Negotiating selves: Gender at Work

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Abstract

This paper suggests that the framing of gender production in workplaces is a negotiation with varying results. The basis for this frame is a combination of the notions of "positioning" (the discoursive production of selves, as suggested by Davies and Harré, 1990), "doing gender" (gender as an accomplishment, an achieved property of situated conduct: West and Zimmerman, 1987), "negotiation of identities" (which takes place when positioning is contested: Pavlenko and Blackledge, 2004) and "coercive gendering" (ascribing gender to people through discriminatory action: Czarniawska, 2006). A distinction is made between a self-positioning and an attributive positioning; the focus is on their interplay. Using examples from the field, the paper then reviews varying outcomes of such negotiations in workplaces. Although the examples concern gender, the same frame can be successfully applied to various instances of intersectionality.

> [They] are pigeonholed, labeled, and they will be judged
> by how true they are to their labels (of course, that and that
> alone is what's emphatically called "being true to oneself")
> (Milan Kundera, *Ignorance*, 2002: 204)

In the last two decades, social sciences have been dominated by what Ian Buruma aptly called "the tyranny of identity"[i]. In his opinion, "identity" was behind most of the present world troubles:

> Identity is a bloody business. Religion, nationality or race may not be the primary causes of
> war and mass murder. These are more likely to be tyranny, or the greed for territory, wealth
> and power. But "identity" is what gets the blood boiling, what makes people do unspeakable
> things to their neighbors (Buruma, 2002).

The phenomenon is not new. What can be called, in somewhat milder terms, an identity paradigm, is usually traced back to the 19th century and to the rise of nationalism (Anderson, 1983/1991). People forced to group within the new borders badly wanted to know what they had in common, as their tendency was to see too many differences. But by then acute observers had already noted that a significant aspect of existence had been lost in the process:

> To exist is to differ; difference, in a sense, the truly substantial side of things; it is at once their ownmost possession and that which they hold most in common. This must be our starting point (…) since all things come back to it – including identity, which is more usually, but mistakenly, taken as the point of departure. For identity is only the *minimal degree* of difference and hence a kind of difference, and an infinitely rare kind at that, as rest is only a special case of movement and the circle only a particular variety of ellipse (Tarde, 1893/2012: 40).

The complementary, and according to Tarde dominant, aspect of the self – alterity – has been subordinated to identity (Czarniawska, 2008). The term "alterity" has a double meaning: it is "used in postmodern writings for the 'otherness' of others, or sometimes the otherness of the self" (*The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*), but this "sometimes" seldom happens[ii].

Searching for origins of the "identity paradigm", Peter Brooks (2005) extended Anderson's analysis. He pointed out that at the turn of the 19th century, exactly when Gabriel Tarde noticed that more and more attention was being paid to identity than to alterity of the self, the western states encountered two types of control problems. One was caused by too many differences (as witnessed in the fictional figure of a master criminal in a variety of disguises); the other, by too few differences (as in the case of the natives in the colonies, who were indistinguishable from one another). The will to trace down the criminals and to maintain control over the colonies contributed to the growing focus on identification and therefore identity, which continues to this day.

Organization scholars happily incorporated the notion of identity in their work (for reviews, see e.g., Deetz, 1994; Hatch and Schutz, 2003). It could be that identity rather than alterity is the main interest of managers and organizers, just as it was for nation builders (but see Strannegård and Friberg, 2001 for an ethnography of an IT company). Nevertheless, discarding alterity as a central ingredient in construction of the self has negative consequences for organization studies. In the first place, this "tyranny of identity" unwittingly reproduces a colonial attitude, in spite of the protestations of postcolonial writers. Second, and again unwittingly, it tends to treat identity as an essential trait, something to have or not to have. Even the notion of "identity work" and "identity construction" (for early takes, see e.g., Snow and Andersson, 1987) suggest that there can be an end product, thus losing from the view the never-ending dynamics of the construction of selves.

In the place of identity-related terms, the concept of "negotiating selves" may be a potentially useful frame for analyzing events in the workplace in terms of social dynamics. The examples in this paper focus primarily on gender. But both the inspiration for the frame and its possible applications are closely related to the intersectionality perspective introduced by Crenshaw (1989; 1994), as a concept highlighting the connections between race and gender in the example of violence against black women, but later extended to many fields and populations. The frame suggested here is a hybrid, grown from a combination of several concepts that I have found useful in understanding, describing, and conceptualizing negative discrimination in workplaces.

Positioning, or the discoursive production of selves

The notion of the *true Self*, the essence of a person that exists even if buried under many layers of social masks, is ancient, and probably connected to the idea of "soul." Yet in 1910 William James had already written that any person could be said to have "as many different social selves as there are distinct groups of persons about whose opinions he cares" (p. 292). His idea gave rise, for example, to the evolutionary view on the construction of self, according to which "the self develops in response to uncertainty reduction with the 'correct' self identified via the 'sentiment of rationality'" (Yost et al., 1992: 110). Although such an evolutionary view still conceives of the construction of self as a cognitive process, symbolic interactionists suggested early on that the self should not be seen as an essence to be located or

expressed, but as an image of "I." produced and reproduced in interactions (Mead, 1913). Such a self would be stable insofar as there persists a shared memory of past interactions.[iii]

Thus individuals who find themselves in an environment that does not share their memories experience a cultural shock, which can be interpreted in two ways, which, although contradictory, actually complement one another. One is a faulty performance: a habitual "presentation of self in everyday life" (Goffman, 1959) did not result in an expected reaction from the audience. The other is a disappointment that the true Self did not shine through the faulty performance; most people, like many social scientists, cherish a belief in the existence of such an entity.[iv] A paradoxical response, therefore, goes along the following lines: "I did not present myself properly, but couldn't they see who I *really* am nevertheless?"

As contemporary people move around and constantly remake their nets of relationships (Gergen, 1994), they often experience their selves as fragmented and multiple, and find their performances faulted, which is counteracted by a mediating effort of self-narration ("What I just did may seem strange to you, but you see, in my culture..."). Accordingly, it has been suggested that "[s]elf ... must be treated as a construction that, so to speak, proceeds from the outside in as well as from the inside out, from culture to mind as well as from mind to culture" (Bruner, 1990, p. 108).

After all, claimed Rorty (1991), the human self is just a self-reweaving web of beliefs, which are revealed as habits of action. This web is centerless and contingent, connecting the self "to those with similar tastes and similar identities" (p. 192). The self is historical, and is both constituted by and constitutive of a community. If the community conceives of itself as an abstract system, as is the case with formal organizations, the resulting selves will also be conceived of in abstract terms, a feature that often baffles an outsider witnessing organizational presentations. "'I hold a Chair in Management.' 'Oh, you are the head of your department.' ' Oh, no, gods forbid!'" Thus proceeds a constructivist spiral: I present myself in abstract, systemic terms, as the convention requires, but in order to make them understandable, I have to resort to the history of a particular community: "You see, in Sweden, professors are not the heads of departments anymore." In the USA, where everyone is called professor if they teach in a university, that may even be taken to mean that nonacademics are hired to manage university departments.

What becomes clear is that "[i]dentities are performed in conversations. ... what we achieve in conversations is positioning vis-à-vis other people" (Davies and Harré, 1990: 44), and against the background of a plot that is negotiated by those taking part in the conversation. Whether this background is the history of the community or one's life project may vary from one conversation to another. Thus, the Self is produced, reproduced, and maintained in past and present conversations. It is community constituted, as Rorty said, in the sense of being created by those who take part in a conversation; it is historical, because past conversations are evoked in the course of present ones.

The idea that a self or an identity is constructed in interactions has been apparently accepted in the organization studies community,[v] but traces of the essentialist view still linger. The selves may be constructed, but they are still "things" or "attributes." One has a self as one has a dress; one can choose it and change it, but it is still a property (see e.g., Ibarra, 1999). The truly processual view, like that of Davies and Harré's, seems still to be too difficult to espouse.

Also, although I accept Davies and Harré's reasoning, some aspects need to be added to make it more complete. In the first place, a construction of the self may not, in fact, start with an identity, but with an alterity construction: "How am I different?"

I do not think that Davies and Harrè would oppose such an extension of their concept; after all, they speak of "discursive construction of selves." not of identities. The selves are constructed in interplay of alterity and identity. "How am I different? Who from? How am I similar? Whom to?"

Another extension concerns the adjective "discursive." I believe that selves are shaped by much more than conversations alone; there are body forms and clothes, gestures and physical acts. In case of gender, ethnicity, physical handicap, and age, they all play a significant role. As Halford and Leonard (2006), who adopted a similar frame, put it, negotiation is "an everyday process created and recreated through the routines, activities and practices of our everyday lives" (p. 9).

Coercive gendering

In their famous article, "Doing gender" ethnomethodologists Candice West and Don H. Zimmerman (1987:126) suggested that gender should be seen "as an accomplishment, an achieved property of situated conduct." Their appeal has been widely accepted in organization studies by Gherardi (1994), Bruni and Gherardi (2001), and Yancey Martin (2003), among others. West and Zimmerman's reasoning can be extended to a situation in which gender is not an accomplishment, but a coercive ascription, a forced property of situated conduct (Czarniawska, 2006). One of the most obvious ways of "doing gender to the other" is to ascribe gender to people through discriminatory action, which, even if coercive, may be perceived by both the target of the action and the society as justified by the situation and therefore legitimate. Thus to oblige men and women to go to different toilets would be seen as doing gender (although it should be added that what is justified and legitimate changes with time and place, like any other social construction; unisex toilets do exist). Other discriminatory actions may be seen as unjust and harmful, by either the target or observers,may openly refer to gender as its basis ("women are not allowed in pubs"), or be hidden, at least according to some opinions, behind some other criteria ("she lacks leadership qualities"). It is this last case that is of greatest interest for gender and organization studies, because of the moral imperative to fight against harmful discrimination and injustice in workplaces, and because silent actions that form the core of gendering practices in society tend to be taken for granted.

Negotiation of identities

An interactive production of a self could go smoothly and successfully, or not at all. A positioning may be contested: if I am not chairing a department, this means that I am not a chair.

What happens when a position is contested? Aneta Pavlenko and Adrian Blackledge (2004) focused on just this situation in the context in which it is most likely to occur: a multilingual (which is often also multiethnic) context. Inspired as I am by the work of Davies and Harrè, they selected for their attention situations in which people "resist, negotiate, change, and transform themselves and others" (p. 20). They distinguished between reflective positioning, which I later call *self-positioning,* to avoid inclusion of a situation in which a reflective attribution is taking place; and interactive positioning, which I rename *attributive,* as I see all positioning as being, by definition, interactive. They define the negotiation of identities as "an interplay between reflective positioning, i.e. self-representation, and interactive positioning, whereby others attempt to position or reposition particular individuals or groups" (p. 20).

Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004) remained focused on identities (which may be more salient in a multilingual context, in which the difference is obvious from the start and it is the similarity that must be established) and on linguistic interactions only (again, this is given by their initial interest). Still, I believe it is justified to extend their terms to other contexts, in which issues of both alterity and identity – that is, a complete construction of a self and non-linguistic interactions – come to light.

An interactive production of selves

My focus is not, therefore, on the products of the construction of selves – a self-concept, a self-image, etc.[vi] – but on the process itself, on the interactive production of selves consisting of ongoing acts of positioning.

In order to inspect the negotiation of the selves in various types of organizing practices, I introduce two main types of positioning acts: self-positioning and attributive positioning. Both of them may end successfully or be contested, and I am trying to illustrate various outcomes of such negotiations of the self with examples from my own field studies, other field studies, and my own life experiences.

In the taxonomy proposed below, its is the narrator of an event who judges the type of positioning and its consequences. The narrator, however, can be either a target person, a member of a targeted audience, or an observer, which means that these judgments may be contested. As in any kind of interaction, interpretations of what happened may be multiple and conflictual. Nevertheless, it may be assumed that the judgment of the narrator comprises part of his or her life experience and is therefore of value and of interest.

Table 1. Types of positioning acts and their possible results

	attributive positioning	self-positioning
positioning accepted	1. maintaining position	3. managing position
	2. shifting position	4. losing position
positioning contested/ resisted	5. refusing definition	7. performance faulted
	6. re-positioning (intersections)	8. performance unrecognized (divergent definitions)

1. Attributive positioning accepted, position maintained: "The Polish Mother"

The position of Polish women in the labor force in the years 1945-1989 differed from the position of many other European mothers. In 1974, they comprised 46.2 per cent of the work force, and only 6 per cent worked part-time. Magdalena Sokołowska, who conducted a study of Polish women in decision-making elites, noticed that they often held extremely high positions in professional terms, but rarely, if ever, held positions of formal power (Sokołowska, 1981).

According to the women themselves, they tended to decline positions of power. They could not afford it because they were also fully employed at home with their families. Much to her surprise, Sokołowska discovered that the historical ideal of "the Polish mother" was still alive among these professional women. I was equally surprised to learn that the City of Raciborz ordered a monument of the Polish Mother to be built after 1989.[vii]

This peculiar ideal of the Polish mother was born in the years 1795-1918, when Poland was deprived of its sovereignty and partitioned by three foreign forces: Russian, German, and Austro-Hungarian. The Roman Catholic Church and the family were the only institutions that remained free from the occupants' intervention, and were thus the main sources of survival for Polish nationalism.

> Polish conditions demanded fortitude. Polish wives and mothers were often their husbands'
> advisors; and compelled by circumstances, when the husband was at war, in prison, or in exile,
> or if he had perished, the woman often became head of the family, conducted affairs, and
> directed the children's future. The idea of woman was praised to the skies: fortitude and
> adherence to duty were demanded of her; her importance in bringing up the children and in the
> household was emphasized. Feelings of public responsibility arose among women and
> embraced ever-widening circles of them. Wives and daughters of the gentry secretly taught
> Polish language and history in villages, opened nurseries, and conducted courses in household
> management and hygiene for rural women (Sokołowska, 1981: 107).

This ideal was consecrated between 1918 and 1939, during the short period of Polish independence between the wars. Although such heroic efforts were no longer required, the time had come to collect the laurels. As modernity approached, however, new types of ideal woman were imported: *la garçonne*, the flapper, the New Woman, and even the suffragist. At the turn of the century, the literature was dominated by two women: poetess Maria Konopnicka and novelist Eliza Orzeszkowa, both traditional writers. They were soon joined by a modernist Zofia Nałkowska, and a satirical playwright Gabriela Zapolska, and a parodist Magdalena Samozwaniec. Witold Gombrowicz complained that literary critique was completely dominated by women.

All this came to an end with the Second World War, when the need for "the Polish mother" arose again, as men left to fight. Forty years later, Sokołowska found the situation unchanged:

The majority of Poles in the 40-65 age group today stems from the peasantry of working class and was deeply imbued in their childhood and youth with a prevailing "ideal" image of women. In conversation on this question with men in leading positions one is struck by the fact that their conception of woman is still so similar to that 'ideal' model. It is an image encompassing all 'female wisdom'. She is brave, hardworking, economical, self-denying, and devoted; the guardian angel of the children, the aged, and the sick in the family; the ruler of pots, pans, and the washtub; the confidante of man's troubles; and his life companion. It is difficult for them to accept a different idea of woman – not that she should not have an education and a washing machine, but that she is a true and equal partner in family, professional, social and political life instead of someone's "life companion" (Sokołowska, 1981: 108-109).

Thirty years later, feminist and gender scholars are trying to gain acceptance under the new regime. As one of the Polish weeklies observed, "[t]he biggest success of feminism in Poland means that the word 'feminist' no longer denotes somebody who is completely crazy"[viii]. The situation resembles that in many other fields, where there is a kind of automorphism – a conscious re-enactment of realities from 1918-1939 (Czarniawska, 2002). Construction of the Polish Mother's monument is only one symptom of the general situation, characterized by the central role of the Catholic Church, a glorification of the family, and an encouragement of nationalistic sentiments. Young women use the expression "the Polish mother" as a self-description – albeit with a dose of self-irony. Apparently, "it is a tradition irrevocably related to the identity of the majority of Polish women of today" (Witowska, 2001). The position has been maintained for something like two hundred years.

2. Attributive positioning accepted, position shifted: "I am not a Joan of Arc"

One situation in which a self needs to be re-negotiated is a change of job in the same place of work. Silvia Gherardi (1995: 115-116) quoted the following story told by "Fiammetta", an official in a municipal administration in Italy who changed positions in her office:

> I first came to work in the town hall when I was 20 years old. And I always had a simple life in this office. I got on well with my colleagues, and the boss was a good man. He took care of everything, and we just attended to wages, pensions and so on. (...)
>
> My boss had taken an early retirement. (...) his job was advertised and everyone in the office was asking who would take his place. It began as a joke when a colleague and then all the office asked me why I didn't apply. (...) I sent in my application and began to study for the exam – but mostly so that I wouldn't make a fool of myself, not to win. I knew that to get to the top someone had to pull strings for you.
>
> [She got the job].
>
> They greeted me like a bad smell, and they treated me like the book-keeper they had always known. They thought I would continue to take orders and be obedient. (...) The more I dug my heels in with the other section heads, the more they treated me as an enemy and the more they saw me as a "snake in the grass". (...) They would have granted a man the right to disagree, even to be an enemy, because he was their equal. But they expected me as a woman to understand quickly without asking questions, and not to bother anyone.

As indicated by the part of the story in which it was suggested as a joke that Fiammetta apply for the manager's job, she previously has accepted the position attributed to her: "to understand quickly without asking questions, and not bother anyone." She did not believe she would get the job, and was probably right: it was a reform of the Italian public administration that made it possible for her to be promoted. She expected, however, that the attribution would automatically shift when she changed job. It did not. It was her self-positioning that changed: "It took me a long time to get a complete picture of the situation and when and how I could start to change things. And it also took a long time to persuade my town councillor to back me up." (p. 116). But other people's positioning of her did not change. In the intersection of job position and gender, gender won.

Fiammetta ended her story by saying that she has "no intention of playing Joan of Arc," but that she is not going to give up. The reader does not know how her story ended, but it is most likely that, in order to change the attributive positioning, she would have to change her place of work. Repositioning rarely works in the same place; the pattern of interactions is too stable to be re-negotiated. It also needs to be added that women in high positions are still rare in the Italian public administration.

3. Attributive positioning contested, definition refused: "I have work." "Stop treating us as children"

In this section are excerpts from field notes taken during my study of management in Warsaw (Czarniawska, 2002). Top management is meeting, and Male Vice-Mayors (MVM) 1 and 2, Female Lawyer (FL, upper-level staff position), and Female Economist (FE - high executive position) are present, among others.

The meeting cannot begin, as a quorum is lacking.

> *MVM 1 (says in a dreary voice): Either we wait for our colleagues for God knows how long or*
> *we meet once more on Saturday.*

> *MVM 2: Maybe we could meet at 11?*

> *FE (enters just in time to hear the suggestion): Christ!*

> *MVM 2: You'll have to cancel your date at 11 and send your lover away.*

> *FE: I don't have a lover; I have work.*

> *VM 2: Everybody has work.*

Was "Everybody has work" conciliatory, or did it mean "everybody has work but only you have a lover"? I do not know, as the exchange ended at that point. It seemed to me that Vice Mayor 2 was obviously "doing gender to women" by introducing constant sexual allusions in the most improbable contexts. I do not believe that he was voicing an actual suspicion about the Economist's private life; this was, for him, an appropriate way to address a woman whom he liked (!), under an assumption that the suggestion that a woman has a lover is always flattering to her.

Such assumptions make part of local "gender ideologies" as Pavlenko (2001: 124) called "normative masculinities and femininities, as well as beliefs and ideas about relations between the sexes." Such ideologies may be similar, but may also vary across times and places. I do not think that the comment about a lover would be accepted in my workplace, but my colleague in UK, a full professor, was told by her dean to wear a miniskirt the next day as they were expecting an important visitor from industry. A woman who received her degree in Italy, now a lecturer in UK, met her former adviser at a conference, and seeing her, he said: "I see you are doing well. Even your breasts have grown!"

But only I considered the vice mayor's comment to be coercive and unpleasant. The women I shadowed in Warsaw spoke in fact about "doing gender to them", but they would refuse my critical interpretation of such scenes as this if the offender was someone they liked. If it were someone they disliked, the interpretation would be critical, but they would steer clear of interpreting their words as a gender issue, as the next excerpt shows.

> *MVM 1: As to the last suggestion, shouldn't it have an appendix with the division of duties?*

> *FL: As long as it does not say how to formulate legal acts, because it's nonsense.*

> *MVM 1: You are not listening again. Nobody said anything about legal acts.*

> *FL: I am listening, but for heaven's sake stop treating us like children!*

Although MVM1 was considered to be a generally unpleasant person, he discriminated between men and women in his ways of being unpleasant. He was simply aggressive toward men, while being condescending toward women. In my eyes, he was not so much doing gender as doing age-on-gender: treating men badly, albeit as adults, and treating women like children.

"Girlification" is a common way of attributing gender, and one that is perhaps less contested than direct "sexualization." The two are often placed in interplay, the former as a way of making light of the other. I do not believe that the Female Lawyer could have said "Do not treat us like women." although, for me, that was an obvious alternative interpretation.

Girlification is, however, a re-positioning often used by women in Sweden to signal that they are not a threat to men or, alternatively, when they feel threatened and wish to signal surrender. Often manifested by switching to a higher pitch of voice and using expressions like "This is a girl thing." "We girls think to go now." it also works in the opposite direction: lower pitch, "Don't call us girls, we are grown-up women."

4. Attributive positioning resisted, re-positioning: A "frame-and-cue switcher"

Lowe et al. (2011) listened to stories of Korean entrepreneurs in London. One of these was Mrs. Lee, who worked as an interpreter. Here is one of her stories:

> And there are times, when you go to interpret, like once I was in court, it was in Birmingham, and I was employed by an English solicitor but his clients are Korean. Three Korean gentlemen, and I walked in and said, oh, I am the interpreter, and you must be from this company, because I couldn't find the solicitor yet. And you know what they said, when I was right in front of them? Quiet but loud enough for me to hear (stage whispering) do you think this woman can do *any* kind of translation?! English is better, but the word they used was really degrading. And then the proceedings started and after that they change their attitude (laughs) (Lowe et al., 2011: 40).

What makes this situation truly instructive is the fact that Mrs. Lee does not "negotiate" with her Korean clients in the literal sense of the word; she does it through her competent translation. Negotiations by actions are likely more successful than verbal ones, as they include facial expressions and body movements. And, of course, the image.

5. Self-positioning accepted, managing position: "The Marlboro men"

Magnus Mörck and Maria Tullberg (Tullberg, forthcoming) have studied dress codes during the annual general meetings of publicly owned companies in Sweden. The pattern was clear. The male managers and board members who took their places on the stage wore something that can be described as a "corporate uniform": a dark grey suit with single button line, soft cut, in light and lusterless fabric. The shirt is usually white or pale blue; the tie, until recently, red (George Bush's launch of blue ties in February 2006 have changed that). Private shareholders and managers in smaller firms were freer in their dress codes. The higher up the hierarchy, the stricter is the male code, which makes women conspicuous. They adapt by choosing one of two strategies: mimicry (imitating a business suit; hair in a bun or cropped short) or femininity (high heels, make-up, various colors, long loose hair).

The situation that Tullberg described in great detail was the annual meeting of a large Swedish corporation that had been shaken by a series of financial scandals involving the previous management group.

In the company of two female board members, the new Managing Director was awaiting the arrival of the other people. He was dressed in the corporate uniform, whereas the two women represented women's two styles: one imitating the uniform, and the other emphasizing femininity, including long, lush blond hair. The atmosphere was expectant, and the flashing cameras soon identified the expected person: the nominee for the new chairman of the board. A well-built man in his sixties approached the stage, and on his way grabbed the arm of the "feminine" woman, turned her toward the photographers, and said, "We'd better stay together!" with a big smile. The blond hair caressed his arm, inserted in a sleeve belonging to a suit cut from a fabric that was both lighter and coarser than the corporate uniform. The shirt was impeccably white, and the tie had only a touch of color. A suntanned face framed in a wave of grey hair made Maria Tullberg – the observer – think of the Marlboro man. Later the same day the chairman was interviewed at a fitness center, where he promised, among other things, to promote women if they were competent. As the annual meeting came to its end, the feeling of relief and promise of a better future was palpable. Tullberg concluded that this was an obvious example of *homosocial seduction*, evoking the term launched by Michael Roper (1996).

Katerina Tsetsura (2004) described similar situations through examples of Russian women who worked in public relations. These women applied a hybrid solution, though: they tried to dress "like a bank employee." in severe dark suits, complemented by long, lush blond hair and strong makeup. Humphreys and Brown (2002) described a more dramatic case – of changing dress codes at a Turkish university. The two dress codes signal belongingness to two different groups – those faithful to the ideals of Atatürk (and the modern, westernized Turkey) and those representing Islam. Although the self-positioning was mutually accepted, its management was a battle. The 2000s were reversing a process that occurred in the 1920s when the western code was in ascendance and the Islamic one was descendent; now it is the other way around. Which group will manage its position longer? more successfully?

6. Self-positioning accepted, losing position

A story of losing a position that has been accepted has been told by Deirdre McCloskey in her account of changing sex, *Crossing: A Memoir*:

> [Deirdre McCloskey] was back in Cambridge ... and decided to go over to her old private school ... One of the women offered to give her a tour of the school. In the library Deirdre asked if her books were there – she thought she had remembered sending a pile some years before ... The librarian looked in her computer under "McCloskey."
>
> "We have two by 'Donald', but none by you," she said perkily, adding with irony common among women, "Unless you are 'Donald'!"
>
> "Uh . . . but I *was* Donald." The librarian face went white and then red (McCloskey, 1999, p. 253).

It seems that this is a situation that is well known to transsexuals, although it comes in several variations. In the movie, *Transamerica* (Tucker, 2005), the protagonist, a transsexual, believes that she has been "unmasked" after hearing two women complaining about some men trying to enter a women's toilet. The director suggests to the audience that, in fact, they are addressing the transsexual not as an impostor but as one of them – inviting her to join their outrage. This is a good example of how even the classification of the positioning acts (Am I losing position or maintaining it? Is my self-positioning contested or accepted?) is a matter of interpretation. The present classification does not describe reality, but offers a tool for conceptualizing it.

7. Self-positioning contested, performance found faulty

Was the protagonist of *Transamerica* right in believing herself to be unmasked, it would have meant that her performance was found faulty. I have had a somewhat similar experience. I was invited to act as a member of an external examining committee of a doctoral candidate in Umeå, a university town in Northern Sweden. The members of the committee were invited to Cloudberry for lunch before the defense. Cloudberry is a VIP-faculty-type of restaurant on campus.

I stayed at a hotel in town and took a taxi to the university. I was, in my opinion, dressed with moderate elegance, appropriate for the occasion – the most important occasion in the life of a doctoral candidate. The taxi driver was a man of about 30. When we arrived at the restaurant and I was paying my bill, he asked me: "So, are you applying for a job at Cloudberry?"

I am convinced that this was a case of intersectionality, but I feel that it was my gender that caused my performance as a university professor to be faulted. The first cue was my ethnicity, which is divulged by my accented Swedish. Nevertheless, I have no doubt that a man dressed in a suit going to Cloudberry at lunchtime would be taken for a member of the university community, no matter what his accent.

On the other hand, the way I was dressed could have contributed to the failure of my positioning act. An US colleague who was also a member of the committee came dressed in a loose sweater. Perhaps female professors must not overdress, whereas female job applicants should.

Although my example is mostly amusing (Should I be flattered? Maybe he thought I was a famous female chef?), the failed negotiations over presumed competence are probably the most frequent gendered situations that occur in the workplace.

Even the "frame-and-cue switcher." Mrs. Lee, had been faulted at least once:

> "Once I was told off by a very, very high official from Korea. No, the man for whom
> I interpreted didn't mind at all, but the high official he brings lot of his people and one of them
> said I was enjoying myself too much, I was too excited. My voice was not proper. But it was
> a big room! And I enjoyed it actually." (Lowe et al., 2011: 41).

The last example indicates that when there are many parties to negotiate with, the results can differ. This is indeed the last type of the situation to be described here.

8. Self-positioning unrecognized, diverging definitions

A somewhat similar situation occurs when the definitions of merit differ between the negotiating parties. This time, the example does not come from the negotiating parties themselves, but from commentators, who suggest reasons for a failed negotiation. In a small study that Marta Calás and I conducted, we gave students in Sweden, Finland, Poland, Italy, Puerto Rico, and the USA descriptions of five events that were grounded in real-life experiences, told by women involved in the situation. All these episodes were all interpreted as discriminatory by their narrators. The students received a following instruction (Czarniawska and Calás, 1998):

> Cultural Differences in Interpreting Social Episodes
>
> We are looking for cultural differences in interpreting social episodes. A series of such
> episodes follows. Please, interpret what is happening in each of them. They are rather vague
> and incomplete so that you will have to introduce certain assumptions in order for your
> interpretations to make sense. While you are interpreting each episode, try to figure out what is
> happening and why. Describe the meanings and consequences of each action, and indicate why
> you think that it is so. In other words, indicate your assumptions behind each interpretation.
> At the end, suggest what the person in the story should do next. In each case the protagonist is
> a professional woman between 35 and 45 years old. The episodes take place in different
> countries.
>
> Episode No. 5 was the least ambiguous of the episodes presented, and most closely related to a
> workplace.
>
> EPISODE 5: Tenure Denied
>
> An engineer joined a foreign company seven years ago. During that time she became a top
> figure in the research and development department at the company headquarters. She has
> produced several innovations, has published several articles in journals within her specialty,
> and has developed several professional ties with her mostly male colleagues. Now she is
> taking a short vacation, visiting for a few days with a friend in another country. Sitting in the
> friend's living room she confides that she has just been denied the customary tenure and
> promotion that comes after seven years with the company. Instead she has been offered an
> extension in her contract for another five years. She does not know what to think about all of
> this.

Most students asked themselves whether this was a case of negative gender discrimination or not. Those who decided it was (a majority did) saw several reasons for the discrimination. First, it could have to do with the woman's profession: women engineers are still rare. Second, it could have to do with the position of power: the men were unwilling to share it with "an Other." Third – a reasoning most common among readers from the two Scandinavian countries – the company

was afraid of the potential maternity leave. Fourth, gender discrimination could have been strengthened by xenophobia: foreigners are not given important positions, or the managers in the company simply believe that the woman may want to go back to her home country. In a sense, these are all cases of diverging definitions – the woman did not fit the definition of person deserving the tenure in the eyes of the management.

The students who decided that this case was not one of discrimination agreed that definitions differed, but not of a person, but of competence required. Most of them suggested that the woman saw herself as competent, whereas her bosses had a different definition of the competence desired (or a different judgment about her level of competence). "This is to me a case where a woman is fixated on the idea that she is a woman in a male world rather than asking herself whether she deserves the position" (2fsF30). Those who decided that professional defects caused the failed negotiation indicated that sometimes it happens that a woman is incompetent for a given job, just as men sometimes are. "Not everything goes as one wants it to go" (3smF38). And a very sharp comment from a man: "Perhaps her innovations were not as innovative as she herself believed? Besides, the best proof for how stupid she was is that the poor cow was surrounded by men only and yet was so surprised by the results!" (5trM27).

The story of the "woman engineer" is similar to the story of Valerie the Engineer in Yancey Martin (2003: 349-350). Valerie's boss says that she is not "gregarious enough." but Valerie, who believes in the value of education and job experience, cannot understand what "gregariousness" has to do with success in the engineering profession.

Some conclusions and reflections

These examples amply demonstrate how identity and alterity of the self is always mixed in negotiations. Even in the first case, the accepted attribution of the self as a "Polish mother," which may seem to be a straightforward example of an identity label, differentiates the Polish mother from all other mothers. Fiammetta gave up the difference, but promised not to acquire the identity forced upon her. In the meeting in Warsaw's municipality, the first woman identifies herself with men ("I have work"), while the other stresses the difference ("We are not children"). Mrs. Lee invests in differentiating herself from a "typical Korean woman"; men and women in Sweden, Russia, and Turkey play with similarities and differences. Transsexuals fear that the difference will be discovered; professional women fight for elaborating it, and so on.

The suggested typology is not an attempt to classify social life, but to facilitate analysis. Why should such help be needed? As I have noted on other occasions (Czarniawska, 2006), it is difficult to study actual negative discrimination at workplaces. People do not start to discriminate because a researcher wishes to see it, and are often unaware of the discriminatory character of their actions. After all, discrimination, as the word indicates, means *differentiating* one kind from another, and this is the most common operation, performed by everyone at all times, not least when it comes to labeling people (Strauss, 1959/2007; Bowker and Star, 1999). How to tell if, and who is to say that, discrimination hurts? What is taken for granted is difficult to see, and therefore microscopic tools may be used. The taxonomy I suggest is obviously under a strong influence of ethnomethodology, but less formalized; it gives more interpretative freedom to the researcher.

Open or not, all taxonomies reify and simplify. Actual life events are of course much more complex, which can be seen even in the examples given here. Various positioning acts follow one another, negotiations are broken and returned to, and intersectionality is perhaps the main resource in such negotiation. A refused positioning – whether self or attributed – may be tentatively replaced by another. If not gender then perhaps class? If not class, perhaps ethnicity? If not ethnicity, perhaps age? All of these differentiations can be used to repair an unintentionally damaged interaction, or, to the contrary, to produce humiliation. Also, as Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004), among others, have shown, people are not only "doing gender", but also "doing class", "doing ethnicity", "doing age", and even "doing feminine leadership behaviours" (Schnurr, 2008).

What if the field actors refuse a researcher's classification according to the categories suggested here? Another negotiation begins, which could be of interest to the researcher, but also instructive for the field actor in question: the same situation can be perceived in many ways.

Last but not least, I would like to remind the readers that positioning is not only discursive, as the examples of Mrs. Lee, the Marlboro men, Turkish academics, and female professors going for lunch indicate. Bodies play an important role, as do dress codes and various types of ornaments. Intersectionality concerns not only categories, but also symbols that denote them: they can be put to multiple uses, turning intersectionality into intersymbolism and the other way around.

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i Like many other research fashions, this one is cyclical, too. Anselm Strauss' Mirrors and Masks. The Search for Identity, first published in 1959, was reprinted (with new material added) in 1997 and again in 2007.

ii One of the notable exceptions, in which the two meanings of alterity are intertwined, is found in the writings of Emmanuel Levinas. An insightful comparison of his views with those of Mead can be found in Aboulafia (2001).

iii On stability and malleability of the self-concept, see Markus and Nurius, 1986 and Markus and Kunda, 1986.

iv Thus much as constructionists may reject the notion of "true Self", its construction is an actual process and needs to be studied, although perhaps not by organization scholars.

v Where it has been most forcefully introduced by Kenneth Gergen (1991; 1994). For later developments, see Knights and Willmott, 1999; Collinson, 2003; Alvesson et al., 2008 and Ybema et al., 2009.

vi Once again, the works of Markus and Nurius (1986) and Markus and Kunda (1986) are to be recommended to readers interested in the products of the construction process. These authors conclude that the self-concept should best be seen as a space, a confederation, or a system of different self-conceptions, from which one "working self-concept" may be chosen for a specific situation. This working self-concept may be a starting point for a self-positioning act. Harré (1994) explained from a philosophical viewpoint what possibly happens in such a space.

vii http://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pomnik_Matki_Polki_w_Raciborzu, accessed 2012-02-09.

viii http://www.polityka.pl/spoleczenstwo/artykuly/1519544,1,polskie-feministki-od-1989-do-dzis, accessed 2012-02-09.