Gendered role modelling—A paradoxical construction process

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Summary
Theory of role modelling in organizations addresses the contents of role models, while the process of modelling has received little attention. In this paper, this gendered process is scrutinized from a constructionist perspective. Modelling starts with a comparison between an image of oneself with that of a person who serves as a proto-model; continues with idealization and/or composition of the traits of proto-models resulting in an image of a role, and ends with a comparison between such an image and an image of oneself, leading to directives for action. People do not model their behaviour on real persons, but on mental constructs they make loosely inspired by actual people. This conclusion forms a new argument against tokenism: it is never enough to employ one woman, as proto-models must be many and varied.
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Introduction

The issue of role modelling has been of interest for organization scholars since the 1960s. It has been repeatedly pointed out that in most contemporary organizations men and women meet many men who can serve as their role models, but neither men nor women have women role models from which to choose (Ely, 1995; Ibarra, 1999; Kanter, 1977; Paludi & Fankell-Hauser, 1986; Schein, 1975). However, it has also been pointed out that the focus on role models is "a psychological version of the American dream: if women merely follow the lead of so-called role models, we all, every one of us, can succeed" (Fisher, 1988, p. 212).

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Even if the *meaning* of role models for women has been focus for much field research (Fisher, 1988; Speizer, 1981), the *process* of role modelling, as Ibarra (1999) pointed out, has received little empirical attention. However, researchers have managed to formulate many questions that call for answers. Women's numerical under-representation at top management levels is a persistent state of affairs, which raises the question of whether or not the dearth of female role models affects the careers and transition experiences of younger women. Gibson and Cordova (1999) claimed that lack of female role models makes women experience organizational life and career as more difficult than men, as women have to perform more sophisticated cognition operations than do men, who have many same-sex role models within the organization. As a result, men are said to be more likely to form composite role models, whereas women more likely identify with cross-sex role models (Gibson & Cordova, 1999).

The same body of research suggested that role modelling needs further examination. One interesting opportunity to study the effects of under-representation of women is an arrival of the newcomers to such organizations. A management apprenticeship programme offered by a multinational company operating in Sweden to young people who recently earned a degree in Business Administrations became thus an object of an ethnographically inspired longitudinal study. The field study focused on the company socialization practices, but the issue of role modelling soon emerged as significant (Eriksson, 2000). A tentative description of the role modelling process has therefore been constructed and it is offered for scrutiny here. Before it is presented and exemplified, however, a brief introduction to the original study and its premises is necessary.

Theoretical and methodological premises of the study of role modelling

The original study (Eriksson, 2000) embraced the constructivist approach, which assumes that reality is socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The constructionist variation favoured by Knorr-Cetina (1981), Latour (1998, 2005), and Czarniawska (2003) makes two specifications of this general approach. Firstly, it takes a realist, not an idealist stance: the point is not that reality is but an illusion to be shaped at will, but that it does not have an essence to be discovered and described. The reality is constantly under construction, and its stability is an illusion created by repetition and supported by artefacts. Secondly, it takes "social" to mean that representations of reality are created in interactions with others. These "others" do not have to be only people—they can be artefacts, symbols and images. Listening to a performance of a successful leader might produce in a listener an idea—an image—of what it is to be a successful leader. It is suggested here that the process of role modelling takes place when a person consciously or unconsciously models her or his behaviour on such an image.

The constructionist stance in gender studies usually means that gender is seen as a "routine, methodical and recurring accomplishment" embedded in everyday actions (Poggio, 2006; West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 126). The focus is on "doing gender"; on "the activities of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category" (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 127). The daily accomplishment of gender can be illustrated for instance by the practices in work organizations (Acker, 1992; Martin, 2006) where it becomes "naturalized as 'the way it is'" (Calás & Smircich, 2006, p. 301).

Only few studies within socialization and role modelling research have been discussing the role modelling process in terms of social construction. Yet the classic Berger and Luckmann's *The social construction of reality* from 1966 put much emphasis on socialization, differentiating between primary socialization where the child internalizes the social reality, and secondary socialization which is defined as "the internalization of institutional or institution-based 'sub-worlds'" (1966:158).

Even if studies within socialization mostly were conducted on other premises than those of social constructi-vism, they often depict in detail parts of the process of learning the social reality. The notion of role models originated for instance in child development theories, especially social learning theory and cognitive development theory (Speizer, 1981). Many studies have focused on parents and teachers as role models for young children or college students.

In the organizational context, these issues have been often discussed within the area of organizational socialization. This literature usually starts from an assumption that the senior members have important effect on the socialization process of newcomers (Avery, 1968; Czarniawska, 1998; Ibarra, 1999; Louis, 1980; Marcson, 1968; Schein, 1992; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Role models are looked for and found among superiors, peers and other co-workers. They provide the newcomer with information regarding task mastery, role clarification, social integration, and emotional information (Adkins, 1995; Feldman, 1989, 1994; Louis, 1980; Reichers, 1987). Recent research suggests that role models are important across the whole career span (Gibson, 2003).

Even though role models are said to be important in organizational socialization, both the defining characteristics and the exact nature of their influence on newcomers are unclear (Jakobsen, 2003). Role models are said to be helping newcomers to learn tacit rules and signalling important personal traits (Ibarra, 1999; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). In most works, it is implicitly assumed that "role models" are actual persons. In the present context, it would be more correct to say that persons treated as role models *appear* to possess certain traits and *display* certain skills. The relationship between a role model and a newcomer requires only that the newcomers desire to be perceived similarly to the model (Fisher, 1988; Gibson & Cordova, 1999). Ibarra (1999, p. 766) ascribed more complexity to the process suggesting that role modelling was the process "by which people negotiate, with themselves and with others, what identities they craft as they assume a new work role".

It should be pointed out, however, that role modelling, like socialization of which it is a part, is a partly unconscious process. One can conclude, with Gibson, Cordova and Ibarra, that it is a conscious and unconscious *identification*; conscious and unconscious *imitation of desires* (Sevón, 1996), but also *negotiations*—with oneself and the others. Identification, imitation, and negotiation are all terms specifying the nature of the oscillating movement between models and prototypes Latour (2002) spoke of; they are all elements of identity construction.

Narrowing the field: gender and role modelling

The reason for a repeatedly formulated demand for female role models is, as Fisher (1988) pointed out, the assumption that men are successful because they are numerous in workplaces and therefore can have many role models. As Virginia Schein pointed out 1975, when people think "manager", they think "male". It is thus presumed that if only women had many female role models, the gender proportion of men and women in, e.g., management positions would be different. Thus, there exists an abundant