

# Gender-based exclusionary practices in performance appraisal

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## Abstract

We examine how performance appraisal is, following Acker, an organisational process producing inequality. By process we mean that appraisal is an on-going and relational year-round practice, enacted through interaction between men and women, rather than a bounded and individualised event. We use Bourdieu's concept of habitus to analyse how masculine domination guides what is presented as a gender-neutral organizational practice. We conducted in-depth interviews at a financial sector organisation in Malta with employees, their direct appraisers and higher-level appraisers. Appraisers measured employees' tangible as well as 'behavioural' performance. We find that the practice of attributing scores to behaviour, and the interaction between men and women, appraisers and appraisees, both reflect and produce women's inferior status. While women concentrated on tangible targets such as sales, male employees and the appraisers focused on soft targets, specifically on socialising with colleagues, which in practice emerged as the key criterion for the behavioural score. We find that male sociality is an organising process that literally devalues women through quantified performance scores. Managerial discretion translates employees' behaviour into a lasting organizational record, contributing a formalised component to the gendered hierarchy.

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## **Introduction**

Organisations which are presumed to be gender neutral are, according to Joan Acker (1990), actually constituted by gendered relations of domination and subordination. These relations are structural, supporting a gendered system which differentiates the rewards and hierarchical position of men and women. This system is fundamentally social in that it is enacted in relational contexts between men and women as individuals and as groups, with interconnections between these levels (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004).

In this article we analyse the gendered workings of a formal system of performance appraisal which has been a central component of performance management (Murphy & Cleveland, 1995; van Wanrooy et al., 2013). The stand-alone and hierarchical appraisal meeting maintains its importance as a management tool even as some employers have shifted to more continuous and more lateral performance management (Bach, 2012) or have moved away from performance appraisal altogether (Cappelli & Tavis, 2016). The use of tools of performance management and appraisal to meet organisational goals can have undesirable effects by undermining employees' wellbeing and how recognised they feel (Tweedie, Wild, Rhodes, & Martinoy-Bennie, 2018). We argue, in addition, that these effects are highly gendered even in a supposedly transparent and formalised appraisal system which is meant to be gender neutral and advancing equality. Van den Brink, Benschop & Jansen (2010: p1460) argue that examining the gender practices of specific actors can uncover how the aims of achieving greater equality through formal transparency fail to deliver in practice.

Previous studies have examined the gendered experiences of performance appraisal at a technical level such as how differences in the content and manner of providing performance feedback to women impede their career advancement, as Bear, Cushenbery, London, & Sherman (2017) summarise. Research on stereotypes shows how unequal appraisal outcomes emanate from the unequal recognition of performance of groups and individuals along gender, race or age lines (Bauer & Baltes, 2002; Roberson, Galvin, & Charles, 2007; Joshi, Son, & Roh, 2015). But research on stereotypes tells us little about how such differences are enacted or produced in organisational processes, a driving force in Joan Acker's (1990; 2006) work, as we set out. Our study differs from previous studies of performance appraisal in its exploration of how the 'process of appraisal' plays out between men and women through their performance of gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

Our interest in process comes from our empirical research in which appraisers and appraisees (those undergoing appraisal) recounted how they act out gendered roles both within the discrete appraisal meeting but also in a continuous process throughout the year. The formal and informal encounters and incidents that occur outside the appraisal meeting are critical because they feed into the formal appraisal outcome. Such encounters enact ideas of how men and women in a heteronormative society and organisation should act as individuals and in relation to one another, based on norms which cross the highly gendered domains of work and home. While pointing to the institutional nature of gendered distinctions, West and Zimmerman (1987) draw to our attention that the interactional validation of gendered distinctions leads to their naturalness and thus invisibility. Our aim is to explore how the appraisal process reinforces and emanates from Acker's gendered hierarchy of organisations and how interaction validates this hierarchy. We ask, how does the evaluation of individuals unfold in the organisational process of performance appraisal in gendered ways?

The article extends our understanding of how gender underpins the evaluation of employees through three contributions. The first is to deepen and widen our insight into the structural ways in which organisations are gendered through the interactions between men and women, the third set of processes that Acker sets out as producing gendered social structures in her 1990 article. She retains this focus in her 2006 article on inequality regimes, theorising that the informal interactions between men and women while doing the work are one of the four organising processes that produce inequality. It is through examining interaction that the organisation's gender subtext is, at least partially, uncovered (Acker, 1990; Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998). Secondly, we explore further how and why women's subordination is an outcome of organisational processes using Bourdieu's theory of masculine domination, which draws on the interrelated concepts of habitus, field and misrecognition (Bourdieu, 2001). We employ Bourdieu's structures of domination to analyse how interaction between men and women reflects the gendered hierarchy, how men understand and play the game to their advantage through their gendered habitus while downplaying women's contributions. Thirdly, we show how managerial discretion in the way the behavioural performance criteria are employed elevates men through gendered practices (Acker) and playing the right game (Bourdieu) in evaluation. We look at how discretion plays out in formal appraisal systems which are meant to be neutral, fair and to reduce prejudice (Reskin, 2000). The metric of male norms reinforces women's inferior hierarchical position (Benschop, 2009), partly through the application of dual standards to men and women (Helgesson & Sjögren, 2019). Furthermore, we show how the act of measuring creates the knowledge that divides the population (Miller & O'Leary, 1987), and orders lower scores for women.

The next section explicates further the conceptual framework based on Acker and Bourdieu. We discuss the empirical setting in the Maltese financial sector and then present our

research methods, followed by the results. Lastly, we discuss our contributions and implications for organisational policy.

## Conceptual framework

### **Acker: Gendered organisational hierarchies**

We pursue the theme of how gender inequality underpins the notion of ‘performance’, a crucial concept in human resource management. In her research, Joan Acker (2006) highlighted that competence involves judgement of who is a ‘high-performing worker’ deserving reward. We aim to explore how employee ‘performance’ and the ‘high-performing worker’ are constructed in the formal organisational procedure of the appraisal meeting and beyond this meeting. Acker (1990; 2006) argued that organisations are structured in ways that are not gender neutral but are based on men’s practices and bodies, which keeps reproducing the superior position of certain types of men in organisational hierarchies. We chose Acker’s theorisation for its focus on the structural and relational processes in organisations. Other perspectives, such as Walby’s gender regimes, operate at a different level in distinguishing how neoliberal and social democratic regimes operate on the basis of gender (Walby, 2020). Acker (2006) is more specific in the organisational context, for example she points out that assessment of ‘competence’ involves judgment, which in western contexts tends to default to the image of the white male worker. In her study of Swedish banks, Acker (2006) specifically points to how the predominantly male managers rewarded male employees using a minor element of managerial discretion in the pay setting arrangement. Discretion increased the gender wage gap even in a setting of union negotiated equal pay (see also Rubery 1995). In recruitment, discretion can operate by playing down male candidates’ flaws relative to the hiring criteria or even present them as an advantage (Van den Brink & Benschop,

2014) while downplaying strengths of female candidates (Van den Brink, Holgersson, Linghag, & Deé, 2016).

Social networks which develop on the basis of homosociality – the preference for being with those of the same gender – seem innocuous until we consider how it enacts power. Power as hegemonic regulation emphasises self-evidence, taken-for-granted understandings brought out through the combination of informal practices and formal rules (Benschop & Doorewaard, 2012). Men comprise the higher-status group by organisational design in Acker's gendered hierarchy. As a group, men act to advantage other men and disadvantage women (Ridgeway, 2006). In consequence men notice less or dismiss information which goes against their existing beliefs, views of male and female status, competence and ensuing rewards (Ridgeway, 1997). Studies uncover how the gendered practices embedded in male sociality valorise what men do and downgrade what women do, resulting in competence judgements that are highly gendered and exclusionary (Holgersson, 2013; Helgesson & Sjögren, 2019).

Across her work, Acker focuses on unpaid work and how men's 'relationships to procreation and paid work are subsumed in the image of the worker' (Acker, 1990: 139). It is not always apparent that men's limited participation in care work is a means of constructing their superior position in the hierarchy, conveyed in the image of the neutral worker and part of the organisation's gender subtext (Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998). In comparison, women's association with care reinforces their subordination, associated with lesser rewards and promotion prospects regardless of whether they are involved in care (Williams, 2001; Crosby, Williams, & Biernat, 2004; Cahusac & Kanji, 2014). Hence, caring traits stereotypically ascribed to women, such as concern for others, emotional sensitivity, affiliative tendencies and deference, are devalued in management (Heilman, 2012). In contrast, men are seen to bear the agentic and achievement-

oriented attributes required for success (Heilman, 2012; Carli & Eagly, 1999). ‘Think manager – think male’ encapsulates this long-held view (Schein & Davidson, 1993) which persists notwithstanding some weakening (Powell & Butterfield, 2015). Such gendered distinctions control how men and women are meant to behave in a heterosexual model, both as individuals and in relation to one another, forming part of the often concealed gendered subtext of organisations (Benschop & Doorewaard, 2012).

Acker’s (1998) view is that organisations actively produce this system, partly through the masculinity they produce. As Acker (1990: p139) argued ‘Some aspects of individual gender identity, perhaps particularly masculinity, are also products of organisational processes and pressures.’ For example, long working hours are a display of masculinity, they are not just about productivity or performance as presenteeism shows (Ely & Meyerson, 2000). Long hours and constant availability are building blocks of the heterosexual ordering, as Liff & Ward’s (2001) study of UK banks found. Furthermore, Acker (2006), drawing on Ely & Meyerson (2000), specifically identified how women, in continuity with heteronormatively ascribed domestic roles, are meant to do ‘the organizational housekeeping’, leaving men free to solve more glorious problems.

In this article we explore how aspects of the gendered organisation become incorporated in the *formal* evaluation processes and protocols of organisations, ultimately leading to unequal quantitative performance scores. The result leaves a lasting imprint on individuals’ careers through employees’ documented record.

We develop our theoretical framework from Acker, integrating aspects of Pierre Bourdieu's work on domination. We use Bourdieu to help us investigate Acker's organising processes that render inequality invisible because they are seen as legitimate, normal and neutral. Thus, performance appraisal might act as one of the controls that prevents protest against experienced inequalities. The deep socialisation of habitus helps us to explore further how what goes on inside the organisation connects to what takes place outside, in line with Acker's theorisation of the processes that create and recreate inequalities.

### **Bourdieu: gendered habitus enacts masculine domination**

In order to understand how appraisal has come to be represented as a 'gender-neutral' practice and how it relates to broader societal norms around gender status, we apply Bourdieu's (1990; 2001) theory of masculine domination to our empirical work. Both Acker and Bourdieu stress that it is through social interaction that inequality is produced. Bourdieu gives us a further way of analysing how, through what is said and retold about the appraisal process, male domination comes to be normalised. Adopting Bourdieu's focus on actors' perspectives helps us understand how employees themselves imbibe gendered notions and enact gender differences. Bourdieu's work guides us to look at the struggle within the field, in this case the financial sector, by examining how employees and managers justify performance on a gendered basis in relation to one another within the specific 'rules of the game'. Constituted by a particular logic and set of rules, the field is the game within which people compete for position and power.

Bourdieu argues that the dominated position of women in society is not natural or biological but is naturalised through our ingrained, gendered vision of the world. Internalised past conditions or experiences form the *habitus*, generating an actor's thoughts and behaviours in new



situations, rooted in the person's social position (Bourdieu, 1984). Gendered habitus socialises people into unequal power relations based on a broadly dichotomous representation of gender. Men's superiority, in turn, diminishes the value of women's activities and bodies, dominating without force, through the 'symbolic violence', which denies women recognition (Bourdieu, 2001). Gender unequal relations continuously reproduce themselves through tacit exclusionary practices (Wacquant, 2011), concealed because they appear natural (Bourdieu, 1986).

Hierarchies in organisations are often accepted by women and men alike on the basis that they reflect merit, competence or seniority. Using Bourdieu, we can add that this happens without participants recognising that such hierarchies are also terrains of 'symbolic violence' which dominate women and obscure the real requirements of advancement. In acting within social fields, people draw on their habitus and their 'connaissance' (James, 2015), that is their knowledge of how things are done. This does not simply mean they have (superior) knowledge, but they have what Bourdieu called a 'feel for the game' (Bourdieu, 1990: 52). They implicitly understand the unwritten rules in a given field. Dominated groups 'misrecognise' the terms of the field's social hierarchy and how 'the rules of the game' reproduce their own subordination. Thus, individual women may not fully perceive that they are dominated, and even consent because domination is deeply embedded in social structures and in their own worldview.

For Bourdieu the gendered habitus—gendered views and behaviours — is transposable, meaning people carry their habitus with them across settings (Sallaz & Zavisca, 2007); in our study habitus crosses home and work domains. More generally, male breadwinners work the longest paid hours of all workers (author citation), while having a husband who works long hours increases a woman's probability of quitting her job (Cha, 2010). In addition, male breadwinners have been found to view the presence of women in the workplace unfavourably (Desai, Chugh, & Brief,

2014). Even in a comparatively egalitarian Sweden, managers are more likely to be male breadwinners while higher-level selection committees prefer male candidates to be married (Holgersson, 2013).

### **Empirical case: gender relations in Malta**

Our aim is to make visible these gendered expectations in the financial industry in Malta, a traditionally patriarchal and self-contained society. This setting helps focus our analysis of performance appraisal on gender, while the research remains applicable across contexts. Gendered habitus is evident in Malta, in that only 5% of CEO-level officers are female (European Commission, 2016) and only 2.1% of board members in listed companies are women, placing Malta last among the EU's 28 members (European Commission, 2014b). Gender inequality in organisations is evident in women's lesser likelihood of promotion (Falzon, 2006; NCPE, 2006; Mercieca, 1999). The male breadwinner model is strong, as illustrated by the unacceptability of women earning more than a male partner. Falzon (2006) argues that in Malta men's income is viewed as necessary and women's as facilitating luxuries. Two-thirds of couples have either a male sole or main provider (European Commission, 2014a).

It is perhaps surprising that overall, men and women are equally represented in the Maltese financial sector; this is potentially due to the type of work (NSO, 2018). The effects of performance appraisal differ considerably by the context and gender composition of the environment (Joshi, Son and Roh, 2015). The Maltese financial sector provides an interesting context of equal gender representation in the sector, against the backdrop of societal gender inequality.

## Research methods

The site of the research is a large Maltese financial organisation. Notably, there are equal shares of male and female workers but men dominate the higher-level positions in line with the rest of the Maltese banking sector. The institution had been using the performance appraisal system for twelve years at the time of the study. Internal documentation stated that the performance appraisal outcome determined employee progression. The organisation publicises that it has achieved the Equality Mark, which awarded under a voluntary scheme set up by the National Committee for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE), which suggests the motivation to pursue gender equality policies. The overall gender balance and a recognised diversity policy make the organisation a particularly relevant case to examine how the appraisal process can nonetheless lead to gender inequality.

Performance appraisal consisted of an annual meeting between appraiser and appraisee. The confirming appraiser, who was at a higher level in the organisation than the direct appraiser, examined all performance appraisal reports, and adjusted the final score if it was considered necessary. We conducted semi-structured interviews (with approval from the authors' university ethics review committee) to draw out the experience of appraisal, instead of focusing on and analysing the appraisal forms. We expected that gender inequality emerges in the relations between individuals involved in the appraisal process, so we included the perspectives of groups participating in the appraisal from different positions: men and women; appraisees and the two levels of appraisers. In our relational approach to appraisal, we took into account that actors reflect on how other actors see them and what they expect from them. For example, appraisees might have views on how appraisers see their actions.

Of our total 29 interviews, 21 were conducted with employees undergoing appraisal (appraisees) and 8 with different levels of appraisers. Appraisers and appraisees were not necessarily matched to one another. Appraisees, some of whom were relatively senior, were interviewed at different departments in head office and in branches: customer care (7), investments (5), loans (4), marketing (1), branch network (4). Appraisers came from customer care (2), investments (3), loans (1) and branches (2). It was common for employees to transfer between functions so that several staff had experience of working in multiple areas; this helped broaden the interpretation of our interview data. We interviewed 11 female and 10 male employees, 2 female and 4 male direct appraisers, 1 female (the only woman at this level) and 1 male confirming appraiser. Interviews were conducted in two stages. One of the authors, who was on long-term leave from the institution at the time of research, recruited participants at work events over a two-month period. She selected respondents to fulfil set criteria, such as being full-time employees, having experience as an appraiser and gender balance in the sample. The interviews took place off-premises in a room hired by the interviewer. After analysing the first set of interviews with the employees, the 'direct' and 'confirming' appraisers were interviewed.

Interviews were conducted in Maltese, transcribed verbatim and then coded through thematic analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In the analysis we brought together related codes in themes. There were general predefined themes such as appraisers' criteria for 'high performers', and employees' reactions to appraisal comments and scores. Higher-level themes emerged in the coding process. For example, teamwork and socialising were used interchangeably, and frequently cross-referenced across interviews; they were brought together as a theme. We compared responses from appraisers and appraisees to try to understand if position in the hierarchy was

associated with differing viewpoints, which would provide insight into how power operates across the hierarchy.

The interviews made us revisit the notion of the annual performance appraisal as an event. Although our questions asked about appraisal as a specific, formal meeting, respondents constantly referred to situations and events that happened earlier. The interviewees referred to some events which came up in the appraisal meeting and to other incidents which happened at other times, as interpretations for why they evaluated someone or were evaluated by someone in a certain way. The fact that ongoing situations are central to the event called appraisal led us to reconceptualise annual appraisal as an ongoing process leading up to the event of formal review.

Interviewees brought up the definition of the ‘high performer’, which we probed further by questions that explored which performance criteria the company values, how these criteria relate to the gendering of work, and whether male and female employees felt that women were treated differently during the performance appraisal process. We did not examine archival data, but several interviewees showed the interviewer their performance appraisal forms.

## **Results: Detecting inequality regimes through formal evaluation**

One of our aims was to understand what ‘high performance’ means, particularly in relation to when and how it was applied to women. Higher performers were created through the ‘forced distribution’ system which requires some employees to receive lower ratings to achieve overall a normal distribution of marks. As Katrina explains,

‘On a very recent occasion, I was given very low marks, that is 3 [ratings from 1-5]. For me, it was low because I was expecting a better mark considering that all the tangible goals [sales] were above 3. When I asked for an explanation, they [the appraisers] told me that they couldn’t give me a better mark because the HR department says that in [my] particular department, for example, three people must achieve over 360, two people over 380 and one over 400. So, if you deserve that mark, you can’t have it, because it is already allocated to someone else.’

Regardless of their performance, some employees can only be awarded the marks that are still ‘available’ or, at least, this was the explanation offered to Katrina. We go on to show how this differentiation takes place in gendered ways in the following four sections.

### **Distinguishing ‘high performers’ based on the key dimension of teamwork**

First, appraisers highlighted *socialising* as the dimension of performance which distinguishes ‘high performers’ (Acker, 1990). The performance appraisal form, the basis for the performance appraisal, is divided into two main parts: ‘technical task performance’ and ‘behavioural performance’, with a subordinated third part for customer care. ‘Technical task performance’ relates to the banking business of producing goods and services, selling investment products and loans; it accounts for 40% of the overall rating, while ‘customer service’ accounts for 20%. These two categories were referred to as ‘tangible tasks’ which are more readily quantifiable, through loan sales, customer usage of products and impact on financial performance. In contrast, behavioural performance was often termed ‘interpersonal tasks’. Within the behavioural section, the form listed team spirit, flexibility, personal effectiveness, commitment to excellence, drive and

innovation as separate items, all measured on an ascending scale of 1-5. Teamwork was not listed as a separate item on the standard appraisal form, although one confirming appraiser had added it using her discretion. Yet interviewees, appraisers and appraisees alike, almost unanimously named teamwork as the key criterion in practice. This finding illustrates the importance of focusing on appraisal practice, which may not adhere strictly to the form.

Officially, the behaviour section accounted for 40% of the overall rating but the interviews show how that it drives the overall score. Appraisers use the behaviour section to ‘rebalance’ scores on the objective section. Two appraisers explicitly say that for them the behaviour section is more important than its numerical percentage. For appraiser Luke the behaviour section is ‘number one’ and more important because ‘behaviour affects production’. He does not explain how, and he seems to value the potential for performance more than actual measured sales performance, illustrating how appraisers work their subjective weighting into the final score. Given the importance of the behavioural component to appraisers, its definition is consequential. Stephen, confirming appraiser for the past four years, and previously a direct appraiser, offers his understanding of the behaviour criterion:

‘I think although behaviour is subjective, you can still see it. Sometimes it is more difficult for the people being appraised. For me, your behaviour is your attitude to work. Attitude is very important for me.’

Thus, this appraiser’s personal view is that behaviour can be assessed objectively by the employee’s ‘attitude’. He does not question further the objectivity or fairness of ‘seeing’ or measuring attitude, treating his subjective view as objective.

Among the criteria for assessing behaviour, appraisers and those undergoing appraisal invariably single out teamwork as key for ‘high performers’. Respondents frequently use the terms ‘teamwork’ and ‘socialising’ interchangeably as the key aspect of behavioural performance, although socialising is not specified as a criterion on the form. When asked further, both appraisers and appraisees stress that teamwork is assessed by participation in social activities outside working hours. For appraisal, teamwork is thus synonymous with socialising rather than with any measure of what had collectively been produced by working together.

Accordingly, Joseph, who had been a direct appraiser for 11 years, clearly states that he distinguishes high performers from low performers in the behaviour section by whether employees attend and organise after-hours social events. Joseph links after-work activities to hard work: ‘a hard-worker for me is someone who organises after-work activities in *his* own time’ (emphasis added). In this context, socialising cannot be considered as discretionary or distinct from formal work. A person has to be seen to organise after-work events to be categorised as a high performer. The resulting extended hours do not seem to be directly about productivity but are more in line with disadvantaging women.

### **Appraiser ratings devalue women through gendered habitus**

Second, we examine whether and how appraisers act within their gendered habitus – highly gendered ways of thinking and being that span both work and home life. We observe a sequence of informal criteria by which women’s performance falls short of the ‘high performer’. This exemplifies what Bourdieu calls ‘symbolic violence’, whereby women’s inferior position is maintained through rational justifications.



Perceptions of family obligations attract lower behavioural scores for women. Stephen and many other appraisers draw on male breadwinner beliefs to associate only women with family responsibilities, implicitly marking how their lower status spans home and work. Speaking about socialising after hours, he insists that absence from activities equates to weak teamwork performance:

‘If in terms of teamwork I can never find you [when I need you], so I can’t reward you if I never find you. But you may tell me, ‘I have a family’. Heck, I am very sorry, I ask you for flexibility because then it is not fair to a person who has a hobby and *he* is always there.’

(emphasis added)

Stephen places family responsibility and hobbies as equivalent lifestyle choices. That these are gendered choices is evident in his use of the pronoun ‘he’ to describe the person who has a hobby but still participates in the social activity. Other appraisers and employees used the female pronoun to describe employees who are absent from social activities, specifically linking their absence to motherhood.

Some men recognised that family responsibility only affects women negatively in performance appraisal. For example, Andre, employed in the organisation for 11 years, revealed the contrast in organisational meaning between being a father and being a mother:

‘There are some targets that can’t be achieved because of the appraisee’s role in society as a mummy.’

Earlier biographical questions had brought out that Andre had a six-year-old boy:

Researcher: ‘You are a working dad. Is that the same thing?’

Andre: 'No, because I have my wife who takes care of my son. I am like a bachelor.'

Andre reported that fatherhood hardly impacts his work or performance appraisal evaluation. The social construction of the 'breadwinner father' spans both work and family life rendering Andre as a bachelor, even when he is not.

Male employees did not notice women's attendance at after-hours social events, but the majority of women reported they did attend. Their physical presence was insufficient for them to be noticed: they told us they still received poor behavioural scores. Tacit factors such as their comportment during these activities could lower their behavioural scores. For example, although Emma is a mother, she attends activities regularly. She provides an example where male colleagues are not competing with her in terms of hours, but in terms of male sociality.

'Once I had an experience. We were three relationship officers; the other two had good [behavioural] marks and I got a low mark. I do not talk that much. The other two are male, both full-time and do no overtime. We all go to activities, but they are more social than me in these activities.'

She explains that the other colleagues make jokes and are generally good entertainers, and she suspects that they are rewarded on this basis. Both appraisers and employees mention the importance of likeability, and Guido's comment illustrates its power: 'My character is a bit entertaining. The feedback I receive from my Executive Head is 'it would be nice to have four more like you'.'

Women could be excluded at social events if they talked about unfavourably evaluated topics such as family issues. Katrina explains:

‘For example, appraisers who do not have kids or family responsibilities do not want to hear about these issues and this leads to “klikkek” [cliques] forming.’

Katrina went on to say that being part of the *klikkek*, the in-groups around appraisers, is necessary to be a high performer. Mothers who are not strategic in hiding their motherhood, face exclusion.

In sum, women’s attendance at the social events deemed vital for high performance was insufficient for attaining high behavioural scores. The male participants and the appraisers, through their gendered habitus, do not notice female employees.

### **Having a ‘feel for the game’: men’s social activities translated into performance**

Third, we show how male sociality is rewarded in behavioural appraisal scores, which systematically favour men over women. Bourdieu argues that members of the dominant (masculine) group seem to know how the field works, understand its unspoken rules and thus how to succeed. Most male appraisees said they were always satisfied with their behavioural scores, linking these high scores to attending or organizing social activities. In contrast, women talked about, but could not really understand, their low behavioural scores, consistent with Bourdieusian ‘misrecognition’. Female appraisees expressed frustration but could not pinpoint the cause of their dissatisfaction.

We look at how the two parts of the appraisal form (tangible sales targets and behavioural criteria) seem to be played off against each other, with different gendered outcomes. During the interviews it became clear that women had focused on completing their sales tasks well, incorrectly assuming their behavioural mark would follow. As Emma illustrates,

‘In a particular year, in sales I achieved a mark of 4 [out of 5], however the appraiser still gave me a low mark [as an overall final mark]. He did not give me a 4, because in the end he amended the behaviour section and adjusted it as he wanted... because the manager can play with numbers there...’

Jessica relates a similar experience: ‘Even if my tangible goals were all above 4, the low [behavioural] mark of 2 lowered my overall mark.’ Emma and Jessica’s comments concur with most women interviewees.

At the outset of the interviews, women did not make a specific connection between their low scores and socialising, but they sensed some disadvantage. They stated there were expectations around socialising but felt they could not perform to these expectations, even if they attended the social events. Some of the female interviewees began to question during the interviews whether they were being treated equally to their male colleagues in the appraisal as they knew that men achieved better evaluations which translated into higher scores.

Male employees demonstrate their understanding of the rules of the game by building advantage through social activity. Otaner, another long-time male employee, illustrates how these practices are exclusionary:

‘Three times a week we [Otaner and his male confirming appraiser] go out together after working hours to watch a football match and have a good laugh together without mentioning work.’

As he specifically excludes work from this activity, it is hard to reconcile with Stephen’s previous comment that social activities are evidence of hard work. These outings are part of the game, as is evidenced by the way they support career advancement:

Otaner: 'PA ratings were always awarded in the right way and I was happy. Sometimes I was also awarded 5 marks [5 out of 5] in the behaviour criteria.'

Researcher: 'Who was the appraiser?'

Otaner: 'One of the appraisers, we discussed football together. Hahahaha and we used to go for dinner as a male group.'

Otaner specifically names the male group and ties rewards to male sociality. Adherence to the dominant model of masculinity qualifies men for the game, as we show in a later section.

### **Adjusting the behavioural score (to counterbalance the tangible sales score)**

Michael shows how socialising can protect men from personal factors, which might undermine their performance ratings:

'Socialising and talking about common interests affects the PA system. If you are a manager's friend, this has an influence for sure. It helps even when you talk with your manager about your personal things, because you may be justified for the action you have taken.'

He explains that a personal issue had prevented him achieving his sales target, but his appraiser adjusted his behaviour score to give him an above average mark overall. Interestingly, personal matters can be spoken about between men, whereas, women should not discuss family matters in socialising events, as we have seen. Michael's statement reveals his knowledge (connaissance in Bourdieu's terms) of what the game is and how to play it.

There were other examples of male respondents stating they had received higher ratings in the behaviour section, which were not matched by their performance on the tangible sales measures. We did not observe a similar adjustment of the behavioural score for women when they failed to achieve their technical targets. We can contrast this handling of men's personal issues with how appraisers disqualify women on the basis of family responsibility.

### **Sociability off the books affecting the appraisal**

Women's difficulties in achieving high ratings on sociability are illustrated further by the role of social events from which they are excluded. There was understanding within the organisation that informal socialising after work can feed unfair performance ratings so officially at least it was not allowed. Michael's quote shows how men disregarded the issue:

'A particular branch manager used to emphasise that these things [informal outings with appraisers] are not allowed. If this goes on now, I do not know about it. It could do. But he [the appraiser] emphasised. "Now if you want to go out with Frans [fictitious name], don't say it".'

Our study did not find any women participating in, or organising, these informal social activities in contrast to the formal social activities.

In sum, the women try to play the game of performance based on hard performance targets, such as sales and contribution to financial performance, which they perceive reflects merit. They misrecognise the game, which is about acceptable socialising, defined by male habitus and exemplified by going out with male colleagues, being entertaining, not talking about family and

having the right hobbies and interests. Even when women are present and engage, they cannot contribute to this homosociality, which is what is valued and formally appraised as valuable work.

## **Exceptions that strengthen the rule: subordinated men, satisfied women**

Fourth, the terms on which inclusion takes place are illustrated by the exceptions to the general rule, that is where men are excluded or women are included. Taking the case of male exclusion, the rather coercive nature of socialising is apparent from the negative evaluations received by the minority of men who do not conform to the interests of their appraiser – the more powerful party in the relationship. Andrew, who was an animal rights activist, explains that during a period of eleven years he had always been rated very well in the behaviour section, except during two consecutive years, when his confirming appraiser was an active hunter:

‘Although we talk openly about our differences, yes, there is a personal influence that we can’t do anything about, which I can’t deny. This was related to a hobby, which I see in one way and he [the confirming appraiser] sees in another way. It was a hot potato, a hot argument which was raised frequently. When I try to see what has gone so wrong, I can’t find anything else, because I always worked that way and it was effective, so 100 percent it was that issue.’

Andrew attributes his poor performance appraisal ratings under this particular appraiser to their difference in views, since his measurable technical performance was unchanged.

A minority (2 out of 11) of female employees interviewed achieved high scores in the behavioural section and expressed corresponding satisfaction. These were Pamela, a young, single woman, and Laura, a mother of two whose relative looks after her children – women who are able to put aside the ‘problem’ of family more evidently than some others. Both attend and organize social activities regularly after work. Laura says, ‘I organise the location, collect the money, do whatever is needed to organise such social activities.’ Her understanding of the importance of her



social role compared to her work duties is reflected in her statement 'I dedicate myself to these outings'. Pamela similarly likes to organise and attend, adding 'I always go'. These women who received high behavioural scores not only attend the social events but also organise them, whereas the other women only attend the events without organizing them. These two women fulfil a different social function from the dominant, rewarded males who are entertaining and 'likeable'. Laura and Pamela fulfil the stereotyped gender role of caring, by setting up the event, as Laura's quote shows and that is the basis on which they are noticed.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

Our research makes visible how women's lower hierarchical ordering in the organisation is often concealed as part of the gender subtext. The structural inequality is quantified in lower scores for women in a formal evaluation system which is purported to be a gender-neutral. Some well-studied aspects of exclusionary gender practices, such as men's social networks (Helgesson & Sjögren, 2019; Holgersson, 2013) and women's inability – sometimes perceived and sometimes actual – to participate in long hours or after-work events directly feed into what employees say about the formal appraisal process. It was not that actual time on the job was necessary for performance on sales, but the perception of availability was tied to the perception of commitment (see Liff & Ward, 2001).

The study's results lead to three key contributions. First, we apply Acker's (1990) conceptualisation of the gendered hierarchy to a core HRM practice, showing that the formal, supposedly neutral process of performance appraisal is not neutral but keeps perpetuating women's structurally inferior position. We analyse through Bourdieu how this inequality, particularly in relation to male socialising, emanates from male and female employees' gendered habitus and is enacted through both formal and informal interactions between men and women, part of Acker's (2006) organising processes (see Healy et al., 2019 for further explanation).

We distinguish four means of creating and recreating the gendered hierarchy. First, a forced distribution necessitates identifying high and low-scoring performers, regardless of actual performance. Second, lower behavioural scores for women's family responsibilities are justified by the way men talk about women's association with caring tasks, which brings out the heterosexual aspects of this ordering (Acker, 1990; 2006). Third, achieving high scores on the

behavioural ‘socialising’ criteria seems unattainable for women, in contrast to the ways in which men’s lower ‘hard’ sales performance are compensated. Finally, women inadvertently reproduce this ordering, pursuing the hard sales targets because they believe this constitutes performance, a case of ‘misrecognition’.

By analysing what both appraisers and the people they evaluate say about the appraisal process, we show, following Bourdieu, how male superiority is naturalised for all participants and how women fail to recognise the nature of the ‘game’ that is being played out through the scores which are integral to performance appraisal (de Nisi & Smith, 2014). Women’s perceived invisibility at social events, and their real difficulties attending, were used to justify their lower behavioural, and thus overall performance, and this was considered an acceptable outcome of mothers’ (in particular) inferior status (Crosby, Williams & Biernat, 2004; Cahusac & Kanji, 2014; Liff & Ward, 2001). Women misrecognised that performance is a ‘game’ defined by socialising in the behavioural criteria. They express frustration at not scoring highly despite working hard and achieving on ‘objective’ measures. This ‘misrecognition’ of the implicit rules, in Bourdieu’s terms, sustains the performance appraisal system, which research shows has to be accepted as fair to be sustainable (Murphy & Cleveland, 1995). Meanwhile, in terms of recognition, the men know the right game is socialising in after-work events with other men. Appraisers also seem to rate men’s competence highly on the basis of homosociality, that is liking other men. Van den Brink and Benschop’s (2014) study of academic promotions finds that male gatekeepers trust in the potential of male faculty on the basis of similarity. Even if women recognised sociality as the basis of being a ‘high performer’, they would still not be able to perform on this criterion which feeds their confusion, or rather their misrecognition, about how to advance.

Ironically, the men ‘play’ a more communal game than the women, although stereotypes paint women as communal. In fact, women become individualised subjects of quantitative measures. Men maintain the frequency of communication with supervisors, which leads to higher performance ratings (Kacmar et al., 2003) and men are privileged in informal networking, which opens the way to promotion as Liff & Ward’s (2001) study found. However, it is not just socialising but the quality of socialising that matters: men were expected to share interests and views with appraisers and to be entertaining to enhance their appraisal score.

Our second contribution pertains to the in-depth understanding of how managerial discretion widens gender inequality. As Acker and others have shown through empirical research, assessments of competence are not neutral (Acker, 1990; 2006; Van den Brink, Benschop, & Jansen, 2010; Van der Brink et al, 2016). We find that formalised and form-based appraisal incorporates discretion, translating behaviour into gendered scores on the basis of men’s socialising, liking one another and participating in the right activities. Our research highlights these specific ways in which managerial discretion translates into lower scores for women. The previously observed reluctance of managers to call out low performance (Bach, 2012) applies differentially to men and women. In our study, in the behaviour section of the appraisal form, the criterion that carried most weight with appraisers was teamwork, which appraisers conflated with male sociability. In practice behaviour, which involves discretion, outweighs hard sales targets in determining the final score. Appraisers tend to believe that certain types of men are the high performers, because their superiority in the gendered hierarchy fuels such beliefs. The emphasis on behaviour systematically favours men over women, as appraisers reproduce their gendered habitus through unequal scores.

Normalising the ‘unencumbered worker’ through employee scoring has material consequences for women and men who do not conform to the (male) ideal worker. Even when women attend events, their presence and willingness to put work before other duties and responsibilities are not seen by their male colleagues and appraisers. Partly women are not seen because of normative social roles. As Acker (2006) points out, drawing on Kanter’s work, in most workplaces, women and men are expected to behave in heterosexually appropriate ways. Kanter referred to how women were seen by men as the ‘office wife’. Similarly, in our study women are only accepted in the social events when they organise them or collect the money for them. Thus men and women are forced into a heterosexual organising principle which Acker (2006) sees as central to the inequality regime.

Third, our exploration of how management discretion operates in practice relates to wider issues of diversity management in organisations. First, appraisers may develop criteria, in this case teamwork/socialising, which are not necessarily or fully reflected on the appraisal form itself. This points to the need for further research on appraisal in practice, and on the accountability of appraisers. Second, a clear impediment to achieving diversity within organisations is that managerial discretion may be translated into harder-to-dispute, quantified scores. This quantified discretion, through in-group socialising, relegates women to be the lower performers in the forced distribution. The paradox is that behaviour assessment seems to be at the individual level (which as we noted is problematic in relation to teamwork) but rewards are meted by gender group membership and conformity to gendered norms.

For diversity policies in the workplace, our research suggests that the increasing use of behavioural assessment may not remedy the shortcomings of assessment based on objective criteria, at least in terms of gender. Behavioural assessment is becoming more prevalent in human

resource management (Bach, 2012), while recent work in economics ties ‘social skills’ to productive teamwork and to organisational rewards (Deming, 2017), with limited consideration of how exactly social skills contribute to teamwork, and which skills are important for the business. The perception of social skills and their translation into scores, as our work illustrates, is highly gendered. Based on our research, we can only conclude that appraisal is not an arms-length, discreet evaluation, but is based on the ongoing relationships between employees and managers, a situation that will only be strengthened by the move towards ‘continuous’ performance appraisal, a newer trend.

The broader insight for gendered organisations is that performance appraisal is a means of hierarchically ordering individuals who are working at the same level, and this ordering reproduces various sources of inequality. In line with research on the quantification of individual performance, high performance must be the exception when performance is conceptualised as a normally distributed variable (Miller & O’Leary, 1987). Women were systematically channelled into being lower performers, making space for men to be high performers. Other groups, especially those at the intersections of different forms of inequality, could be ordered in a similarly unequal way through this mechanism. Thus, our research underlines the social-relational context of appraisal: individuals are evaluated not only relative to targets but also relative to others in the population, in part through their interaction, as part of a classifying and ordering system. Within the hierarchically ordered organisation, appraisal transforms the notion of individual merit into disadvantage based on group membership.

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