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## Gender Relations and Identity at Work: A Case Study of Masculinities and Femininities in an Advertising Agency

Mats Alvesson<sup>1,2</sup>

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The paper explores gender relations and gender identity, based upon an ethnography of a Swedish advertising agency. The organization is of special interest as it has a strong gender division of labor, where men hold all senior posts, at the same time as creative advertising work seems to have much more similarity with what gender studies describe as “femininity” rather than with forms of “masculinity.” The paper discusses how gender is constructed in an organizational context. Emphasis on workplace sexuality is related to identity work of men in response to the highly ambiguous and contested context of advertising work. Tendencies toward the “feminization” of the work and client relationships put some strain on (gender) identity for men, triggering a structuring of gender relations and interaction at the workplace to restore feelings of masculinity. The paper problematizes ideas of masculinities and femininities and argues for a rethinking of their roles in nonbureaucratic organizations. Also assumptions about a close connection between domination of masculinity and of males are critically discussed.

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**KEY WORDS:** advertising agencies; gender; femininity; masculinity; organization; sexuality; work.

### INTRODUCTION

Research on gender and organization has only recently been established as an important research field. Against traditionally gender-blind—alleged gender-neutral—ways of understanding organizations and organizational behavior, gender relations have been presented as a central aspect of the functioning of businesses and workplaces. The gender division

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of labor—including the tendency for men to monopolize higher, privileged posts, while women are frequently overrepresented on lower organizational levels—has become apparent as the gender dimension is increasingly seen as an important part of organizational life (Calás & Smircich, 1991, 1992a, 1996; Cockburn, 1991; Ferguson, 1984; Gherardi, 1995; Hearn & Parkin, 1983; Kanter, 1977; Marshall, 1984 Mills & Tancred, 1992).

Conceptions about the historically situated social construction of gender have partially replaced previous dominant ideas about the men and women as being more or less ready produced and thus unitary and fixed—by early socialization, biology, or uniform macro structural forces—and as being in possession of more or less distinct forms of subjectivity (values, self-understanding, ways of thinking, and feeling). Social constructivist ideas point toward the need for graded studies of the processes which create gender, including gendered forms of subjectivity. From the point of view of organization theory variation in terms of organizations, including level and function, occupation, and industry (field) appear to be important to study (Billing & Alvesson, 1994). Acker (1992) proposes the study of gendered processes where the “the advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine” (p. 251).

Complexity and variation speak for the study of workplaces at a certain depth, i.e., closeness to the processes and cultural manifestations which create gender and gender relations. This paper reports on some results from an ethnography of a workplace—a Swedish advertising agency. This case may be a good example of qualified (professional) service work. The study shows how efforts to secure an occupational identity for males interact with gender division of labor and workplace level constructions of gender.

It is argued that masculinities and femininities do not form simple patterns of domination and subordination, but interact in more complex ways. The organization studied corresponds well with what is conventionally—also by feminists—understood as feminine values, principles, and characteristics, e.g., intuitive, emotionally governed work, close friendship relations at the workplace, absence of extensive hierarchy, limited space for careerism, etc. (Cockburn, 1991; Ferguson, 1984; Marshall, 1993). These values coexisted with a strong vertical gender division of labor and difficulties for women to attain and function in leading positions. It is suggested that strongly gendered positions, relations, and interactions may be seen as primarily men’s responses to the identity problems of work with an ambiguous content and tendencies to “demasculinize,” perhaps even “feminize” certain occupations, tasks, and organizations. *I argue that basic ideas about masculinity and its role in domination need to be rethought, at*

*least in those, perhaps increasingly common, contexts where organizational contingencies do not facilitate its success.* This is arguably the case not only in traditionally female occupations such as nursing and elementary teaching (Williams, 1993) but also in certain modern sectors of business and working life (Gherardi, 1995), for example, in some knowledge-intensive and innovative sectors. Here, there may be limited space for employment of many of the traditionally used sources of male power and male identity associated with bureaucracy and rationality. New discourses advocated by management theorists as well as by corporate practitioners instead construct work and organizations in terms of creativity, intuition, flexibility, flattened hierarchy, social interaction, team-building, etc. (Alvesson, 1993b; Fondas, 1997). This may open up the workplace for female employees (Blomqvist, 1994), but may also trigger complex and contradictory gender dynamics.

## ORGANIZATION AND GENDER: A THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

### Understanding Gender

Within gender research over time, there has been a development from having operated with gender as something simple and unambiguous—a one variable added to others—to being looked upon as something fairly complex, dynamic, and ambiguous (Calás & Smircich, 1992b, 1996; Harding, 1987). This development is partly associated with the rise of postmodernism/poststructuralism (Nicholson, 1990; Lemert, 1992). Conceptions such as men and women, male and the female are seen increasingly as ambiguous and floating (Calás & Smircich, 1992a,b; Flax, 1987; Fraser & Nicholson, 1988; Weedon, 1987, etc). Gender is seen by many researchers as a social and linguistic construction, as a nonstable social meaning ascribed to the male and female. Women, femininity, and female experiences are, for example, understood as constituted and open rather than as robust unities. According to this approach, experiences are not associated with the whole, coherent person, but are, in the case of gender themes, constituted through the discursive invocation of a person as a “man” or as a “woman.” Instead “gender-differentiated practices depend on the circulation between subjectivities and discourses which are available” (Hollway, 1984, p. 252). This approach leads to questions like: What is defined as being male and female in local situations? What do such definitions mean in connection with the functioning and handling of the workforce in organizations? How do gender discourses and relations influence organizations and how do organizations construct gender? Perhaps the most important aspect is that definite, final answers are not possible. Historically conscious, local theories are emphasized over universal theory. Diversity is

emphasized. Class, race, sexual orientation, age, family situation, national and regional conditions, life style, and personal interests may be seen as vital sources of differentiation (Chafetz, 1989). Sometimes universal concepts such as men, women, male, female, gender identity, and reproduction are problematized because they tend to indicate a false unity (Fraser & Nicholson, 1988). As Gergen (cited in Gherardi, 1995, p.108) writes, “a once obdurate and unquestionable fact of biological life—that there are two sexes, male and female—now moves toward mythology.” This paper also follows this unorthodox, perhaps provocative, way of reasoning, through questioning some established views on masculinity and femininity and their relationship with males and females.

### **Masculinities, Femininities, and Identity**

Gender relations influence the fundamental functioning of organizations and our general way of thinking about aim, rationality, values, leadership, and so on (Calás & Smircich, 1992a,b; Martin, 1990). One may talk of a gendered-organizations perspective rather than a gender-in-organizations approach (Hall, 1993). Gender can work as perspective or metaphor (inspiration for a set of metaphors) for the organizational understanding (Billing & Alvesson, 1994; Gherardi, 1995). A significant element here is to investigate how organizational structures, processes, and practices—material, behavioral, relational, ideational, and discursive—may be viewed as (culturally understood as) masculine and, perhaps often less salient, feminine. Gendering organizations usually means paying attention to how they are dominated by culturally masculine meanings. Masculinity is a vague concept, but can be defined as values, experiences, and meanings that are culturally interpreted as masculine and typically feel “natural” for or are ascribed to men more than women in the particular cultural context. It makes sense here to recognize the variety of masculinities, avoid single masculine-feminine scales (Connell, 1987) and talk about “multiple masculinities” (Collinson & Hearn, 1994; Connell, 1993). Variation between different classes, nations, occupations, ages, organizations, and ethnic groups is pronounced. Some authors talk about hegemonic masculinity, associated with culturally dominating cultural forms and expressions (Connell, 1993). Some forms of working class masculinity may, for example, be quite antagonistic to management and white-collar work, which is perceived as nonmasculine (Collinson, 1988; Leidner, 1991). Having said this, we must be aware of risks of developing a new masculinity for every group of men we want to address, thus treating the diversity as “a well-stocked supermarket” (Morgan, 1992, p. 45).

There are considerable problems when talking about and identifying masculinities and femininities. How should the concepts be related to physical males/females? Some authors believe that the concept of masculinity “may be thought of as representing the discourses and practices which indicate that someone is a man, a member of a category” (Collinson & Hearn, 1994, p. 6), and that it means “individual signs and institutional indications that this is a male” (Hearn, 1993, p. 151, see also Morgan, 1992). Another version is to relate the concept more loosely to physical gender (sex) and view it as applicable also to “nonsexual” phenomenon (e.g., nuclear power may be seen as a masculine technology irrespective of the number of females working with it or politically supporting it) and to both sexes. When Collinson and Hearn (1994) talk about the “highly masculine values of individualism, aggression, competition, sport, and drinking” (p. 4) they are clearly referring to values on which males have no monopoly, unless one defines a male as someone that scores high on these values and disregards anatomy. A particular problem with the concepts of masculinities and femininities is that they easily draw upon as well as (re)produce cultural stereotypes. We cannot take it for granted that the values mentioned are alien to most women. Studies of all-female shopfloors suggest that women often swear and participate in aggressive and sexualized forms of behavior (reviewed by Collinson & Hearn, 1994). One may, of course, say that they are “masculine” or express “masculine” behavior, but the point of using this concept is, arguably, that it is, in a particular cultural context, more typical for and appealing to men than women. Otherwise, these concepts become too researcher-driven and too insensitive to cultural context—to the native’s point of view. Arguably we should allow some decoupling of masculinity and (biological) men. It may be debatable whether referring to “the feminist male” or “the homosexual male identity” as forms of masculinities (Bradley, 1993, p. 22) is productive. Men and women may too easily be labeled in terms of masculinity or femininity, respectively. Despite a broadly stated interest in gender as socially constructed, a focus on men and women defined according to biological criteria prevails. Loosening masculinities and femininities from biology would be in line with a non-crippled social constructivist approach (Alvesson & Billing, 1997). There are, however, tensions and confusion in the employment of these slippery concepts. Connell (1993), for example, talks about masculinity as concerning “men’s places and practices in gender relations” (p. 601) and as “an aspect of institutions” (p. 602). The former aspect would suggest that where there are men there is masculinity, while the second seems to indicate an interest in institutional qualities without any tight coupling to the bodies of the subjects present.

An interest in masculinities and femininities are appealing as a response to the essentialism critique—rejecting the assumption that with a particular sex-biology follows a specific set of orientations and experiences—and the narrow variable focus on “men” and “women” but these themes are not unproblematic. Rather than feeling free to label all sorts of phenomena one believes appeal to men or are more typical for men than women in thinking, acting, and valuing, great care and restraint should be exercised. This paper encourages a rethinking of how masculinities/femininities may be related to “men” and “women.”

## AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

At the center of this research was a case study of an advertising agency with 21 employees. The agency was solely occupied with creative work, i.e., the production of advertisements. Furthermore representatives for other agencies and a female employee who had left the focal organization were interviewed. In addition, about 3 months of participant observation was included. The time period is really rather brief for an ethnography, but considering that the study object was small this was probably sufficient.

An important part of ethnographical work is to focus on surprises, i.e., letting deviations from one's own expectations and frame of reference direct what is to become the subject of closer investigations (Agar, 1986; Alvesson, 1993a; Schein, 1985). In the current study of advertising agencies in Sweden (Alvesson, 1994; Alvesson & Köping, 1993), it was not originally the intention that gender relations should be put in the center. We operated with no fixed agenda, apart from a general cultural-symbolic theoretical approach, i.e., an interest in cultural meanings and expressions. This open kind of study means that research themes are decided relatively late in the research process, based on a combination of the researcher's interpretive repertoire—the knowledge and vocabulary that the researcher master and have an interest in (Alvesson & Sköldberg, forthcoming)—and interesting themes emerging from (the interpretations) of the field. Two themes, in particular, became the foci of the study. One was language use in relation to identity work and the management of images (Alvesson, 1994). The other, reported here, was gender. I have earlier worked in this area (e.g., Billing and Alvesson, 1994); gender theory was thus a part of the interpretive repertoire. Significant for the turn of the present study was the extreme gender division of labor. It differed from what is normal in the Swedish professional service sector (Blomqvist, 1994), where division of labor often is far less extreme. Accounts of interviews about the workplace, the occupation and industry did not correspond to common descriptions of mascu-



line domination in organizations, but rather with ideas on “feminine” values and principles, as described in the research literature.

Established ways of making sense of vertical gender division of labor do not seem to function in the present case (for a review, see Alvesson & Billing, 1997). There are no unions/associations making collective decisions about strategies disfavoring women, no socialization patterns prescribing what boys and girls should do and not do in relationship to this field, no clear differences in terms of educational patterns predicting workplace composition, no strong public gender images scaring people away because it would be seen as unmanly or unwomanly to work as an advertising professional (in opposition to an assistant), no token problems as the male group is not sealed off from the rest of the workplace (the latter includes 50% women), and, finally, there is no glass ceiling problem as what we are talking about are professional rather than top managerial level jobs and there is more teamwork than bureaucratic hierarchical structuring of positions. I will therefore explore another, potentially more novel line of inquiry.

## GENDER RELATIONS AT LAA

### Division of Labor

One does not have to spend a particularly long time at the studied advertising agency—Ludvig’s Advertising Agency (LAA)—to notice that the agency by no means constitutes a spearhead for the equality strivings in society. The gender division of labor is rather extreme; the women and men are clearly divided professionally. The women hold the lower, coordinating, practical, and “taking care of” roles, while the men lead advertising projects as well as the company and create advertisements. The number of women and men is about the same (ten men and 11 women). At the agency, all project managers, copywriters, and art directors are men, even though one woman copywriter had recently worked there and another was hired during our study. All assistants and those who carry out practical work are women, with one exception.

Before women entered the labor market in greater numbers, a few decades ago, all assistants at the advertising agencies were men. It was the obvious road to take for those who wanted to become a project manager—to first learn about the field through working as a project assistant. Today it is unusual with male assistants. According to some interviewees, it has become a bit more common with female art directors and project managers in recent years, but the overall impression is that it is still unusual:

Yes, there are few women art directors at all and almost no women copy writers. Gittan is one, I can perhaps name two or three more. Say that there are ten clever women copy writers in Sweden. It is very strange I cannot explain why it is like



that. There are a few more Art Directors. But there are not so many women in the field at all. There are a few more project managers, as there are different levels of project managers.

Actually, statistics show that about 32% of all “professionals”—project managers, copywriters and art directors—in Swedish advertising agencies are women (Blomqvist, 1994). This stands in contrast to the common belief in strong male dominance, held by our as well as Blomqvist’s informants.<sup>3</sup> This indicates, in terms of gender relations and equality, that statistical categories about the male/female ratio in senior positions say less about lived experience and prospects of women being recognized than the qualitative impression of the presence of women in these positions. Apparently, women are more common as project managers, perhaps especially at lower levels, while they are less frequently found in the two creative jobs. In Sweden, these are most salient in advertising. Founders of agencies are typically copywriters or art directors. A younger art director at LAA pointed out that there were as many women as men in the Advertising School in the art director classes, at least in the first part, “though of course there are more girls that leave. They are less resilient than boys and take things too seriously.” (Low resilience appears to be a standard discourse about women in relationship to many kinds of work. cf. Marshall and Wetherell, 1989.) I will get back to this later in the paper. On the whole, it seems to apply that the advertising field has been and is still being characterized by a rather clear gender division of labor, in terms of creative and assisting jobs, while jobs as project managers are held by both sexes.

### **The Girls and the Boys**

All assistants, i.e., project assistants, the secretary, the receptionist, and the bookkeeper are women—or girls, as they are called at LAA. This position implies that women do not take part in important decisions and have a very limited responsibility for the end products. On the other hand, the girls are the company’s faces and voices meeting new customers and sub-contractors. They manage routine duties like invoicing, weekly reports, monthly accounts, and other typical computer terminal tasks. It is also the women who sort the mail, book traveling tickets, make the coffee, make breakfast, and tidy up. The lay-out assistants carry out craft work in the studio. This job is perhaps more creative and gives certain possibilities for influence but hardly for responsibility taken on a larger scale. They make

<sup>3</sup>Blomqvist’s (1994) study treats 17 Swedish knowledge-intensive companies, three of which were in advertising. It was conducted at the same time as the one reported here. Strict comparisons are impossible as most of her material is presented without being structured in terms of industry or organization, but her study is relevant for cautious, “soft” comparisons and will be referred to relatively frequently.

the copies which will then be featured in newspapers and on advertising posts among other places all around the country. Not all the females describe their work in service terms. One project administrator constructs her tasks in managerial terms:

The most important part is probably internal information management, time planning and budgeting. The guys here use to say, when they tell what we do, that they are the external project leaders while we (= the girls) are the internal project leaders.

The “girls” that work at the agency are young, about 30, and good-looking. On average, they are about 10 years younger than the men at the agency. They are dressed very well and up-to-date, even if the style of clothing can vary between everything from jeans and sweaters to a suit. They always look very fresh and bright.

All men except one (who is a lay-out assistant) are art directors, copy-writers, and project managers. In spite of the fact that they are older than the women, they are called the “lads,” or possibly “guys” within the workplace—the Swedish word is not easy to translate precisely. Most are in their forties, two are around 30. They seem to be in good physical shape and care about their appearance. The style of clothing varies depending on the tasks for the day. When the “guys” are to meet the customers, they dress up in a white shirt and suit, readily with a striking, colorful, or conspicuous tie (e.g., of the Mickey Mouse type pattern). Otherwise it is not uncommon to wear jeans or corduroy trousers and a sweater.

The general status difference between the genders is not to any great extent reflected in the material lay-out of the office. It is not easy to find any obvious differences between the men’s and women’s rooms or regarding the location of the rooms.

### **Division of Labor and Gender Symbolism**

At most places of work, there exist more or less profound ideas that certain types of work and positions are connected with a certain gender, i.e., are sex-typed or have a certain gender symbolism (Alvesson & Billing, 1997; Leidner, 1991). Also within a particular occupation there may be different expectations and self-understandings for males and females meaning that the gender symbolism is created in different versions (Hall, 1993). As Leidner (1991) shows, (almost) any job may be constructed as either male or female, through emphasizing the right dimensions and reinterpreting others.

Within the advertising area, the job as assistant is evidently regarded as being “feminine.” [This is of course not unique to this field, as studies of, for example, secretaries reveal (Finder, cited in Mumby, 1988; Pringle,

1993).] It is looked upon as a little extraordinary for a man to have this job. One of the people interviewed related that at one of her previous workplaces there was “actually” a male project assistant! That was because he himself wanted to work as such, “He had a humble personality and wanted to start somewhere to learn the advertising trade. Many were sceptical towards a male project assistant, but it worked out very well.” It can be noted that an extraordinary—and perhaps for a male rather atypical—personality trait explains this successful outcome of a deviant case, according to the (female) interviewee. Closely associated with the conception that it is “natural” for women and not men—except for those with a “humble” personality—to be project assistants is the hierarchy regarding positions. In society as a whole, men are greatly overrepresented in higher posts while women to a larger extent are found in the lower posts. This gender hierarchy is traditionally regarded as natural but recently less so. At LAA, it seems like the gender hierarchy is normally taken for granted. On one occasion, however, gender differences were perceived as strange. The agency’s only man who has an assistant job tells us:

Professionally I belong to the girls’ group. It was very funny because when we started up the agency we wanted to introduce it in the Morning Paper under “New Companies” and then all the boys were introduced—except me. Then we started to think about why exactly this was so. There were no girls at all in the picture, there were only project managers, AD:s and copies—that was the agency. This was something that the owner Ludvig got back later. But we came to the conclusion that all those who had been introduced had a leasing car, so it must have been because of that! It was the kindest conclusion we could come to. We just couldn’t imagine that it could depend on positions at the agency, so it just couldn’t be that. We had thought of putting an advert in “. . . and we are the ones who do the work at Ludvig’s.” But we didn’t do it.

As an exception, the connection between gender and hierarchy (status) comes out with strong clearness and in such a way that it gives rise to reflection and even protest. The distinct gender patterns at the agency in everyday life thus does not lead to similar reactions. But the presentation above makes it visible. The borderline between men and women becomes—for a moment—problematic.

The gender division of work also leads to other forms of gender symbolism. The advertising agency reminds one strongly of the traditional couple relationship, where the active, outgoing man is out traveling and conquering the world, while the “better half” with a certain steadfastness, but also perhaps enviously and complaining holds the home front. At a certain point in time, the men at LAA developed a rather hectic traveling schedule.

(Q: Do the boys travel as much still or have they calmed down?)

Well Ludvig is actually at home a little more now and I suppose the intention is that he should be at home more. Perhaps it was the first shock. We sat here all

alone working while the boys thought it was really cool driving around wearing smart suits. It only made us even more sad. In the end you didn't even want to hear where they were going. You almost became jealous. We also had so much to do during that period.

The marriage resemblance according to old fashioned couple relationship patterns, is also reflected in some of the female service jobs that are carried out. As mentioned above, it is a matter of typical woman's tasks such as making breakfast, tidying up, managing routine jobs, and so on. The secretarial duties are also extended somewhat:

So then, I work for Ludvig and Peter (MD). I write minutes, do the correspondence and write reports. Besides which I arrange, or coordinate, many meetings and such like with other companies in Europe. I book trips for Ludvig, he does travel a lot. Yes, all sorts of things. When it comes to Ludvig there are many personal things too. Remembering when he has to go to the dentist and seeing to it that he services the car and so on. He is a little forgetful.

The gender patterns at the agency are thus rather pronounced—and quite typical regarding the role of the secretary, as Pringle (1989) shows. In terms of power and status differentials, the gender asymmetry is very strong: the men are leading, active in, and visible to the outside world while the women, tied to subordinate tasks and the home base, are serving and supporting the men in various ways. However, I have not yet touched upon an important part of gender relations and that is sexuality.

## SEXUALITY

### Sexuality in Organizations

Sexuality in organizational contexts as a research field has attracted a certain amount of attention in recent years. Earlier complaints about its being neglected (Burrell, 1984) are hardly valid today (e.g., Brewis & Grey, 1994; Burrell, 1992; Cockburn, 1991; Collinson, 1988; Hall, 1993; Hearn & Parkin, 1987; Hearn et al., 1989). One side deals with the repressive attitude in organizations toward sexuality in workplaces, etc., which has been looked upon as an element in the general disciplining of the workforce (Burrell, 1984). Many authors, however, think that organizations are fused with sex, not necessarily manifest sexual actions but expressed more indirectly (Calás & Smircich, 1991; Hearn & Parkin, 1987; Martin, 1990). Pringle (1989) claims that “gender and sexuality are central . . . in all workplace relations” (p. 159). Perhaps this increasingly popular view reflects the inclination of contemporary people to define themselves and others in discourses of sexuality more than it mirrors the workplace relations “out there” (cf. Foucault, 1978). Of course, “ordinary” people are also affected by the popularity of the sexuality discourses, although hardly to the same extent as those sen-

sitive to trends in poststructuralism and feminism. A certain amount of agnosticism about the general interest in sexuality and a tendency to see it everywhere would not prevent me from confirming the relevance of Pringle's claim for understanding my case study. LAA was certainly not de-eroticized/relieved from explicit references to sexuality.

Hearn and Parkin (1987, p. 58) defines sexuality as "the social expression of, and relation to bodily desires, real or imagined, by or for others or for oneself, together with the related bodily states and experiences." Sexuality in workplaces is central, at least in certain kinds of organizations. This applies not least to social fields and jobs, where physical attractiveness is important, including many media persons, models, waitresses, air hostesses, guides, a large part of the sales personnel, etc. Sexuality is an essential part of work for them (see, e.g., Hall, 1993). Service work is "personality intensive" (Normann, 1983), which means that the personal image of the service worker is important. In modern society, where so much of the success of organizations depends on the ability to produce the right image, the visual impression that can be given means a great deal. Attractive (subordinated) female staff can symbolize power, prestige, and success both for the superior person who employs and heads the staff as well as for the organization as a whole.

Some authors prefer to talk about sexuality in a wider sense, including broader, more vague aspects signaled by labels such as eroticism, desire, etc. and often discussed in philosophical terms (e.g., Burrell, 1992; Calás & Smircich, 1991). Recognizing the potential value in breaking up conventional meanings and unfixing terms, such an enterprise is not without its drawbacks as it easily becomes a bit arbitrary where one chooses to find "sexuality." For reasons of direction, space, and empirical relevance, I focus on sexuality in a relatively narrow sense.

### **Sexuality and Workplace Climate at LAA**

The advertising agency may be thought of as being a comparably sexualized environment, in which attractiveness and desire is valued and sexually colored impulses are allowed to be verbally expressed. This can bring with it a free attitude and/or experiences of negative tensions, uneasiness, and even harassment. From the following observation we get an example of this type of environment:

One Friday afternoon my co-researcher was sitting talking to Boris. Ludvig who had a question to Boris popped in and sat down for a while. It was about 5 p.m., and Marcia came in to say that she was leaving and wished them a nice weekend. She had on a bright red lipstick and wore a miniskirt. When Marcia had left, Ludvig looks at Boris with a twinkle in his eyes, and says: "That one! With butter on!" Boris laughs. It can be noted that in spite of the presence of the female

co-researcher, the two men have a “relaxed” attitude to their impulses. (Possibly it can all be seen as a provocation aimed at the female researcher.)

It seems to be very common with sexually colored jokes at advertising agencies. Expressions of sexuality are part of the workplace climate. In a comment on the Swedish book upon which this paper is based, three Danish female advertising professionals, in a professional magazine, under the headline “celebrating the sexualized workplace,” say that women “pinching men in their bottom calling them mummy’s own little pig (and themselves getting pinched)” is a part of a positive workplace climate! (Danish Ad Magazine, *Orientering*, no. 7, 1994). (Students doing observations in an advertising agency actually saw a female employee pinching her male colleagues on their behinds.) Without denying the possibility that the statement may be seen as an adaptation to male norms—hegemonic masculinity may put its imprint everywhere—it is important to recognize “women’s capacity to be the subject of pleasure” (Gherardi, 1995, p. 65) and not just see them as objects and victims in sexualized workplace relations. That issues of sexuality are, however, complicated and that the lower position of women may lead to problems was made obvious in an interview with a female former employee who remarked that

... the relationship between copy writer and art director is like a marriage. You work together very intensively and it may become burdensome. The intimate collaboration also means that feelings enter the game. It is a difficult balancing act, in particular if you are young and pretty and a girl. If you have to make a choice and reject somebody it may mean that the other becomes tough and uses a jargon that makes it impossible to collaborate any longer.

Something similar may be said about almost any workplace, but the emphasis on sexuality at many advertising agencies contributes to the production and highlighting of men and women as sexual beings and tie their identities accordingly, normally with the strongest constraints and risks for negative reactions (including but not restricted to harrasment) for females (see below on power). As the (hetero)sexual factors focus on sex differences, they contribute to the gender structuring of the organization.

The emphasis on sexual attractiveness of women was clear in recruitment. But it is also important to understand self-selection in the organizational demography and its significance for regulating gender relations. Not only the organization but the entire industry—the gender-stereotyped character of much advertising may be significant here—thus reinforces a feminine orientation of the female staff and a certain form of feminine gender identity in which looks are central. This phenomenon and the partly corresponding one of males also being strongly oriented to dress and physical appearance reflects the task of advertising: the creation of desire.

Sexuality is also of significance in external social relations. In representative functions, sexual attractiveness is generally something to be sought

after. At LAA, this seems to be pronounced, which is suggested by the following observation. Some of the leading actors at the agency are busy discussing how to get to a potential customer, a larger company, and with whom to get in touch. The following comment is interesting to note: “What is his name who . . . . You remember at Niklasson’s party—he who got so bloody pissed. He was looking at ‘our birds.’” “Our birds” refers here to the assistants. One then assumes that this person remembers how pretty and nice these “birds” were and that he may accordingly have a positive attitude toward the agency! Possibly the mode of expression suggests that the “birds” may act a little as exhibitional objects for the advertising agency. They arouse interest and may be used to establish contact. (An ad functions in a similar way.)

The importance of showing off an appealing “surface”—a workplace where the image of human resources harmonizes with the aesthetic principle that, at least sometimes, signifies advertising—also makes marketing reasons into a motivation for having attractive employees. However, it is not solely the sexuality of the female staff that is regarded as being central in matters of marketing and sales. A female employee tells what happened when an important customer relationship was established:

The boys put on their smartest suits, it must have been Henry, Boris and Ludvig, and off they went to the advertising department which consisted of seven women. And then—yes, then we had Stealheap Ltd, didn’t we!

What is interesting here is of course not the degree of truthfulness of the description, but the kind of conceptions which the statement represents. The meeting between the representatives for the different genders is seen as containing distinct sexual elements. They are looked on as being important to success in the field. The successful result is seen as an effect of the LAA men, their smart suits and the seven women at the company’s advertising department. Quite likely the interviewee’s opinion is an expression of more widespread beliefs about the seductive nature of the business. Such elements are of course a question of a lot more than sexual attraction, but the latter is by no means an unimportant element in the matter.<sup>4</sup>

### **Sexuality and Power**

Male power is central in the agency and this puts imprints on workplace sexuality, for example, in and through recruitment. Control of the point of entrance to the organization means that certain personal styles and norms are incorporated into and signaled in the organization. By re-

<sup>4</sup>In her study of knowledge-intensive companies, Blomqvist (1994) also found that many people thought that mixing gender—females approaching male customers and, although female customers were less common, *vice versa*—facilitated contact.



cruiting young, attractive females, certain standards for “doing gender” are implemented in the organization. Sexual jokes may also sometimes be seen in terms of power. Being a target of jokes or being forced to adapt to jokes that one does not like underscore a subordinate position. It is not only men who joke in this way with or about women, but jokes on behalf of men also occur. Sometimes the joking of the males can be seen as expressing and reinforcing power (cf. Cockburn, 1991; Gherardi, 1995). One example was during a “conference” where the following episode took place:

When we were up at the skiing resort, Ludvig came down and all the girls plus Bertie were there. (I think the guys were in the sauna.) Then Ludvig says: “Well, Bertie, this is not a bad assortment. Better than last year!” I presume that the intention was that we should feel “proud” of ourselves. God, how embarrassing it was [the informant laughs recalling the event].

Referring to the female personnel in such an objectified and degrading manner may fit most people’s definition of sexual harassment, even though the informant does not seem to see it fully in this way, being more inclined to ascribe it to Ludvig’s stupidity than immorality. Sexist jokes of this kind, if not simply backfiring, whether this is the intention or not, may lead to self-definitions where being a sexually desirable object for the gazing and pleasures of men become important.

This episode was an exception and most joking appeared to be friendly. There may be hidden meanings behind the jokes which go beyond the good-natured. Also well-intended, non-offensive sexual joking may be unwelcome and tiresome. Of course, the male organizational members are in positions where it is easier to set the norms, but it can hardly be assumed that sexual jokes are alien to females or that masculine domination produces the subjectivities that accept and perpetuate sex joking. (A claim that men exclusively set the norm and that also two-way sexual joking necessarily reflects male domination, if not backed up with careful observations, appears a bit gender stereotyped; ascribing omnipotence to male power and too little agency to women. The boldest sexual jokes I ever heard were told by some of the women at a party for a class finishing their business studies.)

## Workplace Satisfaction

Friendly sexual humor seems in any case to dominate at LAA, even if the “butter” joke mentioned above may be interpreted as somewhat negative in character and the “assortment” joke (if joke is the correct term) as directly harassing. There were no signs of discontent with the atmosphere at LAA among the females. On the whole, they spoke positively about the workplace. In particular, during the first years before the agency was bought

by a large international company, the personnel increased from 10 to 20 and the “guys” began to travel frequently, the females describe the workplace in terms of “marvelous fellowship,” “the best job ever,” and “like a family.” The period around the sale of the company and the men’s frequent traveling was experienced as frustrating, as the tight community feeling was evaporated. The situation at the time of the study was seen more positively, but less so than during the first years. One typical comment is that

It is a very nice atmosphere and spirit, open people with open minds and a nice work environment. An exceptionally good work environment. Even though it is stressful and a lot to do. I am very satisfied [female assistant].

A “conference trip,” involving recreation and enjoyment more than anything else, may illustrate the climate, and to some extent also more positive sexual jokes, at the agency. All employees participated. They received jackets with the company’s name on the back when departing. The destination was a ski resort and, after a relatively brief conference, where the general conclusion was that the ratings of the agencies by a leading Swedish business magazine was rather difficult to make sense of and was experienced by the agency members as arbitrary and irrational, “but you have to take it seriously as others do so,” skiing took over. All seemed to be in a good mood. All expenditures, including drinks, were paid for by the company’s plastic card. One of the project assistants, Linda, had her 30th birthday and her boyfriend from Australia, Bruce, was in Sweden so she wanted to stay home, but was persuaded to join the trip. She got her gift during the “conference,” packaged in a large box. The manager held a speech saying that while Linda was a great hedonist she should get a “goodie” that will last long. Linda opened the box and Bruce appeared. Without her knowledge the rest of the personnel had got him over by another flight to the conference hotel.

## A MYSTERY

### A “Feminine” Organization Dominated by Men?

LAA is an organization led by men, while the women manage routine jobs and the “domestic chores.” Gender division of labor is common in working life, but in LAA it is extreme, at least in the context of the non-technical professional service sector in Sweden. If you add to that the appearance, age, and general image of the female staff coupled with jokes with sexual allusions, occasionally of a degrading nature, you could perhaps draw the conclusion, based on conventional wisdom in gender studies, that this must be an extraordinarily patriarchal organization, where “masculine values” are predominant and gender oppression pronounced.

But such an image indicates only part of the story. The organization is much more inconsistent. Alongside pronounced status and access to power differences, the agency is very “soft” in many regards. The atmosphere is perceived positively. Social relations are emphasized. One talks a lot about personal chemistry, meaning the significance of fine-tuned, positive interpersonal relationships at the workplace. As shown above, the female employees appear to be satisfied with their workplace—despite some manifestations of sexism. As one says, “we have a common culture in the luggage. Somehow we are as a family with a basic value community.” It seems that the men at LAA are to a rather large extent sensitive, touchy, vain, and careful. It is noticeable not least in their inability to take criticism—they are touchy and easily become aggressive. [Whether this is non-masculine or not may be debated. The idea of male toughness means being able to stand comments and teasing and take it as “a man” (Collinson, 1988).] Their ways of looking after their children is also rather untraditional. In the study, we witnessed one situation where the male project leader ended a meeting with two clients with the explanation that he must go and get the kids from the day care center.

The method and style of working is also far from fitting the terms on masculinities represented in the literature. For example, the duty of the project manager should be to influence or even question the customers’ ideas. But in that area they are very careful, in spite of the fact that they sometimes want to look at themselves as “consultants.” Customers are seldom “corrected” or challenged. One is eager to maintain the accounts and tends to be submissive to clients. Other examples are the art directors who look at themselves as being the “feelings” in advertising production. They “feel” whether an advertising product or idea is “right” or “wrong.” One male says that in school you theoretically learn what is good and bad advertisement, “but the most important is still the feeling. You feel when an ad is good, it is on the top of the fingers or is felt in the stomach.” Another person says that knowledge is important and that the level of knowledge is too low, and remarks that “advertising is no science—we feel.” Creative advertising professionals do not work analytically and/or rationally but rather emotionally, they say.

Advertising people are normally very outgoing and they are emotionally loaded. Because feelings and things like that are the basis of creativity, so to speak. They are often very rich in ideas and associative, they can quickly associate with various phenomena. They are normally rather difficult to steer and jump for joy when they become happy or hit the roof when they become mad. The amplitude on their reactions is much higher than for example people companies’ accounting departments. Advertising people are seldom very systematic or structured . . . [male advertising worker].

One male uses an analogy with pregnancy to illuminate the advertising process. There are three steps: (1) happiness (we have got a campaign),

(2) preparations (one considers what should be done and gets used to the idea), (3) delivery (you produce the idea, it hurts, you feel pain and happiness). On the whole, the self-understanding of the method of working and customer relations have a “feminine” orientation, which at least on an overall and cliché-like level agrees with the ideals of many feminists around the importance of emotion and the personal for thinking, work, and organization (Jaggar, 1989; Mumby & Putnam, 1992). Correspondingly, males are conventionally seen as constructed as non-emotional (Hearn, 1993). Hollway (1984, p. 253) writes that “in our society, the judgement is a sexist one: expressing feelings is weak, feminine and in contradistinction to men’s rationality.” In “masculine” occupations, the jobs require people “to be cool, impassive or stern” (Cockburn, 1991, p. 150). Masculine or patriarchal organizations are seen as instrumental arenas and separated from the category of emotion. “The very separation of emotions from other social life can itself be seen as an example of the compartmentalizing nature of patriarchies” (Hearn, 1993, p. 155). LAA is very different in this regard. Of course, all organizations and work may be seen as emotional, as Fine-man (1993) emphasizes, but the point is that the discourses of the advertising industry stress emotionality as a core dimension at work, while “masculine” occupations and organizations typically do the opposite.

Customers sometimes complain that the agency’s organization doesn’t work efficiently. In many advertising agencies, according to interviewees, management is regarded as being bad or too weak, reflecting a lack of interest in administration and decision-making, a dislike for hierarchies and routines. Advertising workers do not want to have a boss or anybody restricting the degree of freedom, thus breaking a little with the hierarchical, bureaucratic, and control principles which some authors see as being typically masculine (Ferguson, 1984; Kerfoot & Knights, 1996). At LAA, the CEO was a relatively young project manager who was not really seeing himself or perceived by others as a leader or even fully a manager, but rather took care of some administrative matters.

It is very hard to see that LAA—and the advertising industry in Sweden—should match a typical description of masculinity as “. . . hard, dry, impersonal, objective, explicit, outer-focused, action-oriented, analytic, dualistic, quantitative, linear, rationalist, reductionist and materialist” (Hines, 1992, p. 328). It equally badly fits what Marshall (1993) views as male values or the male principle: “self-assertion, separation, independence, control, competition, focused perception, rationality, analysis, etc. . . .” (p. 124). Not all of these virtues are, of course, totally absent, but they are not salient. The agency shows very little of the five types of masculinity that Collinson and Hearn (1994) view as typical in an organizational context: authoritarianism, paternalism, entrepreneurialism, careerism, and informal-

ism (men building networks on the basis of shared masculine interests and excluding women). Some elements of entrepreneurialism characterized the company in the beginning, but this was not salient during the time of the study. Of course, the agency is not completely emptied of interaction within gender groups, but some degree of in-group interaction, based on gender, age, ethnicity, ideology, etc. is presumably a characteristic of every workplace. It is far easier to pick elements in characterizations of the “feminine” as suitable for LAA, e.g., “the prioritizing of feelings ... the importance of the imaginative and creative . . .” (Hines, 1992, p. 314) or the “female form”: “flowing, internal, and personalized” (Marshall, 1993, p. 124). The private and the personal—often seen as “feminine” values (Blomqvist, 1994; Morgen, 1994)—is to a high degree incorporated in the organization. The feminine is typically understood as marginalized in most business organizations, although changes seem to be on the way (Fondas, 1997), but in LAA, masculinities come closer to risking this fate.

Of course, one could imagine reserving the mentioned masculine qualities for hegemonic masculinity and then label those constructions and ideals characterizing the case agency as possessing a kind of alternative masculinity. In this way, one could recognize how the orientations in the agency differ from dominant ideas of masculinity without seeing them as feminine. In particular, if one wants to couple men and masculinity and view all characteristics of men in terms of masculinities, it may make sense to talk about “creative-intuitive-emotional masculinity,” “unmasculine masculinity,” or even “feminine masculinity.” (In particular, the latter concept may have some generative possibilities.) I do not choose this path for several reasons: (1) Following the literature on femininities/masculinities indicates a good fit between the accounts in the case and femininity, and I think that the high degree of consensus on what is defined as feminine says something about cultural ideas on the subject matter. (2) The concept of hegemonic masculinity is rather unclear and slippery—masculinity is difficult as it is, adding hegemonic makes it even worse (Donaldson, 1993). (3) Given the popularity of postbureaucratic organizations, it is rather difficult to establish what is hegemonic—culturally dominant ideas associated with the ruling class—and what is not. (4) Linking men to masculinity and females to femininity easily gives privilege to bodies/biologies, making the distinction of men/women absolute, reducing an acknowledgment of variation to different forms of masculinity for men and of femininity for women, making transgression difficult. An important point of this paper is to encourage a rethinking of ideas on masculinities, breaking up the chain of men, male domination, and masculinity, and this implies avoidance of putting everything that is characterizing a group of males under a very big masculinity umbrella.

Arguably, the case shows an interesting paradox. There is an extreme sexual division of labor with the men at the top and the women at the bottom and a strong appreciation of female sexual attraction combined with a, in many ways, “soft” atmosphere in the organization and a construction of work and organization in “feminine” ways. One may even see it as a *anti-bureaucracy*, as the advertising workers construct themselves, their work, and workplaces in direct opposition to the bureaucracies of the client companies, e.g., the absence and dislike of rules, hierarchies, the lack of formal career possibilities, their subjective involvement in work characterized by emotionality and intuition, the significance of having fun, and good personal relationships (Alvesson, 1994).<sup>5</sup> Asplund (1970) suggests that social science should contain two major elements. The first is to find or invent a quiz (or mystery), the second is to solve it. The present case seems to match this methodological principle. How can we understand these contradictory aspects of the organization; the domination of males *and* of feminine work and organizational values and meanings?

### **The Natives’ Accounts of the Relative Absence of Women in Advertising Professional Work**

The members of LAA point at the field’s inertia and conservatism when asked to account for the absence of women in professional positions:

This is a very conservative field. We are very slow in adopting new technology. . . . It must stay the way it has been before. Even the sex-roles are like that [male employee].

It may be primarily because it is the customers that question the women. Of course they think it is fun with girls, that they are pretty and nice and that they certainly are clever as secretaries but . . . . You can find a little of this attitude also within the advertising agencies themselves [female employee].

Another reason mentioned was a negative reaction on behalf of the female assistants. Martha, an art director, that worked for the agency for some time, apparently had problems cooperating with the other women:

When Martha left she said that what had been most difficult were the other girls (the assistants), to get them to cooperate, to be willing to do so to the same extent as they do with the “boys.” For my own part I see being a female art director as being difficult in two ways. Partly it has to do with hierarchy. Taking orders from a woman is difficult. Partly it can also be difficult for the woman to come in as a family member, to be accepted by the other women. If she is ugly and looks

<sup>5</sup>Blomqvist (1994) found similar patterns in 12 of the 17 companies, of which some were in advertising. Here, e.g., in the advertising industry in Sweden more broadly, she notes that traits attributed to women are highly valued: “Intuition, relationship orientation, ability to listen, to communicate and to put oneself into the position of the other are highly valued. Rather it is stereotypical views about men—fighting spirit, aggressiveness and cock mentality—that stand in opposition to what the profession demands” (p. 153).

like a “moulting owl” the chances that she will be looked upon as a threat (come closer to the men’s hearts than the existing women) are less.

This interpretation is supported by an interview by one of the women who said that Martha was employed because of her looks rather than her competence. I assume that one may interpret this material as indicating that looks are significant when females are employed and that there is a rivalry between the women, accentuated when the combination of looks and a higher position makes one woman move closer to the leading group of men. More generally, lower-level women are sometimes unsupportive of female professionals and managers (Lindgren, 1992; Sundin, 1993). Of course, men sometimes emphasize sexuality and are skeptical regarding competence. Martha herself says that “the advertising industry is dominated by a lot of stupid old men that you have to convince. If you are a girl and 26 years it is difficult to be taken seriously. Preferably you should be very ugly.”

One female interviewee thinks that the recruitment policy within the agency is largely a matter of the dominating group being on its way into middle age:

(Q: Most of the art directors here are men, why do you think that is? And all assistants are women!)

They would never take on a boy as assistant, never.

(Q Why not? Is it more fun with girls?)

They are striving to be 21 again. It must be in order to make them feel younger.

I cannot judge the “amount of truth” in these statements, but they fit in well with my overall interpretation on gender-related aspects of identity work, including the significance of sexuality, to which I will soon return.

### **Ambiguity and the Contested Nature of Advertising Work**

Advertising work, especially creative work, is characterized by a high level of ambiguity. Formal qualifications are not significant for job-holders. Almost anybody can claim to be skilled in advertising. Work results never speak for themselves. As Tunstall (1964, p. 76) says, “subjective opinion plays such an important part in judging the worth and relevance of creative work.” There is a lack of clear guidelines and evaluation models. The skills and products are always open to questioning.<sup>6</sup> People complain about all the arbitrary “opinions” about their work that they are exposed to:

There is something inhuman about this work—because there are no truths.

<sup>6</sup>In Sweden, creative work stands in the center in the advertising agencies and systematic evaluations of advertisement effects are seldom done. In, for example, the U.S. and the U.K. the situation is somewhat different as managing client relationships (accounts) is more significant and efforts to measure effects of a proposal reduces somewhat the space for opinions about how well a particular ad may work.



It is very easy to be critical against this kind of work—because there are no truths.

That is the great dilemma with this business that everybody has the same right to have an opinion. And everybody has as much right as they have wrong.

Clients often dispute suggestions by the agency. According to a survey, many agencies had the impression that some clients thought that they could make the advertisements on their own desktop equipment (Resumé, no. 16, 1990, see also Tunstall, 1964). Often, the proposals on which the advertising professional has worked for a long time are simply rejected.

As Slater (1989) remarks, it is not a work area where it is easy to prove one's value, competence, and contributions to the client's revenue. One has to adapt to the client and is rather dependent and weak in relation to him or her—the client may easily break the relationship and change agencies (Alvesson & Köping, 1993; Tunstall, 1964). The advertising worker normally does not have a strong position of authority, but is often overrun by the client when there is a difference of opinion regarding a specific project. It is a work area where increased age and experience is a mixed blessing. As the idea is that one should develop something new for each project, old experiences can only be drawn upon to a limited extent. Periodical difficulties in developing new ideas during the work process can also be trying to one's self-esteem. Advertising people may also face negative opinions by the public: many people are hostile to advertisements. Some interviewees mentioned that some years ago, when the political opinions were a bit different, they were not inclined to disclose their occupation to strangers at, for example, parties. Tunstall (1964) notes a similar contested position some decades ago. His study of advertising people in London in the early 1960s shows a remarkable convergence with the present study: "Many advertising men undoubtedly feel insecure in their jobs . . . [which] appears to stem from the way in which youth often outdoes age; from the rapid movement between agencies; from the fact that success is so closely dependent upon making the correct personal impression on other people; from the uneasy position of salesmen in general; and from the heavy criticism directed at advertising" (p. 18).

Problems of identity then becomes salient. Identity is, of course, heavily gendered as perhaps nothing is so crucial as gender for one's self-definition and others' inclination to fix a person in a social category. Gender identity seldom appears "naked," but is typically embedded in other sources and constructions of identity, such as age, ethnicity, organization, and occupation. Identities are multiple and contextual, they must be constructed and secured. Identities are constituted through comparisons with other people and groups. People in organizations, as elsewhere in life, routinely engage in identity work—aiming to achieve feelings of a coherent and strong self, necessary for coping with work tasks and social relations as well as

existential issues. Identities are constituted, negotiated, reproduced, and threatened in social interactions and in the form of narratives as well as in material practices. Identities are, at least partly, developed in the context of power relations (Foucault, 1982; Knights & Willmott, 1985, 1989). The exercise of power depends on the development of subjects tied to particular identities regarding how one should feel, think, and act.

The trend in modern society is that the material practices—crucial for the identity of the traditional peasant or blacksmith (whose identity was not really at stake or even emerged as a meaningful category)—is less significant. Social-discursive interaction, including talk and narratives, becomes particularly vital for identity (Giddens, 1991). Recognizing that the contemporary age tends to produce highly precarious identities and shifting selves, and intense efforts for securing identities (Willmott, 1994), and regulating self-esteem (Lasch, 1978), variation within our time must be acknowledged.<sup>7</sup> The advertising worker, when not extraordinarily successful, faces more pressing identity problems than most other workers. Personality, personal relationships—with clients, but also within the agency—and ability to give a trustworthy impression is seen as crucial (Tunstall, 1964). The general need for engaging in identity work—counteracting a fragmented sense of self—is heightened in work which is heavily dependent on the environment's more or less arbitrary and floating confirmations and sometimes negative opinions. The situation is quite different for many other upper-level occupations where formal qualifications carry more weight, experience clearly leads to improved competence, and the level of professionalization is stronger, e.g., physicians, lawyers, accountants, and engineers, although also scientists and experts are increasingly being contested. One advertising professional remarks that his friends “who are lawyers, economists and physicians do have, if they don't make fools of themselves too much, a rather safe future to look forward to while I know that I will always have to fight for my existence until I give up. There is nothing that says that with age any kind of authority or status or anything will follow.”

Advertising workers belong to a category of “soft” (semi-)professions which are not or only moderately aided by science, higher education, or acknowledged professionalization in their authority claims and identity work, but is to some extent even worse off than, for example, people in bureaucratic organizations. The person stands more unprotected because it is comparatively difficult to build up an identity through the work results

<sup>7</sup>Advertising workers are of particular interest as they are among those sectors of society where traditional, masculine means of securing work identities—substantive work results, educational/formal qualifications, titles, career ladders, reliance on instrumental rationality, etc.—are of limited relevance. The case of advertising work then appears as productive for exploring contemporary and forthcoming trends in the (re)constructions of masculine identity.

as such, s/he does not have bureaucracy and rule-following as a shield and s/he are dependent on the client's arbitrary and unpredictable evaluations, more or less based on "opinion."

### Females and the Ambiguous Nature of Advertising Work

All this is hardly gender-neutral, given gender constructions, including "real" effects on the subjectivities of men and women. It seems that women are often regarded as, and perhaps experience themselves as being, less well-equipped in terms of coping with the contested character of the job:

If you are to work in advertising you have to have a great sense of humour. You can't let things get to you personally, then it will all go to hell. Neither should you take the problems home with you, you have to be able to shut them off when you leave work. It is a greater problem for women as they are more sensitive than men and often more insecure [male advertising worker].

As the work result does not always speak for itself in the present case, it becomes even more important *who* speaks for it. The impression of the advertisement producer in question influences the impression of the product. It is easier (by definition) for a guru—a person with an established name—to get his creation regarded as being good and creative than an unknown talent. (The name is important. All big names in advertising—in Sweden, at least—are men.) Arguably, the image of the man represents a certain professional authority in commercial contexts. It makes it easier then to parry the "feminine" elements of the enterprise with a form for maleness—adapted to the mixture of creativity, adjustment, and commercialism of advertising work. A "male" identity—experiencing and appearing as a "man"—makes this easier, and a "female" identity makes it more difficult. The former facilitates "impression management" and gives a better accreditation.

Women are not universally evaluated unfavorably compared to men, but in areas which are dominated by men, objectively equal performances by women compared to men tend to be evaluated more negatively (Nieva & Gutek, 1980). "Woman" stands for something slightly extra uncertain in a field where the products are ambiguous (hard to evaluate). Because the space for "having opinions" about what is a good idea or proposal is so great, all doors are wide open to projections from colleagues and customers. In many other situations, actual achievements can kick back against clichés and expectations that women (and other unfairly treated groups) are subjected to. Feedback is thus a sensitive thing, and there seem to exist (or are developed) gender differences in terms of how it is expressed and read.

Although typical forms of masculinities are defined as alien to what the work calls for, the conditions of advertising production favors the male

gender in a subtle way, a “soft,” partly “artistic,” partly business-oriented version that is not very easily labeled in gender terms. In a work context constructed in terms corresponding to what is broadly seen as culturally feminine, the male gender may symbolize a dose of instrumentality and professionalism which reinforces the position of the advertising worker and company. The client may be more prepared to accept male products as “result oriented,” sometimes ascribed to men, instead of expressions of wanting to produce beautiful ads—something the client may fear. Common constructions/stereotypes of men as “instrumental” may here work to the advantage of those carrying a male body.

There are some indications that women don't hit the right tone in their symbolic actions. A male employee at the advertising agency commented in this way about a woman who had worked briefly as a project manager.

But she has difficulties asserting herself, I think. It is silly because she has such great capacity. But she falls back a little and plays a slightly more feminine role than she should.

I have worked with a lot of women. It is always either or. They either fall back and play a slightly more feminine role or even that of a silly little goose or they swing over to the other extreme and become very rough.

The person addressed says that she does not want to work as a project manager, even though she did so for some time in a small agency:

It was such a small place and I don't have the education and the background that I will stand up in front of a couple of hundred persons and produce a marketing strategy. I can't do it and I don't have the ambition to learn it. I think it is too exposed.

Ely (1995) found that females in a male-dominated (few women in senior positions) law firm rated themselves less favorably than in a sex-integrated (more senior women) firm in relationship to requirements of success. The status differences contingent upon gender division of labor affect the identity and self-esteem of women. Power here works through negative self-definitions, leading to “real” problems of self-confidence, making gender differences in psychology and division of labor appearing as, at least to some extent, natural—for women as much as for men, in organizations such as the advertising agency and the male-dominated firm studied by Ely.

The problem is partly a question of the difficulties which many women have in cracking the codes that denote the ways in which people act in advertising contexts and handle symbolism—modes of expression, style—in the correct way. This does not necessarily imply that the code is “masculine,” although parts of it may well be, as part of the problem seems to be access to and lack of persistence in staying in the core situations where the learning takes place. Work identity has been and perhaps still is less central for women than men, according to estimations (Leidner, 1991; Mor-

gan, 1992), especially when sexuality is emphasized, although class, education, etc. account for considerable variation. Of course, behind this are the operations of ideological power defining men and women inequally. This may mean that some women are less motivated to cope with the strain and crack the codes. They may also receive less or more mixed support. Success is very much a matter of mastering the correct forms of symbolism (Bourdieu, 1979; Swidler, 1986). This is especially the case in contexts where the work results are ambiguous (Alvesson, 1993b; Jackall, 1988; Tunstall, 1964). The double binds of emphasis on sexual attractiveness and showing competence complicates the situation for women in this kind of work where competence is so difficult to evaluate.

### **MALE IDENTITY WORK: CONSTRUCTING MASCULINITY THROUGH GENDER DIVISION OF LABOR**

As stated previously, the ambiguous and contested nature of advertising work heightens the need for identity work of the professionals.<sup>8</sup> Defining the work, the organization, and the subjectivity involved in terms opposite to (bureaucratic-rational) clients means constructing a clearly defined identity. A related approach is the use of negatively loaded narratives of clients and some colleagues in the industry (described as unqualified and/or dishonest) which means that the positive identities of LAA people and other "serious" advertising agencies emerge against the negative ones of the other(s) (Alvesson, 1994; cf. Tunstall, 1964).

But the construction of advertising people and their jobs includes its own paradox in terms of identity work. Describing advertising work in non-masculine terms deprives the professionals of the resources for establishing a masculine work identity associated with the bureaucratic-rational-professional set of meanings and images. A feminine undertone of the constructions of the work and the client relations (where the client typically is the financially stronger, evaluating part) may fuel the identity problem through the back door.

The extensive internal structuring of the gender relations can be seen as an answer to the insecurities of identity in advertising work. The gender identity mixes with the occupational identity and is, as a result of the "non-masculine" nature of the enterprise, perhaps more precarious and vulnerable for male advertising workers. Being male is a symbolic resource, but the identity as a male is at the same time threatened in this particular work context, which of course risks undermining this symbolic resource.

<sup>8</sup>Arguably, so is not the case for low-level participants, i.e., the women. It is easier to develop a sense of restricted but confirmed competence around more practical work and the work is seen as less exposed.

The gendered nature of the strains is well illustrated by an interviewee who complained that

. . . everybody has the right to express opinions in this business and everybody's opinion is equally important. Sometimes a client rejects a proposal that you have made because the wife of the manager did not like it.

The wife's opinion here symbolizes the worst possible case of degradation of professional authority. The nonrational, emotional evaluations of the work imply a "feminization" of the job-holders. Also other gender connotations turn up in interviews when interview persons say that "we are in a way prostitutes, because we are paid to express other people's opinions" (others reject being prostitutes, but the metaphor does not seem to be alien to them) or that they are expected to be entertaining to clients, "dance for them," etc. The advertising worker sometimes appears as the "female" part in relationship to the "male" client.

Identity work is facilitated by—and partly a matter of—experiencing a difference in comparison with others. The constituting and reconstituting of a particular identity requires that one defines oneself in relation to some other person or social category. It can be a question of age, nationality, profession—or gender. The male quality stands out in relation to the female quality. You are a man if somebody else is a woman. This is less a matter of anatomy than of cultural constructions. The more feminine others are, the more masculine you are yourself. (So is the case irrespective of sex: male workers may feel like "real men" compared to the soft, unmanly white collar and managerial workers.) When the men in the examples above joke about the women ("That one. With butter on!" and "a good assortment") then their own fellowship, gender affiliation and gender identity are confirmed. They define themselves in relation to the women in question. This is what people do throughout a number of micro-situations in everyday life, in and outside workplaces. LAA—and the advertising field in general—is different to many other workplaces by offering such an (over)clear and abundant flora of (stereotyped) gender identity confirmation, at least for the women. In this way, gender is created and recreated.

The relative weakness of symbolic resources for masculine identity work—apart from intra-agency gender relations—at disposal at LAA may be formulated in less determinist terms: the people at the agency—as is common in the industry in Sweden—have refrained from or been incapable of developing and exploiting such resources: instead they have constructed themselves, their work, and organization in terms closer to feminist discourses than what is conventionally seen as masculinities.

The situation is a bit different in, for example, the U.S. and the U.K., where the agencies are larger, more bureaucratic, and less focused on the creative elements (Rosen, 1985; Slater, 1989.) One may here speculate



about national culture. Sweden is often seen as “feminine” (Hofstede, 1980). In more masculinist countries, there may be an inclination to emphasize project management, analysis, communication expertise, measurement of effects, corporate growth, job titles, and bureaucracy somewhat more—thereby strengthening the masculine character of the work. Neither societal culture nor the wish to construct/reinforce masculinity should, however, be seen as “variables” explaining outcomes, but as interacting aspects and lines of interpretation possibly throwing some light on the phenomena.

The men at LAA do, however, control another means for regulating their masculine identities: good opportunities for recruiting female staff. Influential males (perhaps also females?) in most workplaces seem to be more willing to employ people (normally) of the opposite sex who they see as being attractive (everything else being roughly the same), at least in subordinate positions. LAA is able to offer sufficiently attractive work conditions to make it possible to recruit and retain women perceived in this way, thus making workplace sexuality explicit.

Clear-cut gender relations at the agency can thus be seen as a way of strengthening the identity and compensating for the insecurities regarding identity which lie in the cultural nature of the business. While the femininities at the agency are a question of sexual attractiveness, youth, service functions, and subordinated positions, masculinities are characterized by earning money, high status, creative and leading posts and, in particular, intensive interaction with the Other placed in a highly feminine subject position.<sup>9</sup> The emphasizing of femininity—when employing, joking, and socially interacting in different forms—thus becomes a way for the men to handle the existential and psychological difficulties which characterize the modern person in general but which is greatly added to by the material work situation which distinguishes advertising work. This accounts for the fact that the men at LAA seek gender interaction, not gender isolation, as sometimes is said to be a form of masculinity (Collinson & Hearn, 1994). Being a “man among men” may not be reassuring in a work context weak on (other) signs of masculinity. It would probably reinforce tendencies to homophobia, even though this anxiety may be in certain respects more intense in contexts appealing to men very eager to prove their maleness. Unconscious fantasies—crucial for gender identity according to psychoanalytic feminists (e.g., Butler, 1990)—in that direction may be fueled by the constructions of the nature of the work, the client relationships, etc. Engaging

<sup>9</sup>Of course, the picture also contains variation and inconsistencies. The project administrator cited earlier describes her work less in service and subordinate than in masculine terms. An image of male power and female powerlessness is a bit simplified—the work tasks of the females are a source of power and one may find foremanship in the project administrator’s work.



in gender interaction of a seemingly marked heterosexual character may be one route to achieving feelings and reassurance of masculinity.

Gender relations may also help men with the age problem significant in the field. There is an expectation in the field that one should be fashion-minded and sensitive about trends—virtues that may be seen as inconsistent with aging. As Tunstall (1964, p. 17) writes, “this is a business in which youth has a special kind of moral advantage.” It is no coincidence that the men at LAA want to be called the “lads” (guys), that they dress in a youthful style and that the female interviewee cited earlier thought that the inclination to employ female assistants was an effect of the wish of the men to stay young, a feeling which may be facilitated by the presence of young, good-looking women. Being fashion-oriented and negative about aging characterize our time in general, but also have feminine undertones.

The emphasis on sexuality and, consequently, gender differences leads to sources of ample confirmation of female identity being offered to the female staff—within a narrow and constrained area. The male identity work tends to reinforce conventional gender positioning, including a strong emphasis on femininity. Here, power is in operation: the production of a narrow, limiting (but not necessarily unproductive) kind of subjectivity (Foucault, 1982). Gendered standards for being are imposed or encouraged. Of course, these are inherent in the cultural tradition, but strongly enacted on the local level. When leaving established feminine positions—for instance, when entering into an art director or project manager post—female employees experience more insecurity and exposure.

## CONCLUSIONS

The existence of extreme gender division of labor and that women still tend to be stuck in lower positions is, of course, in no way unique. However, this case differs quite heavily from many general ideas about male organizational cultures permeating patriarchal organizations (e.g., Collinson & Hearn, 1994; Ferguson, 1984; Mills, 1988). The organization is hardly dominated by “masculinity,” “male values” or a “male form”: analytical thinking, independence, achievement orientation, problem solving, instrumental attitude, ability to take initiative, leadership, and dominance (Gherardi, 1995; Marshall, 1993). Instead, the work is reported to call for intuition and feeling, the problem-solving is not tangible or concrete, while the results are ambiguous and a matter of attitudes, opinions, and other emotional reactions. Close personal relationships and “personal chemistry” are seen as crucial for work relations. Anti-bureaucratic ideals prevail. The vocabulary used by the interviewees, especially the professionals (all male), show a remarkably good fit with what feminists describe as “femininity,” “female val-

ues,” or a “female form” (Fondas, 1997; Hines, 1992; Marshall, 1993). As Blomqvist (1994, p. 177) concludes about Swedish knowledge-intensive companies, “What is perceived as feminine traits are defined as skills that are highly valued.” Discussing male rationality, Gherardi (1995) asks “who dares to declare that they do not obey the principles of rationality and that, for example, they run a successful company on decisions prompted by emotions? Were we to hear such an admission, we would assume that it was made by a female manager running some type of service or producing cosmetics, perhaps” (p. 34). But LAA, and many other (Swedish) advertising agencies/knowledge-intensive companies, may well fit such a description. Indeed, there seems to be a broad trend toward managerial and organizational ideals corresponding to what it is culturally defined as feminine (Fondas, 1997).

But the case indicates that the link between construction of the organization in “feminine” terms and women’s positioning is not straightforward. The ambiguity of the work situation, results, and client relations of the advertising workers heighten identity problems. As in other professional service work “the largely fluid character of anything external to interactional accomplishments, provides for very active symbolic labor” (Deetz, 1997). In the present case, it complicates issues of gender. The construction of the work and organization through the use of the emotionality-intuition personal chemistry-anti-bureaucracy vocabulary facilitates identity work—it indicates positive values, coherence, and distinctiveness, for example, in relationship to client’s personnel and other conventional people—but the “feminine” undertone/low degree of masculinity makes this solution a mixed blessing. That the advertising agencies appear as “feminine” in relationship to clients—the relationship is often referred to as a marriage and it is clear that the agency takes the female part—also puts some strain on gender identity. In sum, the precarious character of the occupational identity has a clear gendered meaning. From the other angle, one can say the gender identity of male advertising professionals is only partially, and in some respects even badly, supported by work, organization, and client relations.

That the field of activity exhibiting more signs of behavior, thinking, feeling, and language use that correspond to discourses on “femininities” rather than “masculinities” may mean that some of the unease experienced by men in “women’s jobs” (Williams, 1993) may be felt by the advertising professionals, despite the very different social contexts. Also men in “women’s jobs” tend to move to somewhat more “masculine” spheres (supervisory jobs, union positions), indicating a want to emphasize differences and support male identity (e.g., Billing, 1997).

In LAA, this is partly done through highlighting workplace sexuality. The weakness of masculinity in the symbolism of work content and client relations is compensated for. Masculinities emerge in relationship to female personnel, subjected to what may be referred to as “hyper-feminization.” Gender becomes structured so that male work/gender identities are supported. One aspect here is the location of men and women in the division of labor where male power accounts for the recruitment of younger, sexually attractive, lower-positioned women. Another is the heightened state of gender interaction.<sup>10</sup> These two means that the mean can place themselves in “masculine subject positions,” making gender a resource for their symbolic labor.

In gender construction, both men and women participate, but in terms of highly asymmetrical positions of power. Understanding a (nonconscious) motive to maintain and reinforce pronounced gender differences (of traditional type) thus calls for (a) an appreciation of factors triggering problems with identity and selfhood at work, (b) strains on gender identity associated with weak symbolism on masculinity, and (c) the possibilities (power, including control over material resources) to realize the “appropriate” gender relations, e.g., the option to recruit young and attractive female personnel to lower positions and thus use gender relations for identity work.

Masculinity-enhancing identity work may be seen as primarily defensive, serving as a counterforce to the fragmentations and narcissistic frustrations encountered by the (post)modern in general, and the one in highly ambiguous and contested work contexts in particular. Masculinities then are not so much a matter of keeping women down for the sake of “objective interest” as much as using gender relations to repair and support self-identity. Such supporting work may be most pronounced in low-status and oppressive work contexts, such as certain shopfloors, where excessive masculinity is often expressed (Collinson, 1988; Reskin & Padavic, 1994) but may also put their imprint on privileged, well-paid, and creative workplaces, as this study illuminates. Work is presumably done in a “soft” and rather flexible way, as the strains on identity are less severe and the options for “nongendered” identity work, i.e., through affluent consumption and constructing the work in culturally positive terms (creative, free, individualistic), are better than in low-status, oppressed jobs. There are no social

<sup>10</sup>It should be emphasized that it is not a matter of hyper-masculinity, visible in some macho contexts. These men hardly go into advertising. Nevertheless, the creation/availability of sexualized work relations gives some opportunities for identity support. Given the existence of other agencies in Sweden with a much less pronounced gender division of labor (Blomqvist, 1994), this pattern in LAA is probably flexible rather than obsessive. Changed vertical division of labor would not necessarily change sexualization patterns, at the same time as the strong emphasis on workplace sexualization at LAA apparently tends to constrain women.

mechanics involved in terms of any causal relations between ambiguity/contested work and a specific response, but local processes of constructions which may easily be the objects of reconstructions. In the present case, there are no strong indications on direct discrimination or devaluation of women when employing professionals. The agency hired a female copywriter during our study and the capacity of this particular woman was recognized. The gender dynamics are much more complex than suggested by many of the standard explanations accounting for gender structures in organizations emphasizing men, devaluing women, and preventing them from promotion.

This study suggests the possibility of a *loose coupling between male domination and domination of masculinities* (as these are described in the literature and typically culturally defined). We have a trend away from machine bureaucracies strong on masculinity toward organizational forms and values that are potentially more open to be constructed in nonmasculine, even feminine ways (Gherardi, 1995), at least according to modern, increasingly popular anti-bureaucracy, anti-rationality, service, innovation, and change rhetoric (Alvesson, 1993b; Fondas, 1997). This does not mean that new organizational principles and forms are constructed in ways directly recognized as feminine or suitable for women. In many Swedish knowledge-intensive companies, this kind of coupling is made, according to Blomqvist (1994) but she also refers to an Australian study in which managers describe the work in these organizations in "pro-feminine" terms, but without using the gender label or connecting the work characteristics directly to (positive) stereotypical ideas of women.

Something similar can be seen in the case reported here as well as in some recent literature on leadership and management (Fondas, 1997). Men may perhaps even exploit and dominate "femininities" (as defined in the gender literature) in business contexts, although "femininities" are presumably often not addressed in such (gender) terms by organizational participants. As Gherardi (1995, p. 153) says, words/values such as emotionality may go through a process of "defeminization." Through gender-stereotypical interaction, it is still seen as unproblematic that certain jobs are occupied by men, even though the jobs are not constructed as "naturally" male. The case presented here suggests that there may be a discrepancy between abstract ideas of masculinities/femininities proposed by gender researchers and local constructions of gender. In particular, the presence/absence of specific linkages made by subjects in organizations between what in the gender literature are viewed as masculinities/femininities and the two sexes are important for the fate of men and women. This is partly a matter of power: labeling what is generally, but not necessarily consciously, seen as culturally feminine explicitly may well upset gender orders. In the

present case, gender division of labor would be more difficult to reproduce if the constructions of work content, client relations, and organizational practices would acknowledge the correspondence with what is broadly defined as culturally feminine.

A minimal implication for gender research would be that the tautologies associated with a strict definitional overlap of men and masculinities—men dominate, therefore masculinities dominate, which accounts for the domination of men—should be resisted. Gender studies should more openly consider convergence, divergence, and complex interactions between various masculinities and femininities and the promoting of men's and women's opportunities and well-being. Ideas on masculinities and femininities in gender studies may need to be radically rethought as social changes transcend their empirical relevance and theoretical usefulness.

## APPENDIX. NOTES ON THE RESEARCH PROCESS

The research was carried out in close collaboration between myself and a (female) co-researcher (PhD student). The co-researcher did most of the empirical work, but I also did some interviews. Together we wrote a book covering a wide area of cultural and work aspects of the core organization, the occupation, and industry (Alvesson & Koping, 1993). I did the analysis and writing on the gender part of the study, reported at length in this paper. The empirical work included interviews, informal conversations, and 3 months of observations of everyday life, a combined conference/recreational trip, etc. Access was excellent—we even had the opportunity to observe an important meeting with a potential client. We formally interviewed an equal amount of male and female employees, together nine persons, for about 2 hours per person. Interviews were taperecorded and typed out. The interview guide included questions about the interviewees (background, development), their work, the organization, its history, social relations in the workplace, and comparisons between the organization and others in the industry as known by the interviewee. Instead of trying to force interview subjects into a prestructured logic and fixed categories they had time to talk about themselves, their work, their workplace, and their client relations relatively freely. After deciding that gender relations should be one of several important subthemes—about halfway through the study—we asked interviewees why there were no women in creative and leading positions. Interview accounts and detailed observation notes were continuously discussed between the two researchers. The research process gave priority to openness, curiosity and a sensitivity to what the interview subjects can offer in terms of unexpected insights and experiences rather than formal procedures and protocol. To describe the re-

search process in terms of the latter (a) gives a corrected, misleading picture of the interactive, messy, emergent nature of fieldwork familiar to all with an experience in ethnography (Clifford & Marcus, 1986), (b) draws attention away from what is significant, i.e., the interpretive/constructive nature of empirical work, (c) indicates that interview questions, etc. express standard meanings, rather than local, context-dependent ones, and (d) tends to support an outdated, neopositivistic epistemology (Alvesson & Sköldberg, forthcoming; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

A key feature of ethnographies is the combination of openness with an interpretive repertoire capable of registering/interpreting interesting aspects, close contact, and empathy with the people in the organization studied and the use of abstract concepts and ideas and an ability to theorize. This combination is difficult, the researcher risks going native for too long or being caught in one's own ideational world and prestructured understanding. Co-research, including the collaboration between a person working primarily empirically, concentrating more on closeness, empathy, and learning what the natives think they are up to, and another, preferably a senior researcher, to a larger extent concentrating on theory, critical analysis, and abstract thinking, may be productive, although some overlap in roles is necessary. It is, for example, possible to develop the relevant parts of the interpretive repertoire at the same time as the empirical work continues to a completely different extent than if the same person does all the empirical work and readings.

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