Just talking? Middle managers negotiating problem ownership in gender equality interventions

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Problem ownership
Resistance
Gender equality interventions
Change agency
Negotiations

ABSTRACT

An important condition for gender equality change is that managers become problem owners of gender inequality, being responsible for change and committed to action. Managers regularly resist such problem ownership. This research explored how managers in a participatory gender equality intervention in science negotiated their problem ownership. The findings contribute to gender equality change literature by showing that resistance can be productive of gender equality change when the intervention provides a compelling space for negotiations on problem ownership. In addition, our research unpacked the notion of problem ownership into a complex layering concerning personal and group responsibilities and personal and group actions, providing a more detailed understanding of resistance of managers against change agency.

1. Introduction

Resistance to gender equality interventions is a much reported topic in gender equality change literature (Cavaghan, 2017; Goltz & Sotirin, 2014; Lombardo & Mergaert, 2016; Mergaert & Lombardo, 2014; Powell, Ah-King, & Hussénius, 2017). The resistance of change recipients to such interventions is "a major challenge" (Lombardo & Mergaert, 2016, p. 43), hindering or even blocking change. Scholars call for a closer analysis of resistance to gender equality interventions (Cavaghan, 2013, 2017; Ferree & Verloo, 2016; Lombardo & Mergaert, 2016, 2016), in order to get to transformational change (Husu, 2013; Kalev, Dobbin, & Kelly, 2006). Recently, gender equality change scholars argue that resistance is not only a hindrance, but may also foster organisational change by allowing open discussion of thus far implicit gendered norms and values (Benschop & Van den Brink, 2014; Benschop & Verloo, 2006; Lombardo & Mergaert, 2016). Organizational change is conceptualized as the construction of new meanings and new interpretations of organizational activities (Tsoukas, 2005). Resistance is enacted in negotiations about how to understand and to practice change (Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2017), and may eventually become productive of change. However, when and how resistance can become productive of change is hitherto under researched. Our research aims to address this gap.

We focus on an important condition for gender equality change: that interventions will encourage managers to become change agents for gender equality (Bleijenbergh, 2018). Scholars argue that middle managers need to ‘own’ gender equality change, leading by example the change that the top has initiated (Kelan & Wratil, 2018; Mattis, 2001), taking responsibility and acting upon it (Mattis, 2001; McRoy & Gibbs, 2009). We use the notion of problem ownership to unpack change agency of middle managers in gender equality interventions. Though scholars report that managers regularly resist such problem ownership (Benschop & Verloo, 2006; Callerstig, 2016; Cavaghan, 2017; Lombardo & Mergaert, 2013; McRoy & Gibbs, 2009), others argue that resistance might be productive of change (Thomas & Davies, 2005; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2018). Our research aims to provide insights in when and how resistance is productive of gender equality change by exploring how managers in a participatory gender equality intervention in science negotiate problem ownership. In our theoretical framework we expand on resistance, and on the potential role of middle managers in gender equality change. Next, we expand upon the context of the gender equality intervention, discuss relevant characteristics of the method we applied, and reflect on our position as researchers and change agents in these interventions, allowing us to critically reflect on both process and results of our research.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Productive resistance

Resistance to gender equality interventions, as “attempts of changing the asymmetric gender order” (Husu, 2013, p. 18), contesting
prevalent norms, values, and power relations (Benschop & Verloo, 2006; Ely & Meyerson, 2000), is a well researched topic in gender equality change literature (Cavaghan, 2017; Goltz & Sotirin, 2014; Lombardo & Mergaert, 2016; Mergaert & Lombardo, 2014; Powell et al., 2017). In general, resistance to these gender equality interventions is deemed unavoidable, as the goals and methods of the interventions and those of the organization are likely to be different or even contradictory (Acke, 2000). In line with mainstream organizational change literature, which sees resistance to organizational change as detrimental to change initiatives (Argyris, 1990; Clegg, 1987; Wittig, 2012), resistance to gender equality interventions is generally discussed as a barrier to gender equality change (Cavaghan, 2017; Goltz & Sotirin, 2014; Lombardo & Mergaert, 2016).

Organizational theories on resistance as being detrimental to change began to shift when scholars started to contest resistance being a psychological characteristic. Instead, they framed resistance as the behavior of a system seeking equilibrium (Dent & Goldberg, 1999). Also, scholars challenged assumptions regarding resistance, identifying positive aspects of resistance, for instance resistance as a productive force, influencing and improving management decisions (Courpasson, Dani, & Clegg, 2012; Thomas, Sargent, & Hardy, 2011), or resistance as valuable feedback that can contribute to successful change (Ford & Ford, 2010). We find this latter take on resistance in gender equality change literature as well, in the argument that studying resistance can inform the design and planning of gender equality interventions, as it draws “a clearer picture of what hinders the effective implementation” (Lombardo & Mergaert, 2016, p. 58).

Taking resistance further, scholars argue that the practice of resisting itself can be productive of change when it results in negotiations about how to understand and to practice the change that is advocated. In line with these scholars, we define resistance as “challenging and rewriting of organizational discourse” (Thomas & Davies, 2005, p. 701), which lies at the heart of change (Thomas & Hardy, 2011). We see gender equality change as a specific form of organizational change, and organizational change as an ongoing discursive process, in which negotiations construct ‘new meanings and interpretations of organizational activities’ (Tsoukas, 2005, p. 98). Resistance to change, in this view, is enacted in negotiations on how to understand and to practice change (Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2017). Mumby, Thomas, Martt, and Seidl (2017, p. 1169) characterize resistance to organizational change as ‘productive managerial resistance’, hinging on the ability of middle management to negotiate with top management. These negotiations might lead to organizational change in the form of new meanings and interpretations of organizational activities.

This view of resistance as productive of change is found in gender equality change literature as well. Benschop and Van den Brink (2014, p. 17) argue that “…it is not possible to change routines and their underlying values silently without conflict and resistance”. Conflict and resistance may even be a blessing in disguise, when they lead to an open debate on core values and so bring underlying and implicit norms and values out into the open. Drawing on Thomas and Davies (2005), who discuss feminist activism practiced in micro-level negotiations, Benschop and Van den Brink (2014), pp. 19–20 contend that resistance legitimizes gender inequality practices as “an arena for political contest”. When underlying values and implicit stereotypes emerge in conflict and debate, they can be subject of negotiations. Thus, resistance might fuel a debate on gender equality practices, challenging existing power relations, and creating openings for change (Van den Brink & Benschop, 2018). At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that this challenge of implicit norms and existing power relations “is embedded within and reproduces existing workplace norms”. Thus, productive resistance is ambiguous, in that it both challenges and reinforges organizational norms and values (McCabe, 2019, p. 257).

Although gender equality change literature increasingly recognizes that resistance can be productive of change, we need to better understand when and how resistance is productive of change, in particular when this resistance is provoked by gender equality interventions. We aim to provide such insights by exploring how managers in a participatory gender equality intervention in science negotiate problem ownership. Engaging (middle) managers in the change effort, turning them into gender equality change agents, is an implicit goal of many gender equality interventions. We will first discuss the expectations of gender equality interventions regarding the role of managers and their problem ownership, and next the resistance this is reported to evoke.

2.2. Engaging managers in gender equality interventions

Top managers, at the level of chief executive officers, receive special attention in gender equality change literature, as scholars purport their involvement necessary to achieve gender equality change. They characterize top managers as gatekeepers to gender equality change, opening their organizations for gender equality interventions (De Vries, 2015; Meyerson & Kolb, 2006). With their “long-established authority”, the engagement of top managers is essential in providing legitimacy to the intervention (Acke, 2000, p. 626). They have the position to determine strategic directions, disrupt gendered routines and practices, control resources, change cultures and engage employees (Kelan & Wratil, 2018; Peterson, 2015; Powell et al., 2017). In short, managers are presumed to “have the authority [and] span of control to initiate and drive diversity initiatives through the organization” (Mattis, 2001, p. 375).

However, it is middle managers 1, whom the CEO needs to “make change happen” (Kelan & Wratil, 2018, p. 15; Mattis, 2001). Whereas top managers have to “support the bold steps of change”, “middle managers have an important role in leading the change” (McRoy & Gibbs, 2009, p. 697). Middle managers are expected to “walk the talk” (Mattis, 2001, p. 385), and this engagement of middle managers, leading the change by example and making it happen, is characterized as ownership in the literature (Kelan & Wratil, 2018; Mattis, 2001; McRoy & Gibbs, 2009). Ownership of middle managers is a pivotal concept in effective change, and scholars assume that gender equality change agents aim to ‘transfer’ problem ownership to middle managers (Benschop & Van den Brink, 2018; Callerstig, 2016). The few papers on middle managers taking problem ownership in gender equality interventions, indeed suggest that gender equality change agents put pressure on middle managers to become change agents (Bleijenbergh, 2018; White, 2017). We argue that gender equality interventions expect managers to both acknowledge being responsible for change (talking), as well as taking actions towards change (walking). We take this to represent the dual aspects of problem ownership.

Resistance to responsibility and to taking action, are recurrent themes in gender equality change literature. First, resistance to responsibility for gender equality change is described as a “refusal to accept responsibility” (Lombardo & Mergaert, 2013, p. 304), and as a refusal to accept “transfer of ownership” (Callerstig, 2016, p. 129). Managers resist the responsibility for the gender equality change they are expected to initiate, considering themselves to be change recipients rather than change agents. A first reported cause for such resistance to responsibility is the design of the gender equality intervention: managers refuse to take on problem ownership when the design of the intervention does not involve them in creating action plans they can engage with (Callerstig, 2016; Cavaghan, 2017). A second reported cause of resistance to responsibility is that the goal of gender equality interventions conflicts with hegemonic discourses, for instance on gender neutrality, meritocracy, and gendered norms. Hegemonic discourses frame gender inequalities as a cultural or individual problem rather than a structural problem (Calás, Smircich, & Holvino, 2014). As

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a result, managers are convinced that there is no problem for them to solve (Lombardo & Mergaert, 2013).

Second, resistance to taking action concerns the observation that managers pay lip service to gender equality change, but fail to follow through (Powell et al., 2017). A first reported cause for resistance to taking action on gender equality, is the (perceived) lack of resources (Lombardo & Mergaert, 2013). Managers participating in gender equality interventions can easily articulate they lack agency (Connell, 2005). A second reported cause of resistance to taking action on gender equality stems from contrasting discourses of gender equality as the ethical thing to do and organizational norms in which gender equality is nice but not necessary (Powell et al., 2017). Powell et al. (2017) describe how this contradiction results in top-management initially giving support, but later withdrawing it.

Summing up, literature indicates resistance of (middle) managers to accept responsibility for gender equality change, and resistance of (middle) managers to follow through on actions. In this paper, we empirically study how middle managers discursively enact resistance to problem ownership in gender inequality interventions, to explore how this resistance can be productive of change. We focus on discursive enactments regarding the dual aspects of problem ownership, walking and talking; in other words, acknowledging responsibility and expressing a willingness to take action.

3. Methodology

To empirically study how managers negotiate problem ownership in gender equality interventions, we conducted case studies (Yin, 2013) of three interventions towards gender equality in science research institutes of a Dutch university. We will first sketch the context of the interventions, then describe the selection of participants, reflect upon the role of the researchers and finally describe the data collection and analysis.

4. Case study context

We conducted case studies of gender equality interventions in three science research institutes of a Dutch university, as part of participatory action research in 2014-20172. The faculty board of the science faculty was committed to participate, seeking to improve the enduring numerical imbalance in men and women scientific staff. Statistics on the years 2008–2014, showed that full professors in the institutes were almost exclusively (95–100 %) men, whereas the percentage of men PhD students was around 60–80 %. This situation had hardly changed over the last ten years.

In the gender equality interventions we applied group model building, involving participants in building a dynamic model of messy problem (Vennix, 1996, 1999). Working with a standardized script (Hovmand et al., 2012), the facilitator (first author) supported the participants in jointly building a causal diagram of gender inequality processes and identifying the leverage points where policy can improve the situation. The model building took eight hours per research institute, divided over two (four hours) or three (three and two hours) sessions.

Participants in the gender equality interventions were employees of three science research institutes, working in hierarchical positions from postdoc to full professor, having different experiences with gender inequality (Table 1). Generally, we involved about twelve participants in each intervention, with slight variation between the institutes. This choice of both male and female participants in different hierarchical positions aimed to enhance team learning on gender inequality, to create a shared problem analysis and to support the commitment to the implementation of change (Bleijenbergh & Van Engen, 2015). In addition, in each group a gender expert from the same university participated. The other participants were addressed as experts on the particular processes in their institute; the gender experts provided general knowledge about gender inequality processes.

Reflecting on the gender equality interventions, three aspects are relevant. The first concerns the design of group model building, which is geared towards negotiations between participants: discussing different perspectives on a problem, powered by different backgrounds and interests, with the aim of agreeing on a joint analysis and ways to tackle the problem (Rouwette, 2011). This design opens the door for resistance to become productive of change, as “organizational change is the process of constructing and sharing new meanings and interpretations of organizational activities” (Tsoukas, 2005, p. 98). The discussion during the gender equality intervention entails negotiations on new meanings and interpretations of the gendered effects of organizational activities. While the method emphasises consensus-building, it is not void of organizational power and politics, and we are especially interested in the negotiations as a way into analyzing the resistance to gender equality interventions.

The second aspect concerns the willingness to participate in the gender equality interventions. The commitment to participate in these interventions was articulated by the faculty board and communicated to the management of the research institutes. The management of each institute consists of a scientific director, a position rotating between full professors, and a managing director, a professional manager with a master’s or doctoral degree in the field. We consider these managers of the research institutes as middle managers (McRoy & Gibbs, 2009; Pieter, Jack, & Darwin, 2017). The faculty board explicitly expected them to participate, in order to increase their commitment to gender equality change. The dean of the faculty had set an example by participating in the very first intervention of the action research project himself. So, though participation in general was voluntary in name, top management pressure on middle management to participate was considerable.

The third aspect is the focus on concrete actions. Group model building supports participants in finding solutions to messy problems (Meadows & Wright, 2008; Vennix, 1996) by finalizing the model building process with identifying leverage points for change. This means we focused on identifying gender inequality processes the organization itself can influence and change (Lansu, Bleijenbergh & Benschop, 2019) followed by deciding upon a list of actions. After each intervention, we compiled a report with the results of the intervention – containing both the analysis of the problem as well as the list of actions – which we distributed amongst participants and the faculty board. Thus, we stimulated a hands-on approach, not limiting ourselves to discussing gender inequality processes in general, but situating these processes in the context of the research institute, and negotiating ways to abate it in practice.

Thus, the interventions were designed to enhance problem ownership. First, we aimed to involved middle managers in both the analysis and identification of actions (Calás et al., 2014; Callerstig, 2016), preventing them from claiming they lack the agency or support to follow through (Powell et al., 2017). In addition, we hoped the common analysis of the gender inequality processes would challenge prevailing views that gender inequality is an individual problem that is not for the organization to solve (Calás et al., 2014; Lombardo & Mergaert, 2013). Finally, because the interventions were geared towards negotiations between participants, we hoped they allowed us to observe when and how resistance becomes productive of gender equality.

4.1. Reflection on gender researchers’ role

Finally, we reflect on the role of the researchers in this participatory action research. All three authors identify themselves as gender scholars and were responsible for the design of the intervention. The first author,
data (Boeije, 2009). Going through our data iteratively, we identified expectations about the group model building sessions. Views on gender inequality at their institute, (b) what had been done in interviews with middle managers we used a topic list regarding (a) their memos written before, during and after the interventions. For the in-

4.2. Data collection and analysis

Data collection consists of six semi-structured interviews with participating middle managers (before the gender equality interventions), transcription of 24 h of audio taped interventions, and researcher memos written before, during and after the interventions. For the interviews with middle managers we used a topic list regarding (a) their views on gender inequality at their institute, (b) what had been done already about the problem, (c) possibilities or barriers for change, and (d) expectations about the group model building sessions.

We applied qualitative content analysis to select and analyse our data (Boeije, 2009). Going through our data iteratively, we identified all discussions on problem ownership that involved at least one of the managers. In doing this, we focused on specific words like ‘responsibility’, ‘commitment’, or ‘act’, but also on fragments indicating action, agency, helplessness, or responsibility. Next, for each middle manager, we looked for excerpts relating to their position on problem ownership. We found these texts either in the interview reports or in the transcriptions of the first phase of the gender equality intervention, when all participants were asked to voice their expectations. The names of both the institutes and the managers are anonymized (Table 2).

5. Results

5.1. Problem ownership of gatekeepers

In our role as facilitators, we approached the managers of the research institutes as the gatekeepers, engaging them in the preparation of the intervention, asking them to identify and invite other participants, talking with them about the lack of women in their department and explaining that the goal was to focus on what they could change in the institute itself. We hoped that the intervention could coach them into an active role so that they would acknowledge problem ownership of gender equality change. We first explore how managers answered to this (implicit) expectation, by analysing how they talked about problem ownership in the interviews preceding the intervention.

One of the six managers denied there was a problem. Managing director Floyd of Institute Kappa analyzed the current gender imbalance in his institute as a ‘coincidence’, resulting from the quest for ‘quality’. He claimed to be satisfied with existing hiring and promotion policies and not to worry about gender imbalances. Thus, Floyd discursively mobilized meritocracy to downplay the importance of the problem. He implicitly denied even being a change recipient.

One of the managers did position himself as an – involuntary – change recipient. Scientific director Stefan of Institute Sigma refrained from committing to the intervention (“I will just see what happens”). In the preliminary interview with the first author he stated not to have organized a gender equality intervention if it were up to him, suggesting that he had had no real say in the decision that all research institutes would engage in these interventions. In addition, both in the interview as well as in the introductory round at the start of the intervention, he addressed the facilitators as change agents:

“I am curious to see […] whether we are doing a good job, or a bad job. […] And I turn around the pressure. What do you want to achieve here? […] I am curious about what you can do for us, with us.” (Stefan, Institute Sigma)

By inviting the facilitators to evaluate his department regarding gender equality, and by voicing that he expected actions from them (“what you can do for us”), Stefan took a position as change recipient, expecting change agency from the facilitators.

We found that three managers articulated responsibility for gender equality: they acknowledged that their institute had a gender inequality problem and would have to do something. However, they expected the facilitators to tell them what to do. Thus, Ethan, scientific director of institute Delta, stated in his preliminary interview: “I fear we will not discover new things that can help us. I hope for a new insight with which we can do something.” Managing director Selma of Institute Delta took a similar position. In her preliminary interview she said: “I don’t expect anything yet. I hope the intervention will lead to workable agreements on how to deal with things”. Managing director Brenda of Institute Sigma indicated at the start of the first session that she hoped to “get some tricks or tips on how we can improve the situation”. However, both Selma and Brenda indicated they feared a lack of resources in the form of non-complying colleagues. Selma said that her colleagues showed only
discussive support for gender equality: “I hear the words, but do not see the belief”. Brenda even did not see this discursive support in her institution, saying that some colleagues in the institute felt that the gender equality intervention was “a mission impossible”. Thus, implicitly, both Selma and Brenda acknowledged that there was a problem the institute played a role in. However, both articulated a lack of resources (the attitude of their colleagues) to seriously restrict the opportunities to act themselves. Summing up, the above three managers all acknowledge that gender inequality is a problem that needs to be acted upon. They take a position as change recipient. However, they are skeptical about the willingness to act. In contrast to the previous three managers, Hugh related to act, discussing the interpretation of activities attached to their problem ownership. We found that the negotiation of both aspects—acknowledging responsibility for and expressing willingness to act towards gender equality—is multi-layered. This means that negotiations are not simply about acknowledging or declining responsibility, or willingness to act, but can also concern sharing responsibility and calling for action from multiple actors. In addition, we found that wondering whether gender equality is a problem, precludes problem ownership. We found four patterns of negotiations, namely diplomatic denial, minimizing the action, diffusing ownership and ambiguous positioning.

5.2.1. Diplomatic denial
During the interventions, no single manager explicitly denied that gender inequality was a problem. However, some managers did—implicitly, tentatively and sometimes contradictory—question the existence of gender inequality in their institute. An example was managing director Brenda from Institute Sigma. Throughout the intervention, she was in two minds about gender equality being a problem for the institute. In the beginning of the first session, she stated as her goal for the intervention to find out whether gender inequality was a problem for the department. At the end of the session Brenda said she wanted to learn: “[…] how much work needs to be done in this group to make progress towards a better gender balance if it is not good now? How much is needed, how much DO we need the improvement and how can we achieve that?” In this quote, we hear Brenda diplomatically keeping all options open, from working on improving gender balance to doubting whether there is a problem at all (“‘If it is not good now?’”). When, during the second session, the participating gender expert talked about research into the gender pay gap that was conducted at the university at the time, Brenda challenged the existence of a pay gap in her institute: “I know we are doing quite well in that respect. […] I can tell, I know. Women are very equal here.” With this statement, Brenda indicated that she saw no gender inequality in the institute, and temporarily discarded diplomacy in her denial of gender inequality. Finally, at the end of the third session, Brenda evaluated the intervention as a whole, saying: “[If] t can be the start of other initiatives we can take as a group because it is not an easy problem. Or I think we concluded that there was not really a problem in this department, or in this institute.” The second sentence is in direct contradiction to the first sentence. Because Brenda ends with the denial of gender inequality as a problem (“there was not really a problem in this department”), the need to act disappears. This manager consistently questioned the necessity of the intervention, packaging her doubts in conflicting remarks on how gender equality was a difficult problem that needed ‘learning’, and at the same time negating the existence of gender inequality at the institute. We conclude that this diplomatic denial of gender inequality results in implicitly denying both responsibility and willingness to act on gender inequality. Problem ownership is absent when both being responsible and willing to take action are absent. We analyze that the intervention forced managers who thought that gender equality was no problem for the institute to openly discuss the issue with employees. This means they had to reveal their resistance against gender equality change during the intervention. The intervention made them tone down the resistance, but they diplomatically kept the option open that it is no problem.

5.2.2. Minimizing the action
Another negotiation pattern we found was that managers tried to postpone or minimize the action to achieve gender equality. To give an example, we discuss a negotiation towards the end of the intervention, concerning the identification of levers for policy change. In the second session, scientific director Ethan readily accepted responsibility as manager of the research institute: “[…] if I speak for myself, there certainly is commitment to ensure that enough women [enter the institute]”. Later in the session, several participants identified commitment from the top as an important factor to support gender equality. After that, a discussion evolved between Barbara, a woman researcher in tenure track for assistant professor, and scientific director Ethan, about what this commitment would entail.

Turn Participant Quote
Ethan, the scientific director is very quick to accept commitment as an important point of action (turn 1): “This [is] one of those things we have to pay attention to continuously”, and: “It needs long lasting attention”. He immediately acknowledges responsibility and expresses the willingness to act – though the use of the word ‘we’ in the first sentence, and the absence of an acting subject in the second sentence obscures how much problem ownership he sees for himself. In the same turn, he suggests that showing commitment does not need to take a lot of time: “Then you just tick the box”, and “We could easily add gender balance. […] Touch upon it, as an agenda point”. He is not pleased when researcher Barbara challenges his interpretation of commitment (turn 2), arguing that aiming at gender equality is more than counting bodies (Alvesson & Billing, 2002). He interrupts her in a dismissive tone of voice (turn 3), indicating that he realizes there is more to gender equality, but remaining vague (“everything that’s to do with it”). When Barbara perseveres in making explicit that decision makers should realize why women don’t flow through (turn 4), Ethan challenges her (5). We consider his challenge intimidating because of the confrontational tone of voice, and the directness with which Barbara was admonished to speak up if she knew better. We think his remark was not meant as an open invitation to discuss what ‘commitment’ would imply, but rather to put her in her place. This interpretation is supported by Barbara’s surprised and somewhat undignified ‘Sorry?’ (turn 6). Ethan repeats his remark, toning down confrontation (turn 7). Next, Barbara does embark on an explanation, but her voice trails off after a couple of sentences (turn 8). Finally, Ethan agrees, and his “Yeah, yeah. Yes” (turn 9) is a cue for other group members to change the subject. So, we find that Ethan displays an ambivalent position towards problem ownership. On the one hand he is quick in accepting responsibility for the policy point of commitment from the top, and in articulating concrete actions that he is prepared to persevere in for a long time. On the other hand, he downplays the amount of work it will bring (“just tick the box”, “touch upon it”), and blocks a negotiation about the content of the necessary actions.

We conclude that accepting personal responsibility, but consequently minimizing the action, limits problem ownership. While this manager expressed his responsibility for gender equality, he seems to resist substantial action. The intervention confronts him with employees that do not consider these actions sufficient. Despite using his position to dismiss that message, he also reluctantly agrees more is needed.

5.2.3. Diffusing ownership

Another negotiation pattern was diffusing ownership. In the previous paragraph, we found that scientific director Hugh of Institute Kappa acknowledged responsibility and was willing to act. We understood his use of an all-encompassing ‘we’, when talking about problem ownership, as meaning himself and his managing director. During the intervention the impression that Hugh accepted problem ownership remained, but questions arose as to whether this was indeed a personal responsibility for him. At the beginning of the third session, a discussion between participants started about what equality goals the institute should adopt. Scientific director Hugh was eager to interrupt. When he finally got the floor, he gave an emotional monologue; spoken in a loud voice and emphasizing several words.

“[…] Ehm, WHAT DOES KAPPA WANT? HELLO? Who are Kappa? That is US. Here, all of us together. There is no, what does Kappa want. That doesn’t exist. Who are THEY? I have no idea […] Kappa is us! We are here with a community of people together and have to take care that everybody can function WELL, that qualities are fully valued, that people feel comfortable (‘senang’) in their position, and can fully develop themselves. […] The question is, how are WE ALL going to solve this, each from his [sic] own responsibility. […] Now we are going to see whether we can touch those levers, but those […] are levers that we REALLY need to operate ALL of us, otherwise it won’t work. […] As if someone, you know, is accountable for that. We are, REALLY, we are all of us in this together, sorry!” (Hugh, Institute Kappa)

After this emotional address, the group was silent for several seconds. We take this as a signal that scientific director Hugh’s call to solve gender inequality together had made an impression on them. Hugh’s monologue indicated acceptance of responsibility and willingness to act. However, the interpretation of problem ownership as something to be done together, as a shared responsibility, is not without risk for the next step, that of implementation. When responsibilities are diffuse, are shared amongst “all of us”, who is going to take the lead? Who is going to be the change agent? The understanding of gender inequality as a shared problem indicates high problem ownership concerning the acceptance of responsibility. However, because this responsibility remains at a somewhat abstract group level, this might negatively impact the action part of problem ownership.

We conclude that embracing group responsibility and group action, by emphasizing that gender inequality is a joint responsibility that requires joint action, may obscure personal responsibility and action, and so results in diffused problem ownership. The group discussion about gender inequality processes allowed the manager to articulate responsibility for gender equality but to share this responsibility with the employees as well. We argue that diverting the action to the whole group, is a form of resistance against personal action. Problem ownership is limited when it is negotiated on the level of group responsibility and group action, because it is unclear who exactly is going to be responsible and take subsequent action, and potentially creates a hiding space for reluctant managers (‘diffusing ownership’).

5.2.4. Ambiguous positioning

Before the intervention, we saw that scientific director Stefan of Institute Sigma saw himself as a change recipient, effectively refusing problem ownership. During the first intervention session, however, he acknowledged that the problem is in part ‘home made’.

“The actual environment that we have now, is made by us, made by the
male dominated society. And so, it is very much driven into competitiveness, and not into compromise. […] If you look around at meetings you see also very successful females [sic] and they have a very female group. And therefore females [sic] seem to be very happy in a setting where there is a different culture. […] So, I think we have created an extremely competitive setting which becomes worse and worse.” (Stefan, Institute Sigma)

The acknowledgement that there is a ‘we’ who created a competitive setting in which women don’t thrive could be the beginning of acknowledging responsibility. Indeed, Stefan’s attitude towards the intervention had mellowed a bit at the end of the first session: “It was less a waste of time than I thought it would be”. However, he was absent without notification during the second session. Herewith he missed an important part of the actual model building, hampering his understanding of the group’s progressing insights when he attended the third meeting. In this final session, participants split up in three groups to discuss leverages for change. Stefan chose to discuss the subject of competitive culture, together with Brenda, the managing director, and assistant professor Kevin. Kevin was the spokesperson of the subgroup, reporting what they had discussed regarding competitive culture in the institute. Their subgroup had a clear idea of what was needed: ‘[We should] increase the level of collaboration actively […] to make sure that we feel as a community again.’ Despite the fact that other participants voiced skeptical remarks about practical implications as well as about the gender impact of this policy suggestion, this recommendation did end up in the written report on the intervention. Scientific director Stefan however did not support Kevin in defending the need to increase the level of collaboration. We do not know why. Did he think Kevin did a great job by himself? Or did he disengage from the discussion, as he disengaged himself from the intervention on several occasions? We find that Stefan acknowledged responsibility in stating that a problem is ‘home-made’ and addressable: he acknowledged group responsibility for at least some aspects of gender inequality, specifically a culture that hinders women. However, he did not show personal problem ownership, by refraining from supporting assistant professor Kevin and appropriating the conclusions of his subgroup. On the level of personal responsibility and willingness to undertake actions, he remained silent. We conclude the group discussion allowed the manager to articulate responsibility for gender equality, also allowing him to resist personal action, hiding behind the group when willingness to act was at stake. So, group responsibility seems to allow managerial denial of action implications.

5.2.5. Resume of problem ownership negotiations

We found that managers negotiated the extent of their problem ownership during the interventions. We found four patterns of such negotiations, namely diplomatic denial, minimizing the work, diffusing ownership and ambiguous positioning (Table 3). The patterns of negotiation show how problem ownership can be denied (‘diplomatic denial’) or be acknowledged at group or personal level.

6. Discussion and conclusion

Our research explored negotiations of middle managers regarding problem ownership during gender equality interventions to better understand when and how resistance can be productive of change. We found managers resisting gender equality to be a problem as such, resisting to be change recipient, resisting to become a change agent at all and resisting the need to take substantial action towards equality. Only one manager did not resist to be a change agent, accepting problem ownership. This shows how resistance manifests itself in the four negotiation patterns on problem ownership, namely diplomatic denial, minimizing the work, diffusing ownership and ambiguous positioning. These patterns displayed specific combinations of denying the need for gender equality change, being responsible for change and willingness to take action.

Our research adds to gender equality change literature in two ways. First, we add to understanding when and how resistance becomes productive of change (Thomas, 2005; Thomas & Davies, 2005; Thomas & Hardy, 2011). Scholars argued that resistance can be productive of gender equality change, when friction and resistance fuel an open debate on routines and underlying values (Benschop & Van den Brink, 2014; Eriksson-Zetterquist & Renemark, 2016). By enabling discussions on such far implicit norms and values, these same norms and values become subject to critical scrutiny. Indeed, the gender equality interventions we conducted made the resistance of middle managers visible for the group of participants. In the participatory design of this intervention, men and women in senior and junior positions in an organization cooperate in analyzing the problem and identifying leverages for change. This creates a compelling space for negotiations. Our research showed how the participatory character of the intervention brings problem ownership – acknowledging some form of responsibility and willingness to act – to the discussion table.

Moreover, the intervention helps participants to contest resistance from middle managers, even though this contestation induces only small tweaks to the problem ownership of managers. Middle managers can try to minimize the action, or hide behind group responsibility and action, but they have to take a position on problem ownership; they have to engage with gender equality change. This creates a compelling space for negotiations. Our research showed how the participatory character of the intervention brings problem ownership – acknowledging some form of responsibility and willingness to act – to the discussion table.

The resistance cannot be fully maintained in the context of a gender equality intervention, commissioned by top management and in the presence of gender experts. The joint analysis of gender inequality as a structural – and not (only) a cultural or individual problem – challenges prevailing views that gender inequality is not a problem for the organization to solve (Calás et al., 2014; Lombardo & Mergaert, 2013). Next, managers cannot claim not to have been involved in the analysis and action plans (Calás et al., 2014; Callerstig, 2016), and will have more difficulty claiming that they lack the agency or support to follow through (Powell et al., 2017). The design of the intervention as an eight- hour structured analysis with successive identification of leverages for change, prevents middle managers from entirely avoiding responsibility and action. So, we contribute to the literature the necessary conditions for making resistance productive: a long, facilitated discussion, including participants with different perspectives on gender inequality in the organization, including gender experts and with the support of top management. An important aside to this conclusion is the observation that the change observed is incremental. We think this is

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<td>Negotiation patterns</td>
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<td>Diplomatic denial</td>
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<td>Diffusing ownership</td>
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necessarily so. Practices such as our intervention both challenge and stabilize the organization, thus illustrating the ambiguity of productive resistance (McCabe, 2019). Following McCabe (2019), we can characterize the intervention as a ceremony, a collective event with an explicit purpose but multiple meanings. This ceremony was productive for change agents, bringing about gender equality change (ceremony as resistance), but also productive in reinforcing established norms and power relations (resistance as ceremony).

Secondly, gender equality interventions involve discussions on who should lead the change: researchers, employees or managers (Bleijenbergh, 2018; Callerstig, 2016; Kelan & Wratil, 2018; Mattis, 2001; McRoy & Gibbs, 2009; White, 2017). We contend that middle managers have a crucial role to play here and contribute by unpacking the concept of problem ownership of middle managers in gender equality interventions. We conceptualize that problem ownership is a two-step notion in which acknowledgement of responsibility precedes pronouncing the willingness to take action. We showed that neither responsibility nor action is a simple dichotomy, in the sense that managers do or do not accept responsibility or do or do not express commitment to take action. We rather suggest a complex layering to problem ownership concerning personal and group responsibilities and personal and group actions. Managers can acknowledge responsibility but refuse commitment to action; they can accept group responsibility and call for group action, and they can accept personal responsibility but minimize (commitment to) personal action. While the classic conceptualization of not walking the talk (Mattis, 2001; Powell et al., 2017) refers to managers discursively accepting problem ownership (both responsibility as well as commitment to action), but in practice not taking action, our conceptualization of problem ownership enables a more detailed understanding of the different types of resistance of managers against change agency (Benschop & Van den Brink, 2018; Callerstig, 2016; Mattis, 2001). We find that problem ownership of managers differs from notions such as shared agency and shared responsibility (Connell, 2005). Shared agency and joint responsibility remain general goals and do not suffice to activate middle managers to take action on gender equality. We contend that problem ownership of middle managers in terms of their acknowledgement of personal responsibility and personal willingness to take action is necessary to further the role of middle managers in initiating and supporting gender equality change in organizations.

We conclude that the opportunity for negotiations about problem ownership should be central in the design of gender equality interventions for two reasons. Firstly, when group discussions on the analysis of gender inequality and actions towards gender equality are the core of an intervention, this enables an open debate on gender equality practices, and thus supports organizational change (Van den Brink & Benschop, 2018). Secondly, when the design of the intervention involves multiple actors in the problem analysis and results in the identification of actions, some of the usual reasons for resistance of middle managers are cut off. Instead, investments are made in their commitment to action (Bleijenbergh & Van Engen, 2015).

Finally, this research has its limitations. Further research into the role and position of middle managers in gender equality interventions (Kelan & Wratil, 2018) is needed. For instance, the ‘dual agenda’, which creates tensions and contradictions between a gender equality agenda and mainstream organizational goals (Acker, 2006; Benschop & Verloo, 2006; Walby, 2005) is possibly most pressing for middle managers, allowing them to reject problem ownership. It might be interesting to examine how political pressure exerted by top management and gender experts on middle managers to acknowledge problem ownership hinders problem ownership or prevents explicit resistance against it. In addition, research is needed into the role of men – and masculinities – in participatory gender equality interventions, for instance (Bleijenbergh, 2018), exploring reasons why men should or want to participate (Broadbridge & Hearn, 2008; Connell, 2005), and the influence of masculine – heroic – notions of the leadership of managers in these interventions.


