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 restrain 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

equality programs are confronted with unwarranted doubts about their qualifications (Agocs & Burr, 1996; Heilman, Block, & Stathatos, 1997).

Gender equality interventions should therefore be conceptualized as subject to mechanisms of power, and they are best understood in terms of power (Verloo, 2005, p. 360). Despite a tendency to conceptualize change in gender-neutral terms, many of these equality programs are gendered as well. Hearn (2000) argues that not only organizations, but also models of organizational or societal change are gendered, and that they embody forms of social division and domination. 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. Or, as Acker (2006, p. 441) puts it: "The study of change efforts and the oppositions they engender are often opportunities to observe frequently visible aspects of the reproduction of inequalities". This study will answer this call by analyzing how discourses of equality programs lead to situations in which people both support and oppose such programs.

Doing gender as a paradox

We draw upon social constructionist feminism (Lorber, 2005), in which gender is not a characteristic, but a social practice that is constantly redefined and negotiated in the everyday practices through which individuals interact (Acker, 1990; Bruni, Gherardi, & Poggio, 2004; Kelan, 2010; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012b). One of the most important contributions to this conceptualization has been made by Patricia Yancey Martin (Martin, 2003, 2006). She introduces the difference between gendering practices and practicing gender to grasp the duality of doing gender. In her view, human beings are capable and knowledgeable agents who are conscious of their own interests and can reflect on their actions. At the same time, most (gendered) actions are characterized by a routine way of doing things, are unintentional (Martin, 2006). This routine way of doing gender is based on tacit and internalized images, which are relatively stable and inert. Possibilities for change become apparent when we disclose the tacit and internalized images and reflect on them. In other words, conceptualizing doing gender as a routine as well as a reflexive practice permits an analysis of persistence as well as of change of the existing gender order.

Gender practices can both be discursive or material. Discursive practices refer to the spoken and unspoken rules and conventions that govern how individuals think, act, and speak in specific social contexts. In this study, we focus on how gender is discursively practiced in arguments concerning gender equality initiatives and how these discursive practices depict the privileged, white, middle-class men as the "neutral and objective standard" (Nentwich, 2006). Discourse analysis provides a tool for investigating this process of discursive construction (Hardy, 2001) as it is able to expose the gendered nature of current configurations of practice that exclude women (Martin, 2006) that are mostly taken for granted (Tienari, Søderberg, Holgersson, & Vaara, 2005). We seek to critically examine the discourses around an academic gender equality program and analyze how they constitute, sustain or challenge unequal gender relations.

In most cases, gender practices in the workplace generate contradictory and ambiguous outcomes (Benschop & Door-ewaard, 1998b; Korvajärvi, 1998). Some scholars have suggested that the notion of paradox would be a fertile way to develop the field of gender in organizations further (Hearn, 1998; Martin & Collinson, 2002). For instance, Sools, Van Engen, and Baerveldt (2007) show that the discourses around career-making and ambition are gendered and paradoxical. Employees who want to climb the hierarchical ladder have to make this known, without mentioning this explicitly in the organization. Making this explicit is considered 'thrusting' and 'pushy' in the Dutch egalitarian culture. This is especially problematic for young women who are often not seen as ambitious. This places them in a double bind, as they have to make it explicit to show managers that they do not lose their ambition (what is expected), but are not allowed to say this explicitly. If women do not explicitly state that they have ambition to climb the career ladder, they reproduce the dominant discourse on women and their lack of ambition. If they do make this explicit, they are considered unnatural and thrusting.

In an earlier paper, we discussed the paradox of visibility (Van den Brink & Stobbe, 2009) to show the paradoxical nature of gender in organizations. Female students had to be visible and invisible at the same time to make a career in the field of Earth Sciences. Visible in terms of their ambition and competencies, but invisible in terms of their female bodies. The use of paradox in our analysis of practicing gender disclosed that visibility and invisibility as gendered practices are part of the same organizational reality.

Pesonen, Tienari, and Vanhala (2009) show in their study how successful female board professional "do" gender and how they construct particular gendered notions of accessing and succeeding in corporate boards. They argue that two discourses constitute a boardroom gender paradox; which is characterized by contradictory elements. For instance, the discourse of competence constructs organizational life as a meritocracy, as the discourse of gender constructs it as "a male game where the rules favor men and where women either lack the necessary qualities or must constantly engage in a balancing act" (Pesonen et al., 2009, p. 339). By conceptualizing and illustrating this paradox, the authors scrutinize the elusive ideal of women's large scale entry into corporate boards.

As basis for our analysis, we adhere to Eisenhardt (2000, p.703) who defines a paradox as the simultaneous existence of two inconsistent states. The core of a paradox is that two elements or situations that appear to be mutually exclusive can actually occur at the same time (Cameron, 1986; Eisenhardt, 1989, 2000). In this way, the term "paradox" can be distinguished from the term "dilemma" (see e.g. Billig et al., 1988) which can be defined as a either-or-situation (Ehnert, 2009; Westenholz, 1993). The difference between a paradox and a dilemma is that, in a paradox "no choice need to be made between two or more contradictions constituting the paradox" (Westenholz, 1993, p. 41). The contradictory elements are present simultaniously and are accepted as such (Lewis, 2000). As argued by Lewis (2000), a paradox is neither a compromise nor a split between competing tensions; instead, it is an awareness of both.

The use of paradox thus seems more promising for the study of gender than concepts as dilemma, ambiguity or

contradiction (see Hearn's 1998 overview on the differences between the concepts). Paradox draws attention away from the dilemma, reframing the problem to derive new ways of understanding. Or, as Bartunek (1988) argues, a paradox perspective creates awareness of blind spots, as well as ways in which they can be reframed. In our view, paradox reflects the dynamics of doing gender in terms of both the persistence of and change in the existing gender order. On the one hand, the concept of paradox allows for the simultaneous existence of seemingly contradictory and ambiguous practices as part of the normal way of doing things. On the other hand, the paradox can be dissolved through reflection, thereby becoming a tool with which to contest and change gender inequality in organizations. In our view, a paradox will help to examine the discursive constructions of gender in gender equality programs by reflecting on the tacit and internalized discourses around these programs. This will be further elaborated on in the discussion section.

Case and methods

The Dutch context

In the Netherlands, the discipline of physics is dominated by men, meaning that the upward mobility of women within physics is minimal. Although women comprise a substantial proportion of women of PhD students (39%), only 8% of all full professors are women (WOPI, 2012). In comparison with other scientific disciplines, physics has fewer women at all levels. The Foundation for Fundamental Research on Matter (FOM) promotes, coordinates, and finances fundamental physics research in the Netherlands. In 1999, they initiated the FOm/f program to encourage more women physicists to stay within the scientific community. The five-year program had a budget of over €4.5 million. In addition to providing financing and co-financing for research projects, academic positions, and prizes, the program aimed to increase the number of women in committees and boards and to facilitate the combination of work and care duties. In addition, a biennial workshop for women researchers was organized in order to provide an informal exchange of information and experiences. Since 2004, the program is not continued in the same way. FOM only funds a post-doc position for a maximum of three years spread over a period of at most five years. The condition is that the woman has organized a period of 1—2 years at a foreign institute in conjunction with this (not paid for by FOM).

In quantitative terms, the program was successful. Although women still constitute a small minority within the discipline of physics in the Netherlands, their visibility has increased markedly between 1999 and 2009 (Van Eerd, Van der Marel, Rudolf, & De Wolf, 2009). This was especially true in the case of appointment of women to higher academic positions. The program has contributed to a more than fivefold increase of women full professors: as of this writing, only one university does not have at least one female chair. The program provided co-financing for a number of these positions. In addition, the MINERVA prize, which is awarded biannually for the best physics paper authored by a woman, is now recognized as a very prestigious award, and it has achieved its goal of bringing excellent woman physicists into the spotlight and advancing the careers of the winners.

Research design

We analyzed the empirical material constructed in the research evaluation of the FOm/f gender equality program. We employed a qualitative research strategy in order to display the underlying norms, values, ideas, and convictions of the equality programs. These aspects provide comprehensive insight into what is perceived as "normal" within a particular organization or profession, as well as what is largely routinized and taken for granted (Dick & Nadin, 2006). This strategy is based on the interpretative tradition that revolves around the capacity of researchers to place themselves in the position of their respondents and take respondents' interpretations as starting point for developing knowledge about the social world (Prasad, 2005). We used in-depth interviews as the main source of our empirical material, meaning that the duration of the interview and the degree of rapport were sufficient to allow respondents to discuss sensitive and complex issues. The interviews lasted between 45 min and 1.5 h. In total, we interviewed 39 physicists: 4 policy makers 18 professors, 6 post-doctoral researchers and 11 PhD students. We chose to interview only women post-docs and PhD students, in order to discuss their experiences with the FOm/f program. Because these interviews took place as part of an evaluation of the FOm/f program, we interviewed only junior women faculty in order to ask about their experiences. In hindsight, it would have been interesting to interview junior men faculty as well, in order to gain insight into their experiences and opinions about equality programs, as they must compete with women for academic positions.

Respondents were working at either one of seven different Dutch universities or at one of the four FOM institutes. We designed an interview schedule using a topic-guided approach, with open-ended questions for each group. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. We validated our results by organizing a group discussion with members of the FOm/f Committee (one man and two women). In general, these committee members considered the results to be an accurate reflection of the problem under study. The research took place in spring and summer of 2004.

Discourse analysis

To analyze the interview material, we draw on critical discourse analysis, which focuses on the role of discourse activity in constituting and sustaining unequal power relations (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Phillips & Hardy, 2002). As discourse is a widely used concept in social science (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000; Keenoy, Oswick, & Grant, 1997), we adhere to Phillips and Di Domenico (2009) definition and consider discourse as pieces of talk and text as they affect and are affected by the social context in which they occur, and the body of texts that gives them meaning. This method enabled us to see how reality is constructed by the interviewees through the various discourses around the gender equality program, and how these discourses are linked to the wider social context from which they emerge (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). In our analysis, we identified specific discourses on the gender equality program, and then using Fairclough's (1992) dimensions of discursive and social practices to analyze the discourses on equality programs as part of a broader set of

discourses that reproduce or challenge power relationships (see also Dick & Cassell, 2002).

Our research process has unfolded in an iterative form, which is typical of CDA (Wodak, 2004). We started to discern the different perceptions of the interviewees on the program. This involved inductive coding (first order codes) and analyzing our material into key categories of arguments (second order codes) that underpinned interviewees' perceptions on the program. Examples of second order codes are labor potential, role models, and backlash. By grouping the initial codes, we discovered three different discourses, which we labeled as follows: the "necessity" discourse, the "concern about quality" discourse, and the "stigmatization" discourse (see Tables 1 and 2).

We found that the general opinion about the program was positive, illustrated by the 'necessity discourse'. However, some men and women respondents showed ambivalent feelings about equality policies for women in general. They argued that hiring less qualified women would also be disadvantageous for the women themselves. In other words, both women and men highlighted the gender discrimination and gender segregation that such programs could induce. By looking for patterns within the texts, we found that most interviewees were drawing on positive and critical discourses in the same interview. They were as well arguing for the program, and simultaneously arguing against the program. In dealing with and making sense of the inconsistencies in and between texts, we had to relate these three discourses to other dominant discourses within the Dutch (academic) society. Interview texts are fragments of a larger web of intertextuality in society (Fairclough, 1992), and we analyzed why a specific discourse was being used within the institutional context (for instance within the Netherlands or within the culture of physics). This dimension gave us a way to identity the underlying grand Discourse of meritocracy through which equality programs were constructed producing distinct perceptions. We will present and analyze the three discourses (necessity, quality and stigmatization) and the underlying grand Discourse of meritocracy.

Formal equality policies at FOM

In this section, we will analyze how male and female professors perceive gender equality programs and discuss the discursive implications of these perceptions. We also analyze how discourses on the equality program are constructed in the function of existing academic practices and discourses.

Necessity discourse

When talking about the FOm/f program, all participants constructed their accounts through the discourse that we labeled 'the necessity discourse'. This discourse contains the idea that it was necessary to have a special program in order to encourage women to pursue academic careers in physics or advance to senior positions, rather than dropping out. Three lines of argumentation were used to legitimize the need for the program. First (and predominately), interviewees argued that, by systematically disadvantaging women, the physics community in the Netherlands is neglecting a great potential. This point represents the *labor potential* argument.

> I wrote a letter to FOM in which I indicated that it was time to do something about the unsatisfactory situation in the Netherlands. I worked in the US for eight years, and when I started over there, the situation wasn't very good either. In America, they implemented affirmative action and equal opportunities measures, which led to the promotion of a few women and this turned out to be successful. It's actually very bad when physics departments consist entirely of male employees. Why exclude half of the population when you need more people? (André, male professor)

> I think it's extremely important that we have it [the program] and that it continues. Especially because physics lacks a whole segment of the working population: women who might choose for physics. This means that there's no one there to set an example for women who may want to do physics. There are hardly any female professors, and something should be done about that. A part of the FOM program is designed to provide role models for these women. (Ben, male policymaker FOM)

André and Ben argued that a more balanced gender composition should be established within the physics community; it is not good for the field to neglect the potential of women and to have so few women faculty members. Ben issues another important argument: physics needs more women to serve as examples so that other women (older or younger) can follow. This observation reflects the *role model* argument. Appointing more women to academic functions was perceived as the only way to break the cycle of not having examples to imitate. Two women professors, Cynthia and Debby, stressed the importance of critical numbers and the visibility of women as potential candidates for professorships.

> I think the program is very necessary, because if you want to change the situation in the Netherlands, you have to create an impulse that will increase the number of women. It is just a question of critical numbers. When there are more women, the process will start rolling by itself. But because there are so few women, if you do not put a special effort on it, nothing is going to happen. (Cynthia, female professor)

> What is also very good, I think, is that these women have become more visible. For example, there was a position for an associate professor and they hired a woman, and then she became more visible and suddenly she got a position as a full professor in Germany. If she hadn't received that position [as associate professor], she would probably never have received the [full] professorship. (Debby, female professor)

Table 1   Number of interview respondents by gender.

	Women	Men
Policy makers	1	3
Full professors	10	8
Post-docs	6	
Ph.D. students	11	

Table 2   Coding scheme.

First order codes	Second order codes	Discourses
Talent shortage		
Dutch backlash		
New generations	Labor potential	
Exclusion of talented people		
Nerdy image		
Lack of examples		
Influx of female students		
Visibility of women academics	Role models	Necessity discourse
Critical numbers		
Same sex mentoring		
Positive climate: friendly, collaborative		
Feminine qualities/femininity		
Social contacts	Difference	
Less competition and conflicts		
Overcoming masculine culture		
Objectivity		
Same standards		
Gender neutrality	Meritocratic values	
Individual careers		
Lowering standards for women		Concern about quality discourse
Loss of quality		
Unfair for men	Helping women	
Treat to science		
Hired because being a woman		
Undermining of confidence	Backlash	
Silencing equality programs		
Own efforts		Stigmatization discourse
Highly successful women	Show pieces	
Success stories		

Cynthia and Debby construct accounts in which is argued that women are needed as role models in order to coach junior female academics and to teach them the academic culture and the rules of the game. In their view, female mentors can take into account the various career tracks that women might choose. Without a mentor who is encouraging and directive, they argue, female academics may find it hard to learn the strategies necessary to build an academic carrier (which men presumably already know).

The third line of argumentation stresses the different qualities that women bring to the workplace. Several respondents argued that women have a positive influence on the climate within the research group, and that women academics are "accurate", "systematic" and "hard working". This observation reflects the *difference* argument. Both men and women indicated that an environment with at least some women is not only more pleasant for women, but for most men as well. In their opinion, male-dominated environments are characterized by humor at the expense of women, by fierce internal and external competition, and by less social contact among colleagues. Adding more women would limit the prevalence of this culture. According to the respondents, it would make the workplace more friendly and collaborative, and therefore more attractive to both sexes.

In general, the accounts of most respondents thus displayed a willingness to welcome more women and to generate awareness regarding the importance of more female

scientists. On the level of discursive practice, the narratives have been produced within the context of a Dutch academic physics community that struggles with the influx of new students and "an nerdy image" (André). According to the interviewees, adding women would benefit the overall student influx, the empowerment of female students and staff and the working conditions. In the excerpts, both men and women brought femininity into play as an "added benefit" in the academic context. The arguments help to convince academics to create willingness to support female talent, to search explicitly for female candidates, and to devote additional effort for eligible female applicants. All interviewees argued for more women, as it would improve the physics community as a whole, and most of them reported having taken efforts to make this happen. Yet, the discursive effect is one of essentialization: it emphasizes the special feminine qualities that women should bring to the workplace, making it more friendly and collaborative and stressing allegedly female qualities as 'dedicated and hard-working'. This adheres to research that show that members of specific socio-demographic groups are defined in essentialist terms, as representatives of a specific socio-demographic groups having additional skills (Fletcher, 1999; Zanoni & Janssens, 2004). Although these alleged feminine qualities are valued by the interviewees, the image of the ideal scientist is still more geared toward men and masculinity. This is elaborated on in the next section.

The concern about quality discourse

Several men, as well as a few women, argued that the equality program was necessary, but, at the same time suggested that the program might jeopardize the quality standards in their institutions.

> Encouragement is okay, but I'm in favor of having equal quality requirements for both men and women. You just can't lower the standards for women. That would be disastrous for quality, as well as for the women we're talking about. If only two people apply — one man and one woman—and the man turns out to be the better candidate, you should just pick the man. (Eric, male professor)

> A guiding principal [within our department] has always been not to give women special treatment. This will always result in the belief that these women were hired only because they're women. One should therefore always give priority to quality, in order to prevent less qualified women from getting positions that would otherwise have gone to men with better qualifications. This only makes women look bad. (Frank, male professor)

While convinced of the need to support special programs for women, both Eric and Frank were also critical toward the program, arguing that it might imply hiring or helping less qualified women. They stressed that academic quality should be the first consideration when someone is hired, not gender. Although they acknowledged that it might be more difficult for women to build careers within the male-dominated field of physics, they considered that helping women during their careers could be unfair to men, or harmful for the quality of physics. This discourse was presented as a moral and normative standard that should be upheld, and is closely related to the idea that everyone should be treated equally and should succeed on their own merit. Respondents argued that everyone should conform to the objective quality standards and that women should earn their positions only according to their scientific qualifications.

Within this quality discourse, gender is discursively practiced by considering the equality program as providing extra help to women who are unable to make progress on their own, in contrast to standard career trajectories, which they regard as meritocratic and gender-neutral (Bagilhole & Goode, 2001; Kvande & Rasmussen, 1994). In exact sciences, there is a strong belief in objectivity and that research quality is easy to measure. In the subfield of the exact sciences, this is described as follows by Traweek (1988, p. 162):

An extreme culture of objectivity: a culture of no culture, which longs passionately for a world without loose ends, without temperament, gender, nationalism or other sources of disorder — for a world outside human space and time.

Due to this strong belief in objectivity, measurement and neutrality, the influence of gender in scientific practice is often completely denied. Women are welcomed, but only when they conform to the existing image of the ideal scientist (Acker, 1992) and follow a strict career path which is translated into more than full-time devotion and willingness to spend long periods abroad (Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012a). The interviewees did not question the discourse of quality, nor did they address the masculine image of the ideal scientist or the ways in which they reinforced the masculine norm within their physics departments. Female faculty members were expected to be able to follow this masculine model with a little extra help, as provided through mentoring and coaching. The assumption was that women who follow this model will be as successful as their male colleagues. In this way, the different starting position of women is completely denied (Noon, 2010). The reluctance to consider gender as a relevant factor in career opportunities strengthens the notion that the university is an objective and gender-neutral institution in which meritocracy predominates.

The idea that equality programs are designed to help women in their scientific careers and that these programs can even be harmful for women persists among both men and women academics. This will be discussed in the next section.

*The "stigmatization" discourse*The perceptions that standards for the hiring and promotion of women are lower than they are for male faculty were disquieting for women faculty members as well. Several women faculty members were somewhat reticent about the equality program and indicated that they had great difficulties with way in which they were being seen after having obtained special funds or chairs reserved for women.

> It is very clear that universities want to attract more women, and they are willing to reduce quality standards to have more women, but my problem is that I do not know what I am worth anymore. [.] I have a professorship, for one day a week. FOm/f facilitated that. But I have no idea if it's because I'm a woman or because I'm the most suitable for the job. I don't think that I haven't earned it and that I only stole this position. I think it just happened because I'm a woman. (Gina, female professor)

> A special women's program will eventually turn against you. With these rules of promotion, you get dubious reactions. It is seen as an unjustified promotion of women. (...) Especially in case of a promotion, people easily conclude you were only promoted because you're a woman. (Hester, female professor)

> Then other people will always use that as an argument to say that your research is not as good as the others. (Inge, female professor)

These women interviewees expressed ambivalent feelings toward the equality program. Some women associated the FOm/f program primarily with unfairness and less as a way of rooting out the gender imbalance in the Dutch physics community. They questioned whether they were hired because they were women, indicating that this tended to undermine their confidence. Others were hoping that people would eventually forget the source of their funding, so that they would lose the "stigma" that they had received upon being promoted through a special women's program. Other scholarly work confirmed that association with an affirmative action program can stigmatize beneficiaries (Heilman et al., 1997). For this reason, some of the respondents mentioned that they did not include the FOm/f funding in their résumés.

We also noticed that both women and men spoke very highly of women who had succeeded without special funds; in other words, they spoke highly of women who had done it on their own.

A female staff member was appointed professor at the end of her career. I didn't believe that was completely just. She must have felt it wasn't completely due to her own efforts. With another female professor, it went more fairly. She is the icon of Dutch physics. She has reached this level completely on her own. So, whenever anyone tells me it is not possible for women faculty members to reach higher positions, she proves that it is. (Johan, male professor)

The 'Dutch icon' Johan is referring to, served as positive example to promote the scientific community's core belief of meritocracy. This woman who had not received help was showcased in order to demonstrate that women who were hard working and talented should be able to make it on their own. Women candidates who had managed to reach senior positions were scarce, however, and we noticed that the same names were mentioned repeatedly when interviewees related to 'success stories'. The exceptional position of these women within a male-dominated field attracts additional attention, and people tend to notice when they perform well. Benschop and Doorewaard (1998a) introduced the concept of show pieces based on Kanter's token theory (1977) to explain this phenomenon. Show pieces are shown off, on the one hand to prove that women have equal chances and possibilities in the organization, and, on the other hand, to prove that women can be successful in top functions. Those who are included, but different from the male norm, become subject to hyper visibility (Essed, 2002; Van den Brink & Stobbe, 2009). These women are constantly used to show that gender equality exists and that women can make it on their own, as long they are qualified.

Again, in this discourse, the equality program is perceived as helping women who are deficient. Despite earlier considerations that women face barriers during their careers, the 'best' women talents will raise anyway. Therefore, the discourse reinforces the ideal of the meritocracy and the norm that the best scientists can make it on their own.

From the *getting help* dilemma to the support paradox
In this section, we will deconstruct the seemingly contradictory discourses surrounding the FOm/f program, taking the dilemma as point of departure to reframe the contradictory connotations of equality programs. The central dilemma is that equality programs (in this case, the FOm/f program) is seen as simultaneously necessary and harmful for science and scientific careers. It is necessary, as women need help in order to remain and build careers within the scientific community. It is harmful, as women who have received help also receive a "stamp" that can be quite difficult to lose. In addition, concerns were voiced that the program could result in hiring less qualified women. We call this situation the "getting help" dilemma in which equality programs are framed as helping women who are not able to make it on their own. This dilemma might restrain the FOM funding organizations and other organizations from installing or continuing gender equality programs.

In our view, the "getting help" dilemma is caused by the normative grand Discourse of meritocracy which is considered gender neutral. A meritocracy implies that only the merits of the individual scientist should count in the considerations regarding the hiring of new faculty members, not

social identity categories as gender, race, class and age (Merton, 1973). In the views of both men and women academics, gender equality programs conflict with the ideals of the meritocracy (see also Deem, 2007; Lamont, 2009; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012a). Reframing the 'getting help dilemma' in terms of a paradox, that is the simultaneous existence of two inconsistent states, (Eisenhardt, 2000) offers the possibility to nuance or even challenge the dominant and gender blind discourse of meritocracy. We show that helping women (equality programs) and quality of candidates are not opposites, but can exist at the same time. By reframing the "getting help" dilemma as a paradox, we are able to illustrate the power structure under the dominant discourse of meritocracy by showing men's invisible support systems and the gendered construction of scientific quality.

Men's support system

Members of the dominant group wish to preserve the impression of having earned their positions legitimately (Crosby et al., 2005). Male professors were most likely to believe that meritocracy operates in academia, and most tended to think that equality interventions undermine fair decisions. Male academics hardly ever acknowledged their privileged position and the structural advantages that they had received as a group. We argue that men also receive help during their academic careers, but that it has never been viewed as help. In the words of one of the post-doctoral researchers:

My conviction is that there are men who have structural advantages because they are men. That is indeed the "old boys' network", or that daddy does them a favor, (...) Well, they also don't have sleepless nights worrying that "the woman was actually better, but they hired me." (...) Some have advantages because they are men, so if I have advantages because I am a woman, I think, "fine." (Karen, female post-doc)

Karen beliefs that men receive structural advantages during their academic careers because they are men. Men give favors to each other and receive help through informal support systems which she labels "the old boys' network". Karen's opinion was voiced by several other female academics, and has been confirmed by several studies (Bagilhole & Goode, 2001; Gersick, Bartunek, & Dutton, 2000; Ibarra, 1992; Ibarra, Carter, & Silva, 2010). Men benefit from what Bagihole and Goode (2001) call 'an in-built patriarchal support system' that maintains their power position. In most cases, it is easier for men to identify with male faculty members and to provide them with additional support and encouragement. The similar interests, shared communication styles, and the existing structure of informal networking create a strong support system (Katila & Merilainen, 1999, 2002). They are helped, as they benefit from a "similar-to-me" effect, as well as from the man-friendly work environment. Scholars have also documented that men tend to receive more encouragement to apply for positions through their male-support network (Bagilhole & Goode, 2001; Holgersson, 2012; Lorber, 1994). This was also vented by Leo:

I don't know, it's something that I was confronted with. "You tell the other post-docs that they should apply, but you hardly give that information to me. I was first in

denial, but I realized that it was true. I still have no clue why...(Leo, male professor)

In addition, Ibarra et al. (2010) found that women are less likely to receive sponsoring — in which the mentor goes beyond giving feedback and advice and uses his or her influence with senior members of the organization to advocate for the mentee. They argue that without sponsorship, women are not only less likely than men to be appointed to top roles but may also be more reluctant to pursue a top position (p. 82).

Women scientists thus have less scope within which to promote themselves, while we could assume that men support and assist other men in ways that advance their career goals. Women do not benefit from these support networks in the same way, so an equality program is installed to compensate for the structural disadvantage women encounter. Helping women by equality programs thus not automatically implies lowering the quality standards (see also Noon, 2010).

Academic quality as gendered

The scientific quality standards has become objectified, and it is considered gender neutral (Merton, 1973), especially in the context of natural sciences (Traweek, 1988). This was strongly voiced in the 'concern about quality' discourse; in the end they favor 'the best', and not 'gender'. According to most respondents, a good scientist is highly motivated, a good communicator, and talented. At first glance, these characteristics appear to coincide with ideas about women (physicists). Although women are perceived as accurate, systematic, and hard working, they are also often seen as less confident in the physics community.

> I do not want to generalize, but I have the feeling that women might feel less confident in this environment. And that matters. You have to be direct and really have to have the urge to perform and present yourself in this field to become successful (Frank, male professor)

Some interviewees perceived women as better communicators, but also as less direct. At the same time, confidence and directness are needed to demonstrate high motivation and true skills in physics. According to the respondents, men scientists perform better in this regard, although they are also characterized as lazier and more disorganized. Men make themselves visible by making noise and being self-confident, whereas women are not supposed to take center stage or exude self-confidence.

Studies on gender in academia show that the most important factors in the production (or reproduction) of gender inequality in universities and research institutes are related to the images of science, scientific practice, and the ideal scientist (Harding, 1986; Knights & Richards, 2003; Valian, 1998; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012b). Particularly in male-dominated organizations (albeit not exclusively), hegemonic discourses are masculine discourses: discourses that assign higher value to men and masculinity. Several authors argue that science and (consequently) scientific institutions are overtly masculine, especially in those fields that are labeled as "hard" sciences, as in the case described in this study (Harding, 1986; Valian, 1998). In these contexts, masculinity and power are intertwined in such a way that men represent

the standard; they naturally occupy the norm against which where women's performance is measured. In other words, the attributes that are stereotypically labeled as masculine (e.g., technical ability, psychical strength, and goal-orientation), are valued more highly, and they are accepted as the natural norm. In real life, these attributes are perceived as innate, implying that they are perceived as inescapable and normal. As a result, Dutch women must be extremely talented and determined in order to pursue a career in physics. In summary, women are forced to fight certain images, while men do not. In fact, these images implicitly seem to favor men, as does the definition of quality that we discussed earlier. Although feminine qualities were valued by the interviewees, the image of the ideal scientist is still more geared toward men and masculinity. Again, the discourse of the meritocracy renders the masculine model of the ideal scientist invisible.

By showing men's support system and the gendered construction of quality, we are able to reframe the "getting help" dilemma in a support paradox. Reframing the dilemma in terms of a support paradox shows that 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 contrast, women's programs were visible and scrutinized, leading to the perception that women cannot succeed on their own merits.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have contributed to research on gender equality programs and the impact of perceptions on the effectiveness of these programs (Benschop et al., 2012; Acker, 2006). We aimed to advance the theoretical discussion on how gender policies and interventions in organizations can become more effective by critically examining the seemingly contradictory discourses surrounding gender equality programs. We evaluated a formal gender equality program introduced by a Dutch scientific funding organization to encourage women physicists to remain within the scientific community. In quantitative terms, this program was considered a success, as the program contributed to a more than fivefold increase of women full professors. However, when interviewing policy makers and professors in-depth about the program, a more complex picture emerged. Our respondents argued that it was necessary to have a special women's program in order to encourage women to pursue academic careers in physics, while simultaneously arguing that such a program might jeopardize the quality of research. This "getting help" dilemma impedes the effectiveness of equality programs.

We identified an underlying paradox that explains why the "getting help" dilemma exists for female academics, but not for their male counterparts. Reframing the dilemma in terms of a support paradox shows that 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 contrast, women's programs were noticed, leading to the perception that women cannot succeed on their own merits. Scientists strongly relate to the discourse of meritocracy, thereby

overlooking the reality of a patriarchal support system, which helps men throughout their careers (Bagilhole & Goode, 2001). Because neither men nor women question the fact that men receive continuous and frequent support and assistance throughout their careers, the situation remains unnoticed. One of the mechanisms of hegemony is the reduction of the socially constructed to the neutral and the normal. Men and women should realize that help and good quality can co-exist, as it obviously does for men. Moreover, special programs for women are based on the fact that women currently experience disadvantages in their scientific careers (Noon, 2010). Such programs are designed to compensate for the effects of those disadvantages; they could therefore be perceived as "getting even" instead of "getting help" (see also Noon, 2010). At this point, women need "help" and, if we do not "help" them, their talent will be largely wasted.

We also contribute to the literature on gender in organizations, by arguing that paradox is a fruitful way to study the doing of gender in organizations. In our view, the paradox provides a direct reflection of the dynamics of doing gender (Martin, 2003, 2006) in terms of both the persistence of and change in the existing gender order. On the one hand, it allows the existence of seemingly contradictory and ambiguous gender practices as part of the normal way of doing things. On the other hand, the paradox can be dissolved through reflection, making it suitable as a tool with which to contest and change gender inequality in organizations. We therefore propose to analyze doing gender as paradoxical. In our view, an analysis in terms of paradoxes highlights the ambiguous and contradictory nature of how gender is being done, leaving room for the individual agency of women (and men) reproducing as well as challenging and changing gender relations and practices in organizations. Moreover, it enables us to uncover multiple forms of masculinities and femininities (see for example Johansson, 1998) and explore the fluidity of gender identity further (Linstead & Brewis, 2004). And finally, it might even help us to disrupt the hierarchical nature of the gender binary, because it allows for a constant reflection on ambiguity and contradictions in theorizing as well as in practice.

The use of paradox can also have practical implications. Paradoxes like the one discussed in this paper, could be helpful "instruments" for interventions and training, as they allow us to reflect on current practices and to begin the process of questioning certain tacit rules and acting otherwise. In addition to enabling us to illustrate the ways in which gender is done in organizations, paradoxes could be used as a political tool with which to contest and change gender inequality in organizations (see also Van den Brink & Stobbe, 2009). Many academic organizations in the Netherlands are captured by the dilemma of equality programs. They do want to increase gender equality in their departments, especially in the higher echelons, but are reticent because of the stigmatization and alleged quality loss of such programs. 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. It is therefore advisable to engage in critical reflection on the dominant discourse of meritocracy, the socially constructed nature of "quality", and the silence about men's support networks. The support

paradox could make academic scientists rethink their assumption about the gender neutrality of current discourses and practices, and they should change the widely held perception that equality initiatives are in place because women need special help in order to succeed. In this way, equality programs can be reconsidered as a viable and necessary policy intervention to speed up the progression to equality in organizations (Noon, 2010). When taken up by 'champions', such as male and female research directors, deans, and diversity managers or equal opportunity officers, another discourse can be brought into the discussion, and could lead to a broader legitimation of equality programs in academia. Effective gender equality policies should therefore be informed by knowledge about these paradoxical gender practices, and they should aim to display and change them.

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