, strategies and decisions. The empirical question is then, which paths a reorganization process takes in concrete terms, and whether traditional (gender-)arrangements are changed or rather reproduced.

### *Method*

The empirical basis of the study is open, problem-related interviews with experts, executive personnel and employees in one regional branch of the company. The interview topics were restricted, which meant they were roughly structured along a specific thematic line; however, the intention was also to generate narratives, so as to allow the respondents themselves to structure 'their' fields according to their own priorities. Two approaches were taken in dealing with the textual material: on the one hand it was analysed on the basis of a content-oriented approach using a number of categories designed to examine the defined dimensions and facts of the reorganization process. On the other hand the texts were subjected to a critical, hermeneutic analysis in an iterative, comparative process akin to that used in Grounded Theory,<sup>3</sup> and communicatively validated in small group discussions as well as by asking the informants for confirmation. I also carried out workplace observations and analysed internal documents.

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<sup>3</sup> See Glaser/Strauss (1968).

*Everyday work, norms at work and personnel decisions – horizontal and vertical segregation*

I started from the hypothesis that aspects such as working styles, division of labour, specialization, social skills, etc. would in fact constitute the basis of informal gender-segregation and hierarchization in – formally equal – mixed environments. This was not verified by the empirical research. In fact, there was no formal or informal gender-segregation to be found either on the level of the everyday work of the employees attending to the customers nor in the assignment and taking on of specialized tasks. As far as types of cooperation and cooperative relationships were concerned, there were likewise no relevant differences between men and women. All the clerical staff interviewed spoke of cooperation, mentioning the same types (with neighbours, individual colleagues, specialists or superiors) in the same cases (technical problems, distribution of workloads). These cooperation relationships, in which again no differences can be detected, are influenced by the organization of work (cooperation within one's own group, or between groups), spatial factors (cooperation within a room, and only to a more limited extent between different rooms or floors) and private relationships – but they are not influenced by gender boundaries. Male as well as female employees refer in their accounts of cooperation to male and/or female colleagues, without gender appearing to have any kind of influence whatsoever on the choice of cooperation partners or the formation of the cooperation network. In a few areas, such as for example communication with customers or the possibility of delegating certain steps of a task to female colleagues, gender is thematized, however. For instance, it is often mentioned that women have “more pleasant voices on the phone”, and a few men, though no women, mentioned that they preferred to dictate letters instead of writing them themselves with the help of word processing tools. Whether actualizations and ascriptions of this nature are only the tip of the iceberg as regards hidden gender-differentiating and hierarchizing practices in the workplace, which otherwise disappear under the ‘cloak of equality’ (Benschop/Doorewaard 1998), or whether they are relics of such practices, or else whether, conversely, they are ‘only’ the discursive actualization of differences (while in fact there no differences to be found), cannot be conclusively established on the basis of the material analysed. I would tend to assume the latter: that is, that gender stereotypes are actualized “in spite of knowing better” (Wetterer 1995) when people are asked in ‘neutral’ surroundings about differences

which must 'actually' exist. In everyday clerical work, however, they do not play any role at all in the sense of constituting differences leading to inequality between the male and female office workers.

These results differ from the findings of other empirical studies undertaken in the field of financial services. In my own study, I was unable to identify the kind of gender-specific segregation of insurance work described particularly in early studies, for example that of Collinson/Knights (1991), according to whom the routine office tasks which are the groundwork for the male-connoted, more prestigious work of the outside sales representative are regarded as women's work. For one thing, it became clear that office work in an insurance company today involves not only routine work, but also highly complex tasks, which in some respects, e.g. in the status accorded to customer services, tends to equal that of external work. For another thing, no dividing line between women's work and men's work could be detected in the area of clerical office work. The employees here are a homogeneous mixture, and their tasks have changed. All the clerical staff, whether men or women, do the groundwork for the representatives working outside, or else deal directly with customers. There have also been descriptions of a gender-specific segregation between office workers, for example by Acker (1994) or more recently by Benschop/Doorewaard (1998). Both studies, conducted in banks, show that there is either an informal division of labour in groups in which the employees themselves regulate the concrete details of the sequence and distribution of individual tasks. Both studies also describe a gender-specific division of tasks, comparing tayloristically organized departments and departments organized on the basis of task-integration. Gender-specific segregation on the basis of a "gendered subtext" also exists, these studies conclude, where a direct link between the organization of work and gender segregation by a functional division of labour is not given. Comparable lines of segregation were not found in the company where the present research was carried out, however, either in the task-integrated phase or in the phase with a functional division of labour. Nor could a gender-specific ascription of tasks such as that described by Leidner (1991) in a study of outside sales work in the insurance sector be established here. The notion that professions, tasks and occupations are always assigned to a specific gender on principle, and that despite high degrees of variance and flexibility, the assignment of tasks along gender lines, symbolically charged elements and hierarchization will always be involved on some underlying

ing level as processes that secure identity with regard to maintaining the dual-gender system – this notion, in the context of the present study, falls away.

This observation is corroborated by the findings of other more recent studies. In what they describe as a new development, Halford/Savage/Witz (1997) see organizational change in the service sector as being – or showing a tendency to be – accompanied by a breakdown of segregation lines. Heintz et al. (1997) describe clear vertical lines of segregation, but ascertain that the area of clerical office work as such is not connoted along gender lines. Their conclusion that this type of work is not culturally charged in any specific way, and has no deeper significance for the employees, is not supported by my own empirical material. On the contrary, it becomes clear from my analysis with just what strongly normative, symbolic and work-related orientations – friendliness, efficiency, order, good working relationships – the work is associated with. These norms are not gender-specific; they may, however, as the reference to the “pleasant telephone voice” shows, become situatively charged with gender-specific significance.

A central conclusion of my study is thus the following: a clear horizontal gender-specific segregation in the area of clerical office work cannot be said to exist. In the portrayal of everyday work, elements and situations which could possibly be gender-specifically charged are mentioned – these do contain moments of gender-differentiation, but not in a form which would allow them to be interpreted as systematically differentiated work practices and experiences or as differentiated action and interpretation by men and women or yet as all-pervading gendered structures and/or discourses of the organization. So while gender-specifically relevant moments do appear, their relevance is decentred by similarities, deviations and common features. That means that, again in contrast to the above-mentioned findings in women’s and gender studies, in mixed-gender fields an intensified “doing gender” does not necessarily have to take place in order to maintain stable gender identities. The implication being this: gender is not an omnipresent criterion of social differentiation in organizational processes.

Accordingly, the pressing question is now how a gender-asymmetrical, vertical segregation comes about, if on the horizontal level no segregation lines can be identified. As already pointed out, in the branch of the insurance company upon which the study focused, all the management positions were occupied by men. With regard to the organizational hierarchies, then, a strong vertical segregation can be identified. A first central question is how such an unequal distribution of men and women in the branch's hierarchy is justified and legitimated, given that on the horizontal plane of organization and execution of work – the basis for the internal recruitment of personnel, a practice which is very widely spread in the insurance field – no stable and unequivocal differentiation according to gender can be detected. A second central question is, what this juxtaposition of equality, difference and inequality might signify for the theoretical conception of the gendering of organizations. In the sense of the criterion of the unequal distribution of opportunity, the organization is quite clearly gendered – admittedly, men and women are quantitatively equally distributed in a non-gender-stereotyped field, but they are not equally positioned. In my view however, this conclusion, which is related to the assumption that organization and gender are inextricably linked, has to be differentiated further. There are levels and elements of organizations that are gendered, and others which are not. Gender can, but need not, be made relevant. Who does this when and how is rather contingent and context-sensitive. The activation of gender differences may be part of a subconscious routine, just as it may be part of a conscious strategy. In both cases, gender-specific relevant situations are constructed. The mechanisms applied here cover gender-specific assumptions as well as the linkage of directly gendered areas with gender-neutral areas. I shall label these linkages 'contingent coupling', i.e. the contingent joining of elements of organizational matters, symbolic representations and/or with gender. I propose to illustrate this with reference to the example of decisions pertaining to personnel.

*Decisions, norms and meaning, and gender differences: naturalization and controlled emotions*

My example focuses on personnel decisions relating to the appointment of a deputy head of the group in the course of the restructuring of the insurance company in question. The process of reorganization in the office went, in several stages, from a functional division of labour into 'stock' (processing the insurance contracts) and 'services' (processing customers' claims and payment of claims) to a phase of task-integrated clerical processing and then back to functionally divided work groups, dealing respectively with 'contracts' and 'service'. In the second phase of (re-) organization, whose goal was all-round clerical processing in teams, four groups of approximately ten staff-members each were formed. For the main part, these were explicitly designated either to process contracts or to process claims. The deputy group managers were, at this point, people with areas of expertise complementary to those of the group managers. In the subsequent phase of reorganization, however, firstly a division between responsibility for the contract and claims services was reintroduced, and secondly the number of groups was reduced from four to three, thus reducing the number of management positions from eight to six. The group managers and their deputies now once again represented the same areas of expertise. Both the women who had had deputy management functions prior to this lost their positions again in the course of this phase of restructuring, as did one man. Another man was promoted to deputy group manager. This occurrence was referred to by all the managerial and clerical staff interviewed, though the emphases in the telling differed. What is of central significance here is how these decisions are justified and legitimated.

*Mr. Conrad among lions*

Mr. Conrad is the local office manager of the insurance-company. He is the main person responsible for all decisions concerning personnel in his branch. In explaining the decisions he takes with regard to personnel, he locates them in a 'naturalizing' structure of argumentation which can be read as leading directly to the exclusion of women. Women are emotional, whereas men are calm; managers need to be calm – therefore men are promoted. This line of argument must however be differentiated

further, since Mr. Conrad naturalizes not only gender, but also describes the functioning of organizations in terms of natural processes. This enables him to develop a generally applicable pattern of organization and to reduce complexity, to the extent that he limits the scope for decision-making by referring to natural orders and so constructing a lack of alternatives.

The naturalizations applied by Mr. Conrad during the decision-making process are threefold: He naturalizes on the level of actors in organizations in general, on the level of organizational structures and finally on the level of concrete people in the concrete company (the latter by means of assigning them ‘natural’ ways of being). First, Mr. Conrad deduces hierarchical structures of organizations from the personal features of the employees, exemplifying them with remarks about actual persons: there are ‘chiefs of the tribe’ who stand out from the crowd because of their natural charisma, their individual abilities and their commitment. Then there are ‘Indians’ who do their jobs more or less well, but who do not have ‘what it takes’ to be leader, because they are e.g. too emotional or simply too retiring. Mr. Conrad explicitly defines personal hierarchies in the company as a direct result of ‘natural’ hierarchies that have simply ‘grown’, as they do in the animal kingdom.

*“But this natural hierarchy, that is, as with the animals, that’s the way I’d put it. Yes, like that. That’s even in, children, little children, yes? - they’re not yet so much influenced by everything; even in groups of really small children, certain hierarchies develop naturally, it’s the proof that, that in the end, not only, in a pack of lions, lions it’s like that; at some point the strongest stands out, also with people it’s that way, also there, somehow different than in animals of course, but, but also there, the hierarchies appear.”*

Mr. Conrad then naturalizes personnel very concretely: Leading executives are not described in terms of their position in the company’s hierarchy, but in terms of typical charismatic personalities. They are role-models who obtain their legitimacy either from excellent qualifications, outstanding achievements at work and/or – as the most important source of legitimacy – their special character, which is balanced, pragmatic and never emotionally uncontrolled. In contrast, Mr. Conrad’s description of the other employees includes personal characteristics related to their work. In his descriptions, he classifies individual features as male and female, relating these to actual men and women. Men are more pragmatic, they work faster and are keener on taking decisions than women; they keep more inner distance to their work and react with less stress to

difficult customers or to mistakes at work. Women work more slowly, but more carefully and thoroughly than men. Women have more inner commitment and thus more often react emotionally and are more frequently 'out of control' than men. The – 'natural' – result of the ascription is a 'natural' division of labour: men are more capable of occupying leading positions since they ('naturally') have the personality traits needed – which women do not possess ('by nature').

At first sight, the strategy of naturalization described seems like another version of the well-known, traditional exclusion of women. This is true, but my point is to show how this strategy helps to reduce complexity in the process of decision-making, how it helps to make decisions reasonable and legitimate and how it therefore helps to reduce conflict in the organization. The tension between narrow career-paths and intensified competition between women and men on the one hand, and the promises that accompany reorganization as regards individual development on the other hand, diminishes. Rather, there seem to be no alternatives when filling a leading position in the company, since the horizon of possibilities is significantly narrowed through the appeal to 'nature'. Decisions about personnel appear as logical consequences of natural evolution; the appropriate person will appear by 'natural selection'. Mr. Conrad confronts the insecurities that emerge from permanent reorganizations with 'natural facts'. By applying this (unconscious) strategy, he reduces insecurities and contingencies; he narrows the spaces of action. For Mr. Conrad, there is no need to argue about the legitimacy of his decision as long as he relies on 'nature'; hierarchies in the company are not the result of individual judgments and responsible decisions in the context of organizational micropolitics, but the result of natural development. If there is nothing to evaluate and no alternative solutions to choose from, then there is nothing to argue about. Nature takes its course. The result is that potential dissent is defused and negotiations become more or less impossible.

Moreover, it needs to be considered that, with regard to decision-making and the justification of decisions, organizational processes are not only a question of negotiation and rational choice, with decision-makers making a choice from all possible decisions with the optimal cost-benefit ratio under the given circumstances, in order to attain a specific goal. Brunsson (1982) has shown that decisions are not in fact made in a linear process of rational choice, but are instead determined by their results. In his per-

spective, goals are not defined at the outset of a decision-making process, but rather at the end, so that the decision arrived at can be legitimated as well as possible – and so that it makes sense. Norms and ideologies play a central role here: they provide the framework within which decisions become legitimate, and criteria can be flexibly defined.<sup>6</sup> Mr Conrad’s decisions are accepted by the other senior members of staff and by the employees because his decisions derive legitimacy from the authority of his hierarchical position as branch manager. A further reason why they are not questioned is because naturalizations narrow the scope for decision-making, and help reduce complexity, and because they guarantee the legitimacy and stability of social orders as such – both the dual-gender order and specific principles of organization, like types of division of labour and segregation on the basis of gender.<sup>7</sup> And they are regarded by all those involved as legitimate because they are embedded in an all-embracing inner-organizational system of norms and interpretations. Naturalizations do not in fact play any great role in these interpretations, according to my empirical findings; instead, emotions and emotionality do – an important dimension in Mr Conrad’s pattern of naturalizations as criteria of differentiation between men and women. The interconnection between decisions involving personnel and the patterns of norms and interpretations within which the members of the organization interpret organizational processes, can be illustrated from the perspective of another staff member in a leading position, Mr. Mühlenbrock.

*Mrs Gudenau feels ill at ease*

In Mr Mühlenbrock’s view, for various organizational reasons, the re-allocation of positions described above was unavoidable. The lean-management policy prescribed by the insurance company’s board made it necessary to amalgamate groups and to downgrade three deputy managers. He named the following reasons for the choices of (new) deputy managers. He begins by pointing out that it was “necessary” to “replace” one of the deputy managers because “she had a baby”. He links this portrayal of the situation directly to the description of the member of staff who took over her position: the latter is “a very, very competent employee”, who has taken pains to ac-

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<sup>6</sup> See Brunsson (1982) and Weick (1995, 1998).

quire a broad spectrum of further qualifications, and who, in Mr Mühlenbrock's view, has a strong career orientation: "he'll go on to greater things". Without making the point explicitly, Mr Mühlenbrock thus indicates that the promotion and downgrading had already taken place before the groups were reduced in number, and so had no direct connection with this re-structuring phase.

He then switches to another level, that of communication, and goes on to talk about telling the members of staff affected about what had been decided as regards the changes to the deputy management positions in the new organizational structure. This he does without actually saying who made these decisions, or when. He stresses that the decision was accepted by all those involved; "it went without any complications whatsoever". The reason for this is that Mrs Gudenau, the second female deputy manager, "was happy that it went the way it did", because she "had found the pressure of being deputy manager really rather unpleasant over the previous six years, felt rather ill at ease when the group manager, that is, she could have proved what she could do, had to, when he was on holiday, anyway, she felt ill at ease". The other male deputy manager, Mr Schäfer, had to take second place to the newly-promoted deputy leader, Herr Goeke, "because now this, what I'd call a high-flyer, well, he's there now, isn't he". Mr Mühlenbrock then goes on to weigh up the respective qualities of the two men against each other, after having emphasized at the outset that the central criterion in making the decision had not been seniority, but qualifications: "when you don't say, these are the old, tested hierarchies we've always had and we'll do it like this because you were also deputy for ten years before, when you throw all that overboard, and you say, okay, now let's really go by abilities and qualities". Herr Goeke, the employee who was promoted, is then described as a member of staff who has "great charisma", and as "very good and young, dynamic, very quick on the uptake, has everything it takes for leadership tasks". The demoted Mr Schäfer is described as a "long-time" employee who "knows a lot about his field, has a lot of experience; in his field, quantitatively, qualitatively, he works very well". However, "there are certain, knowing your field is one thing, and there also have to be, management ability has to be that way, and there are just simply shortcomings".

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<sup>7</sup> See for example Douglas (1986), Wetterer (1995).

The decisive factor in the decisions on personnel are, in Mr Mühlenbrock's view, thus above all organizational constraints and technical considerations. Of the three former contract specialists, only one could remain in this position and take on the deputy management of the new "Contract Services" group. A very good specialist qualification plus a high degree of social competence is needed for this and the requirements for managers have to be met. Mr Mühlenbrock does not specify these requirements further, but implies them in his descriptions of Mr Goeke and Mrs Gudenau: they include being dynamic, ambitious, charismatic, able to cope with pressure, wanting to prove one's abilities. It is within this framework, then, that he assesses his colleagues and legitimates the decision made by the head of the branch. One of the two female deputy managers does not fulfil requirements, because she feels ill at ease and hasn't proved herself; one of the male deputy managers fails to fulfil them as well, because he, too, lacks leadership qualities. The third person, the (female) deputy manager referred to first, is not mentioned in this comparison of demands and qualifications.

Gender plays a role at two points in the argumentation presented here. First the absence of the one former deputy manager due to family commitments is referred to. This highly gender-specific aspect (her having a baby) is mentioned, and then not thematized further. A second aspect is that Mr Schäfer, in contrast to the two female deputy managers, is assessed extremely strictly in terms of his membership of the company, competence and performance: classical, legitimate criteria of personnel evaluation – whereas the two "ladies" are out of the running for non-professional reasons, one being on childcare leave, the other having withdrawn voluntarily. Mrs Gudenau relinquishes her position immediately and with pleasure ("was happy"), since she "felt ill at ease" when the group manager was not there; i.e. she has failed as a leader. Mr Mühlenbrock does not formulate this in an open assessment of her leadership qualities as he does with Mr Schäfer, however. She "couldn't prove what she could do" – something which Mr Mühlenbrock describes in terms of emotionality (feeling at ease, being happy), whereas Mr Schäfer is assessed according to criteria such as professional ability, length of service and personal ability. This makes it evident that gender-specific inequality as regards positioning within the firm occurs not only on the basis of the structurally asymmetrical positioning of men and women due to the gender-specific division of labour (work in the family vs. paid work), but that it is also connected to the legitimations and interpretations of powerful actors. In this

respect, however, and this is my point, it is not only ‘crude’ stereotyping of women (having a baby, feeling ill at ease) that is used to downgrade them and exclude them from executive positions. Rather, there is a common construction (of “images” of executives, of men and of women) and shared patterns of interpretation which, though they do contain certain gender-specific, gender-‘charged’ elements, apply to men and women equally.

Mrs Gudenau “felt ill at ease” (the phrase Mr Mühlenbrock uses in German is, “hat sich unwohl gefühlt” – which means both “ill at ease” and “unwell”). I would like, finally, to focus on this phrase in order to show that more is involved than patronizing ascriptions and denigrating stereotypes of femininity in the dominant interpretations of powerful actors. This idea is undoubtedly implied – the notion of being “unwell” in itself has powerful associations on the level of female physicality (menstruation), and on the level of emotionality (“feeling at ease”). Both are characteristics commonly associated with women and femininity. At the same time, they are also elements of the positioning of the self and others by subjects in this organization. The “emotionality” referred to should not only be interpreted as a direct criterion for excluding women, on the grounds that, due to their characteristics and sensitivities, they will not be equal to the demands of leadership positions. In addition, it is embedded in what one might call an inner-organizational, supra-individual interpretative scheme of particular importance for the positioning of the self and the other. I call it ‘controlled emotions’.

The analysis of my interviews revealed that the topic of emotionality played a major role in various contexts. Emotionality is mentioned as a characteristic of employees, as a part of the requirements of the job and as an element of the construction of expectations of leaders. On the one hand, women are described throughout and with more emphasis than men as being emotional and thus less able to stand pressure. On the other hand, emotions are described by both male and female employees, and also by those in leadership positions, as a part of everyday working life, one present in relationships with colleagues (irritations, stressful situations) as well as in dealings with customers (e.g. irritation at unfounded complaints, emotional strain from dealing with very old or seriously ill people). Practically all those interviewed say that they experience emotions of these kinds; at the same time, they point out how inappropriate it is

to express emotions. The overriding duty of all is to be friendly and not to give way to unbridled anger; instead, everyone is expected to keep themselves under control in order to fulfil the expected standards of work and maintain good relations with colleagues. For example, one employee comments on her own behaviour during conversations with difficult customers:

*“Yeah, well, I’d say I’ve got a good grip on it actually. I mean, perhaps I do think to myself and that, but then I don’t say anything, then I just let them speak or whatever they want, and then at some point I just say what I think about it. But then I notice that I also, how I get all red in the face, how I get all hot and so on, but I’m not the type to just yell back or whatever, not the type to shout on the phone.”*

These rules of behaviour apply to all employees; both men and women are judged and position themselves as regards their emotionality according to these norms. They are applied particularly strictly to those in executive positions. Maxims for their behaviour are formulated again and again in terms of self-control, non-impulsiveness, stability, neutrality, firmness, steadiness, imperturbability, resistance to stress and the ability to take pressure.

Frau Gudenau’s feeling “ill at ease” is thus to be seen in a wider context. If she says overtly that she doesn’t feel at ease with management tasks in certain situations, she is positioning herself as a deficient leader, unless she emphasizes simultaneously that she controls her feelings, and how. Should the others judge her to be uncontrolledly emotional, it has the same effect. These ascriptions by oneself and others are equally valid for men and women alike, however. Mr Schäfer, too, is spoken of deprecatingly, because there are allegedly “shortcomings” in his management abilities. From the empirical material, it can be inferred that these deficiencies consist in his being known to display uncontrolled and emotional behaviour in dealings with customers and colleagues. From this it can be concluded that the exclusion of women from leadership positions does not follow the “direct route” of ascriptions of the “woman equals emotional equals unsuitable as leader” type. Decisions involving personnel and their legitimations are much more likely as it were to take the “deviation” of the construction of common norms and self-other positioning – of the interpretation of self and organization in relation to this normative pattern. Gender is thus not necessarily coupled with emotionality and the exclusion from leadership positions; it may be, but need not be, actualized in personnel decisions, and is tied into the interplay between what is

done in everyday work and the constitution of meaning – an interplay which sometimes produces difference, and sometimes does not.

One central finding of the analysis of practices in the office and decisions relating to personnel is thus that gender is made relevant in different ways on the different levels of organization. On the level of working practices and interactions within the clerical work, there is no gender-specific segregation and no cultural ‘charging’ with gender-specific connotations of the kind that would make the work and the organizational processes appear to be systematically gendered. On the level of organizational hierarchies, an asymmetrical, gender-specific segregation is present, which makes the work and the organizational structures appear to be systematically gendered, and indeed what Britton calls “masculinized”.

This makes it clear that there is no one-to-one relationship between gender differences and organizational hierarchies and asymmetries. Furthermore, three dimensions of the relevance of gender differences can be identified.

a) Gender differences are situatively actualized, and are context-dependent. In organizational practices and decisions, gender-specific ascriptions may be actualized. What does become clear however, is how these ascriptions are embedded in organizational schemata of perception and interpretation which are not “directly” gendered, but applied across the board. ‘Controlled emotionality’ for example is not only a male-connoted attribute; it is also a criterion of ‘good work’ in general, and yardstick of the positioning of the self and the other and as such a normative pattern that may be linked to gender-specific ascriptions, but by no means does it have an a priori and consistent connotation of female or male. Gendered and non-gendered elements can, then, be linked discursively in such a way that gender does become relevant – but not necessarily.

b) Gender differences are not actualized on a completely contingent basis; they also have structural origins. Ascriptions which are made and arguments to which people have recourse if necessary in order for example to justify the demoting of or failure to promote women are related to social structures external to the organization. Pregnancy, motherhood and family commitments remain central aspects that shape expectations pertaining to the availability, commitment, career-orientation, abilities and competences of male and female employees in different ways.

c) Actualizing gender differences fulfils specific functions in organizations. Within the pattern of naturalization, as well as within that of ‘controlled emotionality’, both generally applicable and gender-specific norms, interpretations and ascriptions are constructed. The actors in the organization have a wide range of possibilities for action at hand to help to reduce complexity in uncertain situations. These include the construction of “no alternative” scenarios, ensuring the legitimacy of decisions within shared patterns of norms and interpretations, limiting conflicts and creating social order.

### *Organization Analysis in Terms of Structuration Theory?*

From the theoretical point of view, what then are the implications as far as the question of the relationship between organization and gender is concerned? One possible way to analyse processes of (re)organization is to use Giddens’ theory of structuration in combination with Ortmann et al.’s micropolitical concept of organization as a framework.<sup>8</sup> Using a structuration theory approach in organization analysis offers a broad perspective – as mentioned at the outset – and at the same time places the interplay between organizational and social processes in the centre. In addition, it makes it possible to keep the different levels of organization separate in the analysis. In this approach, the actions of competent actors take centre stage, but simultaneously, the interchange between structure and action is stressed. The organization constitutes itself as a constant process of “recursive loops”<sup>9</sup>, in which, through the structurally embedded actions of members of the organization, those very structures which make their actions possible are (re)produced. The connection between structure and action is maintained on the level of modalities. What is meant here are modi, processes and patterns of structuration corresponding to the three dimensions of structure (the cognitive, the normative and the power “orders” in the organization); these are: interpreta-

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<sup>8</sup> See for example Giddens (1984), Ortmann (1995), Ortmann/Sydow/Windeler (1997).

<sup>9</sup> The concept of recursion comes from mathematics and originally denoted the repeated application of an operation to the result of the same operation; see Ortmann (1995: 81 ff.). What is meant here is that the results of actions become the preconditions for action in the ‘next round’ of actions, since they have either confirmed, revised or replaced the existing structures and, conversely, reinforced themselves as structures. Thus the result of an action simultaneously is the basis for further actions.

tive schemes, instruments of power and norms.<sup>10</sup> Modalities represent structures in action; on the one hand, they can be regarded as supra-individual patterns of interpretation and action in organizations, but on the other, if they are specifically actualized by the members of the organization, they convey structures via subjectivity. They too have a close interrelationship with one another. Thus for example interpretative schemata are inextricably intertwined with power relations; the schemata are communicated, and may become norms that solidify into rules of legitimation and so be carried over into sanctioning behaviour which in its turn becomes part of the construction of meaning via interpretative schemata, and so on. The role of gender is not thematized in this approach to organization analysis, either from the point of view of gender as an aspect of the structure of social relations with which organizations might have some kind of link, nor from the point of view of gender as a feature of individuals which might be actualized by the actions of members of the organization in the organization. In this regard, then, the structuration-theoretical model of organization outlined here stands squarely in the tradition which envisages a formal and impersonal organization, even if, in principle, neither elements such as social structures nor subjectivity are explicitly excluded as having a possible effect on the organization. Slotting these elements – that is, gender as an aspect of the structure of social relations, as a feature of subjects and/or as an interactive and symbolic construct – into organization analysis is, however, the declared aim of ‘gendered organizations research’.

From this perspective, organization and gender are multiply linked to one another. For one thing, they are linked on the level of social structures, which have a significant effect in turn on organizational structures and the positioning of the members of the organization, and for another, they are linked on the level of inner-organizational action and negotiation, which take place within these structural relations and (re)produce them. An unequal placement of the genders will acquire significance in negotiation processes, decision-making and in the ratification and legitimation of decisions; it will be activated in these processes, reproduced and possibly modified. The

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<sup>10</sup> The dimensions of action, according to Ortmann’s model of organization (initially following on directly from Giddens), are communication, power and sanction. Any action is again embedded within three dimensions of structure, which correspond to these dimensions of interaction: signification, legitimation and domination. These dimensions of structure can be broken down into rules of the constitution of meaning (the cognitive order of an organization), the rules of sanctioning or else of legitimation of social behaviour (the normative order) and allocative (material) and authoritative (power) resources (the power order).

symbolic or else cultural (re)production of gender plays a central role here, since it creates and propagates the dual-gendered system by means of representations and ascriptions, the gendered ‘charging’ of associations in the workplace and of norms and images with gendered connotations. The physicality of the subjects, their gender identities and the performance of ‘appropriate’ genderedness are regarded as relevant aspects of organizational processes. One point of departure from which to explore the interconnections between organization and gender in greater depth would be provided by including the mutual construction process and the level of symbolic representations of gender in organizations in the analysis of the interplay between structure and action.

This is precisely what the organization model based on structuration theory outlined here could offer, I would suggest. At least one of the requirements of a precisely formulated theory of the gendered organization can be fulfilled here: just as comprehensively as in Joan Acker’s suggestions, but more systematically, it will be possible to identify the different levels of organization on which gender can be made relevant, and to show that gender is sometimes relevant, and sometimes not. On the level of structures it can be pointed out that social forms of production and reproduction, oriented towards the male ‘normal work model’, are reflected in organizational structures. On the level of interactive action and negotiation, communication and decision-making, these structures come into play, both as actualized rules for action and as differently distributed resources the actors have for action. On the level of modalities, as was shown here by means of the examples of naturalizations and ‘controlled emotionality’, structure and action are transmitted via norms and interpretative schemata. In addition, the model is open towards the subjects as gendered people. Modalities are, as Ortmann et al. put it, actualized through actors, that is, through people acting in their roles as members of an organization, but also through the personal biographies and competences of the subjects.

*“In their interactions, the actors connect the action level with the structure level, to the extent that, in a very specific way, they make rules and resources the modalities of their action under situative circumstances, according to the specific situation and to their biography and competence.” (Ortmann/Sydow/Windeler 1997: 319)*

This additional central ‘level’ of organization has not yet been further discussed by Ortmann et al. This too, however, would be a possible point of departure for a more extensive analysis of the relationship between organization and gender.<sup>11</sup>

### *Conclusion*

As the findings of the empirical study presented here show, it is not – or at least not only – strategic interests and power games, and also not direct stereotyping, ascription and naturalizations of work and gender that can make an organization gendered. It is also, and to a much greater extent, the system of shared interpretations and norms which brings together images of masculinity and femininity, gendered and non-gendered elements of organizations and the material side of work. In terms of concepts used in structuration theory, it is the level of modalities that connects structure and action. Patterns of interpretation and norms specific to the organization help to reduce complexity, provide legitimation for decisions taken on the basis of organizational hierarchies and provide the members of the organization with orientation and reassurance in positioning themselves. Of central importance in this perspective is the creating of meaning in organizational decision-making via shared norms embedded in the organizational power-relationships – which makes it clear that power is on the one hand a resource based on hierarchical positioning, but also to a great extent the power to make definitions, and it is, in the construction of meaning and legitimation, a recursive, dialectical relationship. The empirical examples presented here also show that the organization is both gendered *and* non-gendered.

Basing the next steps in a theory of the gendered organization on empirical findings such as these would, I believe, have the following implications. Firstly, in agreement with Britton and other current contributors to gendered organizations research,<sup>12</sup> it can be stated that we cannot continue to assume that an a priori, indissoluble link exists between organization and gender. It must be possible to think of an organization as non-gendered, partly gendered or, as Britton puts it, “less oppressively gendered” as

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<sup>11</sup> Here the question of physicality in a model of organization could for example be integrated. See Halford/Savage/Witz (1997) or Witz (1999).

well. The relevance of gender is to be empirically established accordingly. This means on the one hand that the contexts of gender differentiation in organizations become the centre of attention. On the other, it means that the respective levels of the analysis of genderings must be clearly separated. Is it the genderings of professions and occupations that are being analysed, or is it the genderings of organization? And if so, is it the structural, the discursive or the cultural level of the organization that is under scrutiny? Are we on the level of structures, interaction or modalities – and at right angles to that, the level of meaning constitution, legitimation or power and control? If the focus is thus directed more intensively at the analysis of the organization ‘in itself’, then the question of the function of differentiating by gender comes more prominently to the fore. Analysing the respective functions and patterns of functions of gender differentiation could provide a bracket for all the different – and similar – empirical findings in different sub-fields and levels of analysis.

A further step would, finally, consist in formulating these studies and considerations in more strongly organization theoretical terms. Whether, as outlined here, Ortmann et al. have developed a viable model in this respect, can on the one hand be confirmed. The levels of analysis are clear, and it is equally clearly possible to analyse connecting lines and links between the different levels and thus to trace processes of gendering and the simultaneity of gendering and degendering. One potential problem however exists from the point of view of organizational sociology, and that is that here organization research has been based on a social theory model – which means that the problems I mentioned at the beginning of too broad a perspective on gender, society and organization would be perpetuated. This also raises the fundamental question whether organizations should be regarded as part of the social world, or whether their specific elements – aims, goals, functions, types, constitution, membership and boundary management – are most significant. In this regard, many questions remain open in gendered organizations research. What can be stated in any case, I believe, is that one goal of future research should be to shift the focus of analysis. Instead of a continuing and intensified analysis of social inequality in the research object ‘organization’, there should be analysis of the organization with reference to gender. This does not mean that attention to asymmetrical gender relations ought to be reduced – but I do believe

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<sup>12</sup> See Britton (1998, 2000), Heintz (1997), Kuhlmann et al. (2001), Müller (1999), Wilz (2001a,

that if we are aiming to re-think gender, work and organization, we should think more intensively about organization.

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