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The support paradox: Overcoming dilemmas in gender equality programs



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Summary This paper revolves around ambivalent discourses surrounding gender equality policies and interventions in organizations. On the one hand, these equality policies are perceived as necessary in order to create more opportunities for upward career mobility for women. On the other hand, both men and women argue against these policies due to issues of reverse discrimination and quality loss that they raise. For a Dutch Funding Organization, this resulted in a dilemma; with gender equality on the one hand, and merit and individual advancement on the other. The support paradox provides a discursive tool to counter this dilemma that finds its roots in a strong belief in the meritocracy and a blindness for the genderedness of the meritocracy and academic careers. By reframing and illustrating this paradox, this study shows that the support that men often receive in their academic careers tends to be taken for granted, while women are expected to advance on their own in order to prove that they are sufficiently qualified. We will argue that it is theoretically interesting and politically important to frame the “getting help” dilemma in terms of a paradox.

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Introduction

Although some progress has been made, projects aiming at creating sustainable gender equality have proven to be complex (Acker, 2000; Benschop, Mills, Mills, & Tienari, 2012) and show that planned change seldom leads to planned results. Earlier studies have indicated several reasons causing the limited success of gender equality initiatives, for

instance: the superficiality of gender policies (Eriksson-Zetterquist & Styhre, 2008), poor implementation and fragmentation (Benschop & Verloo, 2006; Van den Brink, Benschop, & Jansen, 2010), the exclusive focus on the minority group (De Vries, 2010; Liff & Cameron, 1997) and the limited structural power of change agents (Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Meyerson & Kolb, 2000). In addition, gender equality initiatives continue to meet with hidden or open resistance, and they are even considered highly controversial (Cockburn, 1991; Connell, 2006; Crosby, Iyer, & Sincharoen, 2005; Hing, Bobocel, & Zanna, 2002). Equality programs are often seen as the opposite of career policies based on merit and individual advancement (Bacchi, 1996; Noon, 2010; Tienari, Holgersson, Meriläinen, & Höök, 2009). Equality initiatives are then framed in terms of dilemmas; with affirmative action,

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gender equality and equal opportunities on the one hand, and merit and individual advancement on the other (Lamont, 2009). As a result, the discussion between opponents and proponents of gender equality initiatives often becomes mired in an impasse.

This paper will focus on the perceptions toward equality programs and the impact of these perceptions on the effectiveness of these programs. The investigation of equality programs and the ways in which they are perceived, can develop our knowledge regarding the effectiveness (or lack of effectiveness) of such programs. These insights are urgently needed, particularly in light of the considerable effort and resources that contemporary organizations are channeling into gender equality programs, both in the Netherlands (Talent to the Top 2012) and worldwide (e.g. EU, 2008; MIT, 2011). This study aims to advance the discussion on how gender policies in organizations can become more effective by critically examining the discourses surrounding academic equality programs and analyze how they change or sustain unequal gender relations. We will study these discourses from a gender perspective, which entails that we conceptualize gender as something that is “done” in social interaction (Martin, 2003; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012b; West & Zimmerman, 1987), instead of seeing gender as an individual characteristic. In this way, we are able to highlight the subtlety and ambiguity of how gender is “done” in the discussions surrounding gender equality programs (Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2008; Hearn, 1998) and how these discursive practices depict the privileged, white, middle-class men as the “neutral and objective standard” (Nentwich, 2006). Once these gendered discourses have been identified, we can use them as a tool with which to reflect on and reframe current practices and beliefs.

To illustrate the gendered discourses in equality programs, we draw upon empirical material on the evaluation of a formal gender equality initiative introduced by a Dutch scientific funding organization for physics. While the number of female academics in the Natural Sciences is still very low in all Western countries, the Dutch situation still represents something of an exception (e.g. Bosch, 2002; EU, 2012) with hardly eight percent women professors in Natural Sciences. Therefore, the Dutch funding organization FOM started a program to encourage women physicists to stay within the scientific community. We conducted in-depth interviews with thirty-nine academics and policy makers concerning their views on the aim and effectiveness of this program. We begin this article by presenting the theoretical discussion concerning the ambivalence toward gender equality programs, and make a plea for taking gender practices and power into account when examining perceptions toward these programs. After describing the methodology, we examine the ways in which members of the physics community discursively “do” gender when speaking about the gender equality initiatives. We discovered three different and conflicting discourses, which we labeled as follows: the “necessity” discourse, the “concern about quality” discourse, and the “stigmatization” discourse”. These contradictory discourses resulted in a dilemma for the funding organizations; equality programs were considered both desirable and non-desirable at the same time by the policy makers and academics. Although more gender balance in the physics community was welcomed, the program was considered opposite to

merit as women were ‘helped’ by the program. This dilemma might restraint the FOM funding organizations and other organizations from installing or continuing gender equality programs.

To overcome this dilemma, we analyzed and reframed these seemingly contradictory discourses by introducing the support paradox in the concluding section. By reframing the dilemma in terms of a support paradox, it was shown how the support that men receive during their academic careers tends to be taken for granted, while women are expected to advance on their own in order to prove that they are sufficiently qualified. In this way, the gender equality program were therefore not longer seen as ‘helping’ women who could not make it on their own, but a program compensating for the structural disadvantage women encounter. The paradox offered a tool for the Physics community to reflect on their day to day gender practices and helped to legitimize the gender equality program in the funding organization. We therefore will argue in the conclusion that it is theoretically interesting and politically important to frame the “getting help” dilemma in terms of a paradox.

Gender equality programs

The dynamic, complex, and multiple ways in which gender inequality is reproduced in contemporary (academic) organizations have been documented extensively by feminist scholars (see for an overview Calas & Smircich, 1999). Achieving change in organizations in ways that will make them more equitable, however, has proven to be hard and complex (Benschop et al., 2012; Eriksson-Zetterquist & Styhre, 2008; Litvin, 2006) and it is accompanied by many dilemmas (Acker, 2000; Nentwich, 2006). On the one hand, gender discrimination is acknowledged as possible but unacceptable within the workplace. On the other hand, it is framed as something that has been addressed in the past and that is no longer relevant for day-to-day interactions (Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998a; Kelan, 2009). As a result, gender-equality programs are often received with ambivalence or even resisted.

Research on ambivalence toward gender equality programs indicates that the perceptions of equality policies are influenced by the impact of these programs on material self-interest, beliefs regarding the existence of gender discrimination, and traditional attitudes toward women (Konrad & Hartmann, 2001; Konrad & Linnehan, 1999). Given that these programs are intended to encourage or support women in their careers, women are more likely than men are to support these programs. Men are more likely to view such programs as a threat to their own careers (Arnold, 1997; Kvande & Rasmussen, 1994). Acker (1989) found that supervisors, middle managers, and male employees all opposed an intervention aimed at making changes in the pay system, as they feared the intervention would undermine their relative advantages in wages and status. Acker further argues that equality may be counter to the interests of some, including those who have the power to undermine change efforts. However, as Dick and Cassell (2004, p. 955) argue, resistance toward equality initiatives will not be limited to white men, but also women or other members of the ‘oppressed’ minority group might perceive little necessity for such changes. This is often described as the “backlash effect” of equality programs: beneficiaries of

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