Representations of the woman leader in Finnish business media articles

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Introduction

The starting point of this paper lies in an observation we made when reading a major Finnish business magazine. Several of the articles dealt with successful financial performance of different companies, often with interviews with the companies’ top-line management. But what surprised us was that if the leader happened to be a woman, she was asked questions such as whether she felt that being a woman leader was an advantage or disadvantage, or whether she experienced equality or discrimination in her work. Male managers were not asked similar questions. They did not have to answer questions about whether they felt that it was an advantage or disadvantage to be a man in a managerial position or whether they encountered discrimination because of their gender. What we found confusing was that the subject of gender emerged only when a woman leader was in focus. This finding aroused our curiosity.

Furthermore, we noticed that despite the fact that women make up a prominent share (47%) of the total workforce in Finland (Statistics Finland 1998), they represent a tiny minority (2–3%) of the top-line managerial population (Aaltio-Marjosola 2001), and are well-represented as leaders only within the service sector – not, for example, in the industrial branches (Veikkola 1998). The top-line management positions in Finland, particularly in the private sector, are predominantly held by men, whereas women are clearly underrepresented. Consequently, with regard to the representation of women leaders, today’s labour market can be characterized as being segregated both vertically and horizontally.

The basic assumption of this paper draws on Acker’s (1990) idea that jobs and organizations are gendered. For the purposes of the present study, we take this to mean that gender is a crucial element in working life and organizations. Since there are a number of ways of seeing occupations as gendered (Britton 2000), we will focus on two important aspects here. First, according to statistics, it appears to be difficult for women to attain top managerial positions in Finland and, consequently, the sex composition in top management is male-dominated and thus strongly biased. Second, gender typing in managerial work has come to be seen as masculinized; that is, managerial work is regarded as primarily suitable for people with masculine characteristics (Aaltio-Marjosola 1994, 2001, Calas and Smircich 1996, 1999, Lorber 1993, Lämsä et al. 2000, Lämsä and Sintonen 2001, Martin 2000, Mills 1988, Wilson 1999). For example, Kanter (1977) notes that the overall idea of a top manager is based on a ‘masculine ethic’, and that masculine traits are assumed to be an integral part of effective management.

We therefore base our study on the ethical principle that although gender is an inescapable part of organizational life, it need not be a source of inequality and hierarchy. The challenge, then, is to create a context in which gendered behaviour may be enacted without reproducing inequality. This would allow women to ‘do’ their own gender in the managerial reality as well as in career...
progression. Women leaders would then be able to construct their professional identities based on female role models which did not take the masculine as the norm and the feminine as marking difference (Katila and Meriläinen 1999). Hence, the managerial discourse should designate women as subjects, not as ‘the other’ (Irigaray 1993).

Furthermore, we draw upon the assumption that organizational and social practices such as taking the masculine as the norm and the feminine as marking difference are not constructed and legitimated only in organizations but are also influenced by societal-level forces. One powerful force in the present day is the mass media. They both create and maintain meanings, thereby influencing our thinking and acting (Gill 1993, Held 1993, Fairclough 1995, Fornäs 1995). The media make choices on how they represent the goings-on in our environment, and this representation can then be seen to have political, social and moral implications in society. The power used by the women and men who write and speak in the media is discursive by nature, and consequently the readers are likely to base their evaluations on the media texts.

Our focus in this paper is on the discursive ways and conventions used by the media to symbolically describe and represent women leaders. The discursive ways in which the business media represent the women leader has an impact on what kind of action is valued or de-valued in working life and especially in management. Such representations have an evident impact on women’s identity and opportunities in a career context. Consequently, our paper concentrates on the business media, particularly on articles published in a leading business newspaper and major business magazines in Finland. We seek to answer the following specific questions:

1) what kind of representations of the woman leader are produced discursively in relation to her career progression?
2) what is the content of the writing?
3) how is it legitimated?
4) what assumption is made of the reader?
5) what are the functions of the writing?
6) in what ways are these functions promoted?

The remaining part of this paper proceeds as follows. First, we discuss the literature concerning women and leadership, with special focus on the view that due to their sex, women uphold values and features other than men and that this contribution of theirs should be valued in organizations. Second, we present our theoretical approach, namely, a discourse analytic approach, followed by a description of the empirical data in the third section. The fourth section presents the built discourses together with their interpretation. And finally, we draw conclusions and discuss the implications of this paper.

**Women and leadership**

There are four main ways of looking at women and leadership: the equal-opportunities perspective, the meritocratic perspective, the view that women can contribute something special, and the idea that women uphold values that could inspire changes in the way organizations function (Billing and Alvesson 1989, Alvesson and Billing 1997). The equal-opportunities perspective emphasizes the problem of the low number of women in managerial positions. The meritocratic approach is based on the argument that organizations should acknowledge and be better aware of the skills and talents of women. The perspective which stresses women managers’ capacity to contribute something special to organizational management draws attention to the dissimilarities between the genders. Women are assumed to make the social structure less hierarchical, to influence the leadership style, and to change the organizational atmosphere. Finally, the perspective that women uphold alternative values and features compared to men again highlights the differences between genders, and stresses the differences between typical female and male values more strongly than the ‘special contribution’ perspective. Moreover, it pays more attention to the idea that there could be a conflict between the female and male values.

If we are to emphasize the idea that women, due to their sex, uphold other values and features than men and that this differentiation should be valued in working life and organizations, we have to note
that this does not mean that men and women should become the same. Rather, it means that the way of thinking and acting in organizations should be changed so that the feminine way would be valued in its own right, just like the masculine. Consequently, women ought to have the possibility and the social space to act in accordance with their own wishes without trying to adapt to the predominant masculine value-basis. In terms of women’s career advancement this would require that organizations be more attuned to female orientations than most corporations are today (Alvesson and Billing 1997: 168–169, Dobson and White 1995).

However, what is paradoxical is that the same factor that makes it important for women to be represented in managerial decision-making – namely, the difference between female and male features and values – also makes it less likely that they will embrace or feel comfortable with careers leading to top managerial positions. So, the barriers to women attaining top-line positions are not merely a matter of lacking equal opportunities but also a result of many women’s lack of interest in adapting themselves to the demands of masculine managerial jobs (Alvesson and Billing 1997: 168–170).

The explanations that underlie the differences between the genders are often based on gender socialization theories which see the constitution of gender as a psychological and socio-psychological process (Chodorow 1978, Gilligan 1982). Thus, the perceived social stereotypes of the genders, masculine and feminine, in life experiences and learning will reinforce that perceived identity. Gilligan (1982), for example, argues in her socialization theory that women are typically socialized into feminine values that reflect a concern for others, nurturance, selflessness, and a desire to be one with the others. Men, in contrast, are typically socialized into masculine values such as assertiveness, acquisition of money and goods and success, and their identity is constructed through individuation.

More sociological versions of the explanations of the difference between the genders pay attention to macro-level and structural forces that affect women’s thinking and acting. Such ideas point at cultural, structural and social practices that work against women and a feminine orientation (Alvesson and Billing 1997: 138). Historically and socially constructed values, norms and patterns of thinking and action, thus, tend to favour masculinity and de-value femininity. According to Holmer-Nadesan (1996), for example, patriarchy is the system of social organization and control which continues to dominate our contemporary society.

According to Fondas (1997), however, qualities that are culturally associated with females are increasingly appearing in connection with descriptions of managerial work in the contemporary organizational and managerial literature. A participatory, people-oriented and flexible style of leadership is nowadays being viewed as appropriate in organizations, and this is formulated in feminine terms. Basically, these new ideas of leadership can open up more space for females to attain top managerial positions, since they appear to value the feminine way of thinking and behaving. In general, this kind of discussion underscores the idea that managing and organizing are not gender-neutral (Acker 1990, Billing and Alvesson 1994, Calas and Smircich 1993, 1996, Collinson and Hearn 1994, Fondas, 1997, Martin 2000). Scholars should, therefore, be keenly aware that the world is constructed along gender lines at probably every level, and that gendered ideas are an essential part of the conceptualization of management.

The existing managerial framework has been challenged by post-structuralist approaches in particular. For example, the literature drawing on structural linguistics and Michel Foucault’s power/knowledge arguments question both the idea of knowledge as well as its constitution as such (Calas and Smircich 1996). Following this line of thought, we can consider the masculine value-basis in organizations as a conceptual system, embedded within language. Talk and discourses reflect the prevailing value system and power relations and, thus, form a way of carrying, producing and reproducing gender segregation (Aaltio-Marjosa´la 1994, Calas and Smircich 1999, Lämsä and Sintonen 2001).

In other words, discourse and language can be used to maintain unequal power relations between
the genders, but they can also be used to attain
greater cultural maturity with regard to social
justice (Irigaray 1993). The increasing talk of the
feminization, as it applies to leaders and their
work, may then be a potentially important con-
tceptual development in managerial thinking
(Fondas 1997). So, although discourses maintain
and reproduce power relations, alternative dis-
courses can also occur within a post-structuralist
framework. We feel that in order to understand
the current status of the woman leader, and
especially that of femininity, in working life, it is
necessary to study and analyze the prevailing
social discourses in today’s business world. Our
analysis focuses on the mass media, whose power
in defining and interpreting social reality is of
major significance in our society.

**Discourse analytic approach**

The adopted discourse analytic approach draws
on a variety of ideas and traditions, particularly
on post-structuralism and language studies (Calas
For the purposes of this paper it is therefore im-
portant to define how we understand the concepts
of discourse and a discourse analytic approach.
We define a discourse here as a relatively coherent
system of meanings in texts that brings objects –
such as women leaders – into being (Parker 1992).
Discourses are found at work in pieces of texts, in
delimited tissues of meaning reproduced in any
form (speech, pictures, clothing, gestures, facial
expressions, and so on). In this paper we focus on
the discourses found in articles published in the
Finnish business press.

According to the adopted approach, the social
world, rather than being seen as a reality indepen-
dent of its actors, is interpreted as the construction
of social actors who create and sustain it through
the use of language and communication. From
this point of view, the use of language is not just
a code of communication that describes social
reality, but rather, it is a social reality in itself
The use of language, or discourse, produces sets of
concepts such as ideas of femininity or masculinity,
the relationship between women and men leaders,
and so on, through which we understand the
world and relate it to one another. These concepts
depend on the ongoing construction of texts for
meaning at a given point in time and in a given
environment, and thus, both the concepts and
their meanings change over time and from one
context to another (Berger and Luckmann 1966,
Hardy and Phillips 1999). For instance, the
meaning of the concept of a woman leader or
the valuation of femininity can vary in different
places and at different times, providing women
similarly varying opportunities in working life.

Consequently, there is no identity of the woman
leader in a stable form across time and place, but
instead her identity is dependent on an ongoing
process of linguistic practices by which people
make sense of the world (Lämsä and Sintonen
2001). Every discourse interpolates individuals as
subjects by locating them within particular posi-
tions. These positions as a subject provide them
with identities that incorporate opportunities for
action, and in so doing discourses can locate
people within the system of hierarchy specific to
that specific discourse. A discourse thus shapes
people’s experiences and the actions of those
participating in it and thereby produces their
subjectivities (Hardy and Phillips 1999: 4).

Moreover, what is especially worth noting is
that the meanings of concepts are not unchanging.
Instead, they form a dynamic resource, although
people in a particular socio-cultural setting easily
experience them as lawlike and self-evident since
they are easily collectivized and reified through
social construction processes (Berger and Luck-
mann 1966). The way in which the business press
represents the woman leader can either work to
maintain or to transform the meaning of the
concept, which, subsequently, may have various
effects in society. For example, ‘new’ articulations
of femininity can change the socio-cultural pro-
cesses of the dominating managerial reality. Not
only is it important how they write about the
woman leader, but equally important is what is
left unsaid in the texts.

Fairclough (1998: 2) argues that much of the
linguistic approach in social theory is based on a
static view of power relations. According to him,
little attention is paid to the transformation of these relations. Michel Foucault, however, makes an interesting contribution to the social theory of discourse by emphasizing the relationship between discourse and power, between the discursive construction of social subjects and knowledge (Fairclough 1998: 37–38, 51). Discursive activities are associated with power in social practices, and knowledge, correspondingly, is also related to power. This does not mean, however, that knowledge is inherently subjugating. Power relations are open strategies, and Foucault, for example, gives special emphasis to the positive, productive and resourceful aspects of power (Berard 1999). Moreover, Holmer-Nadesan (1996: 57) argues that despite the fact that the managerial discourse which dominates current organizations and management is patriarchal by nature, it does not preclude resistance to this domination. Such resistance can be explained in terms of people’s capabilities to draw upon alternative discourses. In other words, we assume here that people have the capacity to adopt alternative discourses that subvert the privileged position of the dominant system of social identities and values.

We also emphasize the functional and action-oriented nature of discourse (Heritage 1996, Potter and Wetherell 1998: 17–23). Language and its discursive uses are social practices, and people apply particular linguistic means to perform social actions – for example, to make excuses to present themselves as admirable persons, to make certain events visible or to prevent them from happening, and so on. Following the idea of Austin’s speech act theory (see Potter and Wetherell 1998: 18), we may say that people use language like a tool: to get things done. This feature of language use is often referred to as ‘reflexivity’. Hence, the representations of the woman leader also have functions which can be either purposeful or unintended from the viewpoint of the writer or speaker.

The discourse analytic approach provides an effective tool for demonstrating the limits and the possibilities of discourse. In particular, the approach enables us to make visible the often gendered structures of communication (Calas and Smircich 1996: 245) and helps us to reveal the linguistic ways which maintain specific, often ‘natural and taken-for-granted truths’ about the social world. Hence, the adopted discourse analytic approach is emancipatory by nature and has a moral loading.

**Empirical data**

The data were collected from 51 articles published in 1996 and 2000 in a major Finnish business newspaper entitled ‘Kauppalehti’ (hereinafter KL) and two business magazines, namely ‘Kauppalehti-Optio’ (hereinafter KLO) and ‘Talouselämä’ (hereinafter TE). These can be said to be widely read and well-known to the general public, even though they are targeted mainly to Finnish business professionals. KL is published five times a week, on workdays, and KLO once a week. These publications are linked to each other in such a way that a customer who orders KL automatically receives KLO. TE is published once a week with certain exceptions in holiday periods.

Two criteria were applied in the selection of the articles. First, the article had to deal with a woman leader in the context of her career progression. Second, the subject of the female gender had to be discussed in the article. For instance, if an article described someone’s career mentioning the name of the person in question, we would not include the article in the sample even if that person were a woman unless there was some discussion about the issue of gender.

We found altogether 51 articles which fulfilled the above criteria in the years under review, 25 in 1996 and 26 in 2000. Of these, 17 were published in KL and KLO, 8 in 1996 and 9 in 2000. TE published 34 such articles, 17 in 1996 and 17 in 2000. In 29 articles (57%, N = 51) the woman leader herself was interviewed, at least in some parts of the article, and thus her voice was to be heard. KL and KLO together had 9 such articles (53%, N = 17) and TE had 20 (59%, N = 34). As a whole, our database comprised the following information: name of the publication, name of the article, publishing date, name of the author (if mentioned), and the original text. For the purpose of this study, the articles were assigned a number from 1 to 51. This number, the abbreviated name
of the publication and the publishing date are marked in parentheses later in this paper when examples of the original texts are presented. For example, code (7, TE, 29.3.1996) refers to article number 7 in our sample published in Talouselämä (TE) on 29 March 1996.

As a first step in the research process we, two researchers, read and reflected on the material several times over. During the reading process we compared notes and discussed our ideas. The built discourses are the result of our reflection and discussions. The collected material was organized so that we divided pieces of the texts by their themes into categories, based on how the articles constituted the woman leader. At first glance, it seemed to us that there were two main types of themes. The perspective of a woman compared to a man was clearly emphasized in some of the texts, whereas others paid more attention to the issue of a woman leader’s competence. After several readings, a third theme began to emerge, namely the question of gender equality. Finally, there were three ways in which the woman leader was constituted in the articles. Based on these we built three discourses which we called a ‘patriarchal’ discourse, a ‘victim’ discourse and a ‘professional’ discourse.

Three discourses of the woman leader

(i) A patriarchal discourse

The patriarchal discourse sees and defines the concept of the woman leader as subordinate in importance to the concept of her male counterpart. The masculine values and norms of the dominant group, that is, those of male managers, are prioritized when juxtaposed with those of women. The following examples of the studied texts illustrate how women leaders are positioned as subordinated to masculinity.

Statement 1: “Malmivirta gives us to understand that women leaders do not fit into Jukka Viinanen’s ‘Big Boys’ League’ at Neste company” (16, TE, 25.10.1996)

Statement 2: “There is something familiar in it with regard to Finnish business life. The matters we’ve discussed together with the older guys in a sauna, over beer, at hunting lodges! Within such a corporate tradition, the experience and insights of the older fellows have irresistibly been passed on to the younger guys. In most cases the women have missed all this. How do you push your way into the same sauna with the male top management of the company if you are a woman? … To be a successful woman leader, a woman has to assimilate a great many rules of a men’s game, which may be different from what they may have prejudicially imagined. They will just have to learn the rules.” (38, KLO, 19.9.1996)

Statement 3: “Marja-Leena Kraemer is full of energy and self-confidence: ‘I grew up as the only girl among a bunch of brothers. That kind of childhood gave me that kind of resources that I have had no difficulty getting along in the masculine business world.’ (28, TE, 15.9.2000)

The patriarchal discourse clearly underscores the topic of gender. Characteristically, the focus is not on the specific woman leader who is discussed in the article, but instead, she is represented as a ‘universal’ type of woman leader. For example, Rosabet Moss Kanter (1977) argues that women who are few in number among their male peers often have ‘only-woman status’. They are easily evaluated and interpreted on the basis of stereotypes and generalizations. In this context Kanter uses the concept of a ‘token’. However, Acker (1990), among others, rejects this idea. She argues that men are advantaged in organizational settings over their female colleagues, that men are constructed as the ideal type, and that these gendered advantages operate both in male- and female-dominated contexts. Furthermore, Martin (2000: 208) points out that when women become the majority in positions in which they used to be a minority, the men tend to exit, and the pay and status of those positions consequently decline.

Our findings indicate that the woman leader is represented as different and subordinate to the male manager in the patriarchal discourse. She is sometimes seen as having the advantage of being ‘different’ and, therefore, highly visible in a system where success is tied to being known. Again, sometimes she is seen as having to endure the hardships and disadvantages of the outsider, the ‘different’. In any case, all her doings are presented from the
perspective of the dominant group, the male managers. Thus, the social space for a woman leader’s own behavioural patterns and actions is articulated through masculine values and norms in the formation of the patriarchal discourse.

The patriarchal discourse is oriented to convincing the reader that a woman leader is different compared to a man, and that male managers and masculinity are the hierarchical authority. Hence, patriarchy organizes its linguistic practices around the primary signifier, which can be expressed as male authority. We can say, therefore, that the function of this discourse is to convince the reader of the appropriateness of subordination between the genders. In other words, the discourse advocates the idea of the traditional division between the genders, and puts the woman leader under the obligation to act according to masculine values and norms. The woman leader is constructed so that she should follow these values and norms in social practices if she is to be successful in her managerial task. The patriarchal discourse, thus, appeals to the reader who accepts the traditional hierarchical division between the genders. In this paper, the assumption of the reader in the patriarchal discourse is that of ‘a preserver’.

The content of the text in the patriarchal discourse is focused on the different leadership styles of the genders. The following statement highlights this type of writing.

Statement 4: “According to the daughter, she and her father differ considerably in their leadership styles. Monika considers herself a team-focused leader who likes brain-storming. Her father, for his part, is authoritative – exactly like his own father was, remembers the young woman.” (43, KLO, 7.9.2000)

Gender differences are typically presented as ‘natural and innate’ in the patriarchal discourse. Consequently, the linguistic strategy by which this message is legitimated is to argue for the naturalness of the differences (Lämsä and Sintonen 2001). When the woman leader is described acting in a masculine way, such action is against her ‘natural’ feminine character and, for this reason, astonishing and exceptional. In other words, it is the exceptional – that is, the masculine – women who are able to succeed in a managerial task. The identity of the woman leader, thus, is constructed as that of ‘an iron lady’. She is an ‘outstanding’ exception who acts against her ‘natural’ feminine character. For example, a woman leader is referred to as ‘a tough bone to chew on’ in one of the articles. A man interviewed in the same article says, ‘she’s not quite the beast of the Apocalypse though’. (27, TE, 8.9.2000)

On the one hand, the patriarchal discourse constructs the identity of ‘an iron lady’ for the successful woman leader. On the other hand, her ‘natural’ feminine features are also sometimes presented as being useful. In this case, however, the representation is that of ‘a woman of cunning’, who is conscious of her difference and takes advantage of it within a masculine framework. The following statement highlights this:

Statement 5: “UllaSirkeinen has proved to be a very competent colleague, open, and always smiling. She applies her feminine perspective precisely to the extent where her ideas and actions do not irritate her male colleagues but, rather, arouse the interest of even the most shilly-shallying ones.” (41, KLO, 17.10.1996)

(ii) A victim discourse

In what we call the victim discourse, the concept of the woman leader is also presented as subordinate in importance to the concept of the male manager, and in this regard, the discourse is similar to the patriarchal discourse. However, the victim discourse differs from the patriarchal in one important aspect. Instead of trying to convince the reader of the appropriateness of hierarchical power relations and subordination between the genders, the victim discourse openly and publicly demands a change in power relations. The following examples illustrate this discourse.

Statement 6: “Again, there was much, even pointed, discussion about women as leaders, but in spite of that no major increase occurred in the number of women leaders.” (35, KL, 2.1.1996)
Statement 7: “Glass ceiling joyfully broken. Sensational news: registered nurse to boss head doctors.” (21, TE, 17.3.2000)
In this discourse, the woman leader is represented as a victim in relation to the advancement of her career, and top managerial positions are seen as a bastion of the male gender. It is difficult for women to attain top-line positions, thereby making them a discriminated group. The underlying value in the victim discourse is gender equality, in other words, the same number of women and men in top managerial positions. Accordingly, if women leaders were to progress in hierarchy, this would be morally correct. The discourse thus draws its strength from a moral argument and is grounded on a moral principle; it is unjust and immoral to prefer men for top managerial positions only because they are men, which then leads to a minor proportion of women in managerial positions.

The function of the victim discourse is to bring about a change in hierarchical gender relations openly by making the discrimination of women visible. The discourse is characterized by its opposition to inequality. It aims at making the reader recognize this discrimination by telling about the career difficulties of women leaders and the sacrifices they have to make. It calls for change and indicates the direction of the desired change, that is, an equal number of both genders in top-line positions. So, we can say that the discourse strives to convince the reader by appealing to the moral principle of justice. Since the discourse makes an appeal to morality, we call the reader assumed by the victim discourse ‘a moral reader’. Moreover, the discourse contains a temporal dimension: although the woman leader is a victim today, in the future she is potentially an equal actor, even a hero. The victim can, in other words, become a hero if the change in hierarchical status between the genders materializes. However, the discourse must also solve the problem of how the woman leader can become a hero. It gives two types of linguistic solutions: a ‘redemption’ and women’s networking. The following statement describes the former, the idea of a redemption.

Statement 8: “Some people feel that equality will not be realized until women leaders, too, incur financial losses of hundreds of millions at the head of big companies.” (12, TE, 13.9.1996)

The woman leader can ‘win the equality battle’ by enduring hardships and tough experiences. That is, she must show that she can take defeat with dignity, and that she can stand pressure and hard times. The woman leader has to ‘redeem’ her place by showing such features at least temporarily. Otherwise, the moral claim for equality is not justified. This type of solution – redemption – resembles the idea, familiar from the patriarchal discourse, of the woman leader having to be or to become ‘an iron lady’. This discursive solution thus also draws upon masculine values and norms.

The second solution, women’s networking, is clarified by the example below.

Statement 9: “‘It is clear that you always have to have mentors in a big organization. Otherwise, you’ll never advance any higher from the lowest step of the ladder. You always have to have someone who proposes you for things, who takes you along to meetings and to meet people. That’s how I’ve drawn some of my own subordinates forward. Those whom I have seen are capable and will manage.’ . . . Malmivirta does not believe that Finnish men’s attitude to women leaders will change yet during the current managerial generation. ‘I don’t think anything will happen among these fifty-year-olds. Instead, I do believe that once the next generation attains top-line positions, it will be much easier for them to accept a woman as an equal colleague or a leader.’” (40, KLO, 3.10.1996)

The core message here is that when a few women succeed in attaining top-level managerial positions the way will then be paved for others to follow, and that equality can be reached by means of unofficial networking. Women leaders have traditionally been supposed to lack the kind of unofficial networks used by male managers to favour other men. In the victim discourse, the purpose of such networking is exactly the reverse. The discourse implies that women leaders should have and should make use of their mutual networks to favour other women. Hence, the change from the identity of a victim to that of a hero requires unofficial networking, which traditionally has been customary only among male managers. This second type of discursive solution bears some resemblance to the identity of the ‘woman of cunning’ of the patriarchal discourse.
So, we can say that this discourse justifies the use of masculine means by the moral principle of equality.

(iii) A professional discourse

This discourse represents the woman leader as a competent professional. The differences between the genders are dispelled, and no clear comparisons are made between female and male managers. The following statements elucidate the professional discourse.

Statement 10: “Finnish companies have recognized that young multilingual women are good leaders in business with Russia. VR continues its familiar strategy: the person chosen to follow Tiina Mäkinen as head of the firm’s Moscow office is Lea Viinamäki, M.Sc., 33.” (19, TE, 28.1.2000)

Statement 11: “In this branch of business, people are ranked based on their competence, not gender.” (48, KL, 20.4.2000)

In the professional discourse, a woman advancing to a managerial position is not viewed as exceptional nor is her competence called into question. Instead, this discourse builds an identity of the woman leader which denies the importance of gender in career advancement. In other words, the subject of interest is not gender but the leader’s competence and skills. Such an identity construction implies the idea of ‘gender-blindness’ or ‘sameness’, arguing that women and men are alike. This resembles the meritocratic perspective of the woman leader (Alvesson and Billing 1997, Billing and Alvesson 1989), where managers move freely up and down in organizational hierarchy according to their personal merits and their contribution to the company. As a result, organizations are understood as places where the qualifications and competence of individuals are what matters whereas characteristics such as gender are disregarded.

The content of the discussion in this discourse focuses on the financial performance of the company and on the managerial competence required. Moreover, the value of the woman leader is defined through her contribution to the company, and she is positioned as a valuable human resource. She is represented as a qualified and competent instrument for reaching organizational goals, and this competence acts as the means for the potential progress of her career. In this regard, the message of the discourse indicates the potentiality of a change in the woman leader’s status in a career context. However, the discourse does not involve any conscious or open reflection of the dominating masculine value-basis. Hence, subsequent conflicts that are almost always inevitable when we are dealing with multiple discourses remain to be solved.

The main function of the professional discourse is to assure the reader of the importance of the financial success of a firm. The idea of successful performance forms the norm by which the woman leader is evaluated. Consequently, the legitimation of her status is based on financial norms and motives, and the social space for the potentiality of her career progress is expressed with reference to the primary signifier which might be called authorization by financial success.

Since this discourse legitimates the woman leader’s status on the basis of financial and economic values and motives, it appeals to a reader’s economic thinking. Hence, we call the assumed reader ‘an economic reader’. The idea is that it is sensible to utilize the best-qualified human resources regardless of gender and that a full realization of their potential competence is valuable. Correspondingly, we might say that a reader who does not utilize the potential competence available is, her- or himself, subject to being evaluated to be ‘an ignorant reader’. We believe that since most people like to be thought of as ‘sensible’ or, at least, ‘not ignorant’, the legitimation of the woman leader’s career advancement on the basis of economic and financial values can prove to be a powerful tool in social practices. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the power embedded within the discourse is economic and that competence, thus, is subordinated to it.

Discussion and conclusions

The main findings of this study are summarized in Table 1, which also presents the three discourses we detected in the articles, together with the answers they provided to the research questions.
Our results show that the descriptions of the status of women and men leaders are often disproportionate in the articles and appear to favour men and masculinity. The woman leader is mainly seen as a representative of her gender, whereas the man is a ‘neutral’ human being. Fornás (1995), for example, argues that this kind of representation is highly problematic as a way of understanding the genders. It is self-reinforcing, and, thus, difficult to change. According to the discourse analytic approach applied to study the research questions, the discursive representation of the woman leader could either be conventional, locking the concept into a traditional, taken-for-granted meaning, or creative, transforming the meaning of the concept and thereby contributing to a change in the unequal valuation of the masculine and the feminine.

We were unable to find many serious attempts to create alternative or transformative discourses in the studied articles as regards such women’s role models which did not take the masculine as the norm. The articles mostly seemed to lack concepts and ideas which could create a ‘new’ way of representing the woman leader. Such potential discourses were marginalized, whereas the discourses which drew upon masculinity were prioritized. What is important to note is that it was often the interviewed women leaders themselves who presented their career and leadership style in relation to masculine values and norms in the studied articles. We conclude that these texts are, to a great extent, reified in terms of male dominance. This conclusion lends support to the suggestion by Katila and Meriläinen (1999: 171), who argue that one problem in organizational life – in their case, in Finnish academia – is the shortage of female role models and lack of the feminine perspective in the dominant discourse.

The victim discourse is especially paradoxical in its relation to masculine authority. It challenges the male predominance by openly demanding a

Table 1. Summary of the main results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What kind of representations of the woman leader are produced?</th>
<th>Patriarchal discourse</th>
<th>Victim discourse</th>
<th>Professional discourse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A stereotypical and general representative of her gender which is subordinated to masculinity.</td>
<td>A victim in relation to her career advancement. Possibly a potential hero in the future.</td>
<td>A competence and valuable human resource.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the content of the writing?</td>
<td>Different leadership styles.</td>
<td>Equality vs. discrimination between the genders.</td>
<td>Organizational success and a woman leader’s competence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the functions of the writing?</td>
<td>Maintenance of the traditional hierarchical gender division.</td>
<td>Public demand for a change in the existing power relations between the genders.</td>
<td>Assurance of the importance of the woman leader’s competence for a firm’s financial success.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In what ways are these functions promoted?</td>
<td>A woman leader acting as “an iron lady” or “a woman of cunning”.</td>
<td>“Redemption” or unofficial networking of women.</td>
<td>A woman leader showing needed competence that results in success.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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The victim discourse is especially paradoxical in its relation to masculine authority. It challenges the male predominance by openly demanding a
change in the gendered power relations. The contradiction comes from the fact that the desired direction of the change – that is, towards equality – is presented by drawing upon masculine norms and values. In other words, in requesting an increase in the number of women leaders, the discourse offers the masculine way of acting as the solution, as the means to bring about such change. This paradox calls into question the intended emancipatory purpose of the discourse. We conclude that, instead of being transformative, the victim discourse appears to reinforce masculinity as a ‘neutral’ norm. So, the function of this discourse is conflicting; it aims at contributing to a change in power relations, while at the same time it strengthens masculine authority.

Finally, our study shows that one type of discourse, the professional discourse, eschews the question of gender. This view has a potential to contribute to a change in the unequal valuation of the feminine and the masculine in organizational life. However, our results then raise the question of the definition of the concept of competence. We propose that this concept, too, merits more study in the future, particularly from the perspective of gender. It is possible that the discursive construction of competence is transformative in meaning, but it may also be that the definition of the concept, in fact, reproduces masculine authority, locking the competence into a traditional masculine framework.

If we are to develop alternative ways of constructing the woman leader into being, the writing in the business media should opt to test the limits of the current discourses by presenting comments regarded as expressly feminine, instead of taking the masculine as the dominant norm. For example, if top-line leaders interviewed in leading business newspapers or magazines were to declare feminine features, values and behavioural patterns as highly valued and important for their career progress, how would such writing influence the representation of the leader? From the viewpoint of the basic idea of this paper, we feel it important that ‘tests’ like those should indeed be done. Such writing could influence prevailing beliefs and attitudes by bringing new aspects into the discussion and also give us a better understanding of the credible limits of the representation of a feminine orientation in top managerial positions. Moreover, it might, over time, contribute to a transformation of the idea of a leader, that is, of the characteristics by which a leader is defined. Our suggestion puts considerable responsibility not only on researchers but particularly on the female – and also the male – leaders who have the opportunity to speak in the mass media.

References


