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**A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF GENDERED DISCOURSES OF  
SOUTH AFRICAN WOMEN IN MIDDLE MANAGEMENT**

by

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## ABSTRACT

This study is a qualitative exploration of the gendered discourses of South African women in middle management. It explores the locations and perspectives from which middle management women speak, the institutions and traditions that inform their discourses and the challenges to dominant discourses on gender present in their talk. It is conducted from a social constructionist framework.

The broader South African context is fraught with a contradiction between policy and practice. South Africa's progressive constitution does not erode women's tenuous and vulnerable position as is seen in the high incidence of violence against women, sexual harassment and women's specific vulnerability to and rates of HIV infection. This contradiction is also evident in the labour market where South Africa echoes a global tendency of the continuation of gender stratification in the workplace. This is characterised by a tendency towards gender traditional occupations, a continuing wage gap, discontinued career paths for women, gender stratification of task division at work and unequal work division on the home front. This results in continued gender stratification of management and executive management positions. Women make up approximately 50% of the global, economically active population yet they have not been successful in entering the management world with the same proportion.

Using social constructionism and a focus on discourse, this study examines the discursive construction of the gender stratification of the workplace. It starts by exploring how available literature on the topic constructs the problem as related to internal and individual matters, societal and social factors or organisational and institutional processes. It further explores the developments in the field of gender, discourse and organisations.

Interview data from semi-structured interviews with women in middle management are analysed using discourse analysis. Different and contradicting discourses emerge from this analysis illustrating different discourses and associated identity positions available to women. The discourse analysis shows how different and contradicting discourses support the status quo by structuring certain subject positions into desirable explications of femininity but also how these contradictions allow space for

resistance. The study argues that establishing a feminine identity remains vital to participants and that this requires ‘identity footwork’ within complex and contradictory discursive positions.

Key terms:

Social constructionism; feminism, discourse; discourse analysis; gender; women in management; organisational discourse; gender equity in organisations; the discursive construction of gender in organisations; contradiction; gender and identity.

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