

## CHAPTER 6

### THE PARTICIPANTS, INTERVIEWS AND DATA ANALYSIS

The previous chapter involved a description of the research position and the research methodology followed. In this chapter I introduce the participants, describe and reflect on the interviews and the interview process and then engage in a discourse analysis of the transcribed interview data. The first section of the chapter serves as an introduction to the participants and description of the interviews themselves followed by reflections on the interview process in general. The second section of the chapter involves the discourse analysis of the transcribed interview data.

#### Introducing the participants and interview reflections

From my research position, as described in chapter 5, it is important to reflect the situatedness of the researcher but also of the research participants. I therefore wish to introduce the research participants and briefly describe and reflect on the interviews with each of them individually. The descriptions and my reflections of the interviews are intentionally quite direct and personal. The direct and personal descriptions of the interview contexts and processes aim to embody the data that will be presented in the discourse analysis that will follow later in this chapter. It is important for me to provide an embodied and contextualised account of the process, not in order to provide more truth-value, but to bring visibility to some of the physical, emotional and contextual aspects often lost in the process of working with interview data. My reflections on the interviews themselves, as well as the interview process in general, are a form of self-reflection to give a more detailed account of my involvement in the research process.

#### *Linda*

Linda is a white English-speaking woman in her 40's. She is married and has one 5-year-old son. She is a senior manager in a telecommunications company. She is originally from the United States and has lived in South Africa since she came here as a post-graduate student.

*Interview reflections*

Linda received me for the interview in her very neat office wearing a long skirt with her hair loose, hanging down almost to her waist. Linda seemed keen to discuss the topic at hand and seemed to have done a lot of thinking about this issue. She discussed her experiences and her ideas with enthusiasm. She spoke with a lot of confidence as she expressed her ideas with certainty and clarity. The interaction between us involved her sharing her ideas with me and almost instructing me on the skills one needs to succeed. I felt somewhat inadequate in her presence, not professional or experienced enough and a bit out of place in the corporate environment.

*Magriet*

Magriet is a white Afrikaans-speaking woman in her early 40's. She is single, has never been married and has no children. She is a manager in a telecommunications company.

*Interview reflections*

She received me at her workplace and was dressed in a business suit. We had the interview in a boardroom with a round table. She seemed keen to help me and she participated with openness and ease. It was clear from the discussion that the topic was not something that she spent a lot of time thinking about and initially it was somewhat difficult for her to talk about this. She became more interested as the interview progressed and said that the interview situation prompted her to think about things she had not thought of before and that she would probably spend some time thinking about it after the interview. From a feminist perspective it then seems that the interview had a conscientising effect on her. I felt comfortable during the interview and was grateful for Magriet's warm and open way of approaching the interview.

*Nobesotho*

Nobesotho is a black woman in her 40's. She is married with two small children and she is a BEE (Black Economic Empowerment) Manager at a research institution.

*Interview reflections*

Nobesotho had to fetch me from another building as I could not find my way to her office. She was dressed in a blouse and long skirt with a scarf around her shoulders. She said that she had a sinus infection and needed to blow her nose a number of times during the interview. She spoke in a soft and gentle voice and answered the questions with ease. She did not seem too interested in the topic and almost apologised at the end of the interview, saying that she thought it must have been boring for me leaving me to think that she felt that she did not give me what I wanted. In this way, this interview did not develop into mutual exploration of the topic and in retrospect I wonder if different questions would have allowed the process to develop in a different way.

*Delia*

Delia is a white woman in her late thirties. She is single with no children and she works in the administration division of an engineering firm.

*Interview reflections*

I met Delia at her home one afternoon after work and she was still dressed in formal work clothes. After she had let the cat out and poured us a sherry, we started the conversation. Delia was keen to participate but worried that she might not give me the information I needed. She seemed quite uncomfortable with the tape recorder initially but seemed to get used to it as the interview progressed. From the way she answered questions and spoke about the topic, it seemed that she had not given much thought to the topic before. She seemed to enjoy talking about it and also seemed to enjoy thinking about her career as the interview progressed. She stated during the interview and afterwards that she had not given her career much thought before as it had just developed naturally.

*Catherine*

Catherine is a white English-speaking woman in her mid thirties. She is single with no children and is a Division Manager in an Engineering Consultancy.

*Interview reflections*

Catherine offered to come to my house for the interview. We sat at my dining room table in the afternoon, drinking juice while we spoke. I know Catherine from another non-work related context and had not discussed the topic of the research with her before. As the interview started and I asked her about her experience as a woman in the workplace she surprised me with a clear and concise summary of the issues she had encountered. She had clearly thought about the matter before and pointed out aspects that bothered her in terms of equality and the workplace. Her solution to the problem is to take a more humanitarian approach to people in the workplace. I enjoyed the interview which was short due both to time constraints and to the fact that she articulated her issues with clarity.

*Andy*

Andy is a black woman in her late thirties. She worked for government in the health field for many years and recently started her own consulting and coaching business.

*Interview reflections*

I met with Andy at her home. We sat outside on the veranda overlooking a big garden with lots of birds and the dog lying around our feet. Catherine was dressed casually in a t-shirt top and skirt. She was keen to talk about the topic and had a lot to say and it was quite a long interview. She spoke eloquently and had a light and bubbly way of describing the issues, using a lot of humour. The conversation developed into a comfortable co-construction of ideas and discourses and we both enjoyed the process and we were still talking as I was on my way out. Catherine and I shared many views and opinions on the topic and this clearly added to our capacity to co-construct and develop a very informal interview style.

*Dominique*

Dominique is a black woman in her 40's. She is divorced and lives with her teenage son. She is a vice-principal at a government school.

*Interview reflections*

I met with her at her home in the morning during school holidays. She was wearing an old t-shirt as she had just coloured her hair. She offered me coffee and we sat on the

couches in her lounge. Dominique feels strongly about women empowerment and has attended a number of courses on empowering oneself in the education field. She had a strong need to remain balanced and reasonable during the interview and wanted to give people the benefit of the doubt. Her approach was quite serious and the interview remained quite formal.

### *Gillian*

Gillian is an Afrikaans-speaking woman in her early 50's. She is divorced and has adult children. She is in the IT industry.

### *Interview reflections*

I met with Gillian one evening at her home and we sat at the dining room table while her two maltese poodles were playing wildly around our feet. She seemed somewhat uncomfortable with the tape recorder and also somewhat uncomfortable in talking about the topic. Her position was that women should not make too much of equality as it has mostly been obtained and my feeling was that she was trying to convince me not to make such a big deal about gender as the struggle for equality was complete. In retrospect I wondered how I could have phrased the questions differently so that she did not feel the need to convince me or so that we could engage in more of a conversation and co-construction on the topic.

### *Lulu*

Lulu is a black woman in her mid 30's. She works as a middle manager in the Human Resources division of a research institution. She is married with three small children.

### *Interview reflections*

Lulu received me in her office and we sat down at the boardroom table. She was dressed in a business suit. She was comfortable to talk and she was willing to participate. Lulu was also interested to hear about me and my experience and asked me if I had children and a family. Thinking and talking about this specific topic was easy for her and she had clear ideas about her choices and actions in terms of the issue. In this interview I needed to use a lot of paraphrasing and clarifying questions to enhance the flow of the conversation but I found the conversation satisfying and interesting. The questions as such did not seem to perturb her much.

### *Fatima*

Fatima is an Indian woman in her late 30's. She is single with no children and she currently works for a think tank organisation but has recently been awarded a scholarship to do a PhD at Harvard University in the United States and was due to leave for the States in the upcoming months.

### *Interview reflections*

Fatima received me at her home, served tea she recently brought from China and we sat in her lounge. She was formally dressed and very well groomed. She was very keen to discuss the topic and also keen to be a participant and to help. She had a lot to say and seemed to enjoy the interview process. It was clear that some of the questions made her think and she responded to this by really revisiting her experience and sometimes expanding on her position. She was quite relaxed and managed to express herself with ease, using a lot of anecdotes and experiences. Her answers were generally quite long and I asked minimal questions, generally questions related to the topic without needing to prompt, clarify or rephrase much. She was also quite direct about her opinion and did not really mince her words. This was also one of the longer interviews as she elaborated on most questions and topics at great length. This interview also had quite a light feel to it despite the fact that she also described a difficult journey to get to where she is.

### *Personal reflections on the interview process*

I generally felt quite comfortable during the interviews as the participants were all keen to assist me and they were generous with their time and their presence. While all of the women were available to help, some participants were more interested in the topic with a lot to say about it while others were less interested in it.

I generally introduced the research with a general comment such as “I am doing research on women in the workplace” and started many of the interviews by asking women to reflect on their experience of being a woman in the workplace. This clearly set up a certain expectation in terms of the content of the research topic but also in terms of my approach to the topic. A study of women in the workplace generally implies that issues of discrimination and gender stratification are under investigation and it seems to me that women generally have a position about the necessity of such

work. Some women feel strongly about the issue and the need to explore it, others have not given it much thought, others feel that it is no longer an issue necessary to discuss or explore, and others became aware of gender issues as the interviews progressed. In terms of an interview situation, it then makes sense that interviews with women who share concerns about the research topic have an easy conversational flow with a sense of being co-constructed. If one considers this research as activism, the interviews were a process of keeping some fires burning brightly, lighting a few new fires and also blowing on the dead embers of others.

Given the above, women who had different views on the topic felt that they were not giving me what I wanted and seemed almost apologetic about it. What contributed to this further was that some of the questions asked during the interviews were based on literature that pointed to gender differences in the workplace in terms of specific topics such as task divisions and salary. I was often curious about how their experiences were similar or different to those mentioned in the literature and enquired about this. This sometimes led to a situation where it seemed that I was ‘looking’ for a particular answer. I wonder how I could have enquired differently about these issues without introducing an expectation of a certain answer. This is probably one of the drawbacks of using an interview guide and introducing topics in the interview as the participant might experience this as probing for something. Not asking a specific question might communicate more openness or otherwise one could state specifically what the intention of a question is or talk about the ‘differences’ between the researcher and the participant openly during the interview.

My purpose with these questions on specific topics related to the literature was generally to provide structure to the conversation as the introduction of specific topics allows one to cover more conversational ground. Despite the drawback mentioned above, questions that introduced a new topic, or different aspect of the topic, seemed to work in that they opened new ground for discussion and sometimes managed to introduce and elicit new ideas in the conversation.

An interview situation with time constraints and an audio-recorder has its limitations in that the nature of it constricts or limits the spontaneous flow of the conversation to a certain extent. Despite this, the questions asked in the interviews, both questions

relating to experience and questions relating to participants' opinions of certain ideas or topics, did provide data to work with. Switching off the tape recorder at the end of the interviews had an interesting impact as it served as the punctuation at the end of the interview and then puts the conversation into a reflective space about the interview that just happened. Some of the participants stated afterwards that they enjoyed the interview and that it stimulated them to think about the topic but also about themselves and their careers. Some asked if the interview was satisfactory and if they had been able to give me what I needed. Spontaneous conversations then sometimes developed that I wished I could have recorded as they happened.

I think that my race also played an important role in the interview. As a white woman doing interviews I found that other white women generally did not comment on their race except for referring to it in terms of possible disadvantage, noting that being white in South Africa placed certain limitations on their career path. Black women also did not really refer to their race. When I gently enquired about race I found a general reluctance to talk about it, especially in interviews with black women. This is hardly surprising given that race is a very sensitive topic in South Africa and not something that people discuss easily or openly. This reluctance was probably partly due to the racial difference between us but also partly due to the artificial and somewhat uncomfortable nature of an interview situation such as this. So in effect, in interviews with white women whiteness attained invisibility and in interviews with black women it became something difficult to talk about. It would seem that gender remains an easier topic to discuss than race in a woman-to-woman interview where some aspects of a shared understanding of being a woman are implicit. My gender therefore also played an important role in the interviews. A male interviewer would have changed the nature of the interviews. A woman-to-woman interview does create a sense of shared understanding and I also think that it makes conversations about inequality easier. I have found this in my personal life where discussing gender equality is often easier with women than men. Conversations with men are often more careful and more tentative.

#### Discourse Analysis of Interview Data

The previous section was an introduction to the participants, descriptions of the interviews and reflection on the interview process as a whole. With this as context and



background, the next section involves an analysis of the transcribed interview data. The procedure of discourse analysis I followed was discussed in chapter 5. Appendix B further provides a step-by-step illustration of my work with one of the interviews and provides the reader with an illustration of how I reached conclusions based on raw interview data.

One of the most striking aspects of the analysed texts and the patterns and discourses that emerge from them is the complex and contradictory ways in which being female and being male are constructed and this is particularly pertinent in terms of the discursive construction of women and femininity. Contradictions abound and the task of separating different discourses is difficult but still indicated, perhaps particularly because of the complex nature of it. The discussion that follows will therefore attempt to isolate and discuss different discourses that inhabit the texts. This process is, however, similar to identifying separate strands of a web where perturbing one strand invariably perturbs and moves other strands as well. As such the discussion will also aim to include broader parts of the web. I will start the discussion by focusing on the different constructions of femininity and being female in the workplace.

#### *The Career Woman Versus the Workingwoman*

A discourse of the career woman inhabited many of the texts, albeit in different forms. The career woman discourse is constructed by the notion that some women are driven by a strong desire to get to the top and are therefore career women. These women place a high emphasis on job titles and status in the organisation and seek to achieve the highest level possible. The opposite of the career woman is a woman who is just doing her work (I will refer to her as the workingwoman) because she enjoys what she does and wants to do it well but she is not driven to reach the top and does not try to find ways to succeed. She is not so driven but can still be very hardworking and committed although she is not motivated by a drive to succeed in terms of status.

In terms of the career woman discourse, participants positioned themselves in terms of it by either distancing themselves from this position, for example by explicitly stating that they are not career women or by aligning themselves with the career woman deliberately.

Gillian starts her interview with the statement:

I just wanted to work .... I have never been a career woman. I have never been a driven person. I just do what I have to do, and what I enjoy.

She continues to define a career woman “as a person who wants to get to the top”. In contrast, she feels “I have never felt I want to achieve. I want to achieve in what I am doing now. I don’t want to achieve to make progress”.

She makes it clear that she enjoys her work, and this aspect also features in other conversations of participants who chose to distance themselves from the career woman. They indicate how they enjoy their work, how they spend a lot of time working and even how the other aspects of their lives suffer because of work but they state at the same time that they are not career women as they are not motivated by a need to get to the top. For these participants, the position of the career woman seems an uncomfortable position to adopt, almost as if being a career woman is something to be ashamed of, to be avoided or at least not admit to. However, not being a career woman does not translate into working less or even not enjoying one’s work. Magriet illustrates this when she advises young women to know who they are but not in “an ambitious women’s group” way.

The construction of the career woman is, on the other hand, embraced by other participants who place themselves clearly in this position, and describe themselves as being both hardworking and ambitious. Taking this position involves a distance from ‘mere’ workingwomen. As Linda (who describes herself as a career woman) states: “not all women are highly motivated and aggressive”. There is a mutual distancing process happening here.

One of the central characteristics of the career woman, as she is discursively constructed here, is ambition. Ambition features in many of the texts, often in complex and contradictory ways. For one, it has the power to categorise women into either career women or working women. The career woman is ambitious but the workingwoman is not and therefore ambition is something that working women are cautious of. Ambition here is constructed as both a need and a motivator or driver. It

is a need to get to the top and it is seen as being driven by an internal force. The use of it in many of the texts is ambivalent and contradictory: women will describe how hard they work, how motivated they are and how they act above and beyond the call of duty, but, at the same time, they do not consider themselves to be ambitious.

Delia also does not align herself with the career woman and says

I don't know. I don't live for my career you know. I don't feel that I have to reach the highest position or that I have to make my mark but it just happens. I just get involved with things. ... In terms of my company I am actually quite senior there and this is strange for me as I never thought that that is what I want to do.

In the interview with Magriet, she commented on ambition a number of times. First she said: "It must be because I don't have ambition to reach the next level. People sense that I am not competing for it" and later she states "I can say with all honesty, it is not my ambition to reach the next title but I do want acknowledgement. I want people to see that I am good at what I do."

I was curious about what seems to be a contradiction and when I asked her to reflect on this she responded by saying: "I want to find a niche for myself where I can know that nobody can do what I can. So if that is perhaps ambition, then I suppose I have it". And further on she comments: "The financial hierarchy does not matter, what matters is that I want to make a mark. That is probably ambition in a way."

Magriet's initial ways of talking about ambition are amended almost in the form of an admission of guilt. As if to say, 'you caught me out, I am actually ambitious'. Ambition is also associated more with 'women's libbers' (the construction of feminists and women's libbers will be discussed in more detail later).

There is therefore an opposition between the career woman and the woman who works, and participants generally took positions in terms of this. Within this opposition lies another discourse, generally not explicitly stated but often implicitly present: the discourse of the bitch. The bitch is a woman who is too aggressive in the

workplace and generally constructed as a “*big, big* turn off professionally” (as described by Linda). Men do not respect a bitch and neither do other women. The bitch breaks all taboos by not remaining feminine. The discourse of the bitch is an implicit and explicit presence in the texts and definitely viewed as a position to be distanced from. The bitch is implicitly present in much of the talk on being a woman in the workplace in that women make sure that they construct themselves as different from the bitch and distance themselves from her.

The discourse of the bitch is a dominant social discourse and seems to become internalised as a frame that serves to evaluate much of what is said about being a woman in the workplace. It is as if the images and memory of women ‘who act like men’ (as it is often described in everyday talk) are present. Images of these kinds of women (Margaret Thatcher or *The Devil Wears Prada*) loom in the background and warn the speaker against certain positions and the social rejection they involve. So if a woman is brave enough to align with the career woman discourse it becomes important to distance oneself from the bitch, explicitly so, and to make a clear commitment to the value of remaining feminine. As Linda (who describes herself as a career woman) stated: “I expect men to treat me like a lady but you can only expect a man to treat you like a lady if you act like a lady”. Women who have made it to the top are then described as women who have become bitches. Here Fatima says: “On the flipside of the coin, women that get to the top are either real bitches because they fight so hard and they have to be constantly a mean person to get there” and Andy reflects on this dilemma by stating that “executive women have two choices, they either have to become like a boy’s boy, you know, so they have to play golf ... or they become the bitch. You know, she is hard core”. The awareness of the very negative characteristics of the bitch seems to be present or at least inform a lot of identity work in women and can act as a barrier or inhibitor in terms of work behaviour. It is as if the bitch presents a line that should not be crossed and occupational functioning is therefore not only evaluated in terms of success but also in terms of the extent to which the success is achieved without becoming the bitch. This view of women at the top (by participants) is yet another distancing manoeuvre, another way of being different from women who make it.

This opposition between the career woman and the workingwoman can act as a discursive mechanism that maintains the status quo, with a warning towards those who choose to be a career woman, not to step over the line of femininity. Yet at the same time, this opposition makes it possible to slip into a committed working life, almost unseen and without having to be accused by the anti-bitch internal and external warning system. Distance from the career woman gives a strange permission and excuse that claims that even though the woman is working hard and committed to work, she cannot be categorised into a position that undermines her identity and position as a woman. This makes it possible to climb the career ladder and get promoted without compromising feminine identity.

The necessity to distance oneself from the career woman points to another more fundamental discourse where the combination of the concepts ‘work’ and ‘woman’ is still in some way considered to be irregular or non-standard. Perhaps more accurate here is the combination of career and woman. Working is one thing, having a career is another and remains something that has to be justified if one is a woman. Given workplace statistics, this notion seems almost ludicrous and too outdated to still have any persuasive power. Most people today who consider themselves reasonable would probably challenge the idea that there is some discursive structure that does not reconcile having a career and being a woman, seeing that this practice is commonplace in our society today.

Exploring the presence of this almost antiquated discourse would involve greater detailed reflections on how women and womanhood are constructed in the texts and this is what follows next in the discussion.

The construction of what it means to be a woman and also what is required of women is a discursive quagmire. It is messy, unpredictable, you never know what your next step will find or where it will take you.

#### *The Natural Differences Discourse*

The natural differences discourse (Dick & Nadin, 2006) as it was discussed in chapter 4 seems present and prevalent in the participants’ talk and presents itself in a number of different ways. The natural differences discourse is a discourse that calls on the

commonsense notion that women and men are naturally different and that these differences cannot be explained away. (The term commonsense here refers to ideas that are taken up in dominant discourses and everyday talk that have gained taken-for-granted truth value and are rarely questioned.) The natural difference discourse has a discursive mechanism that is sometimes used to support the status quo of gendered structures as it explains and therefore justifies differential treatment. When referring to how men and women are different, participants do so with ease, generally, as it normally only requires confirming some commonsense notion of womanhood. There are a number of differences that are alluded to and employed in explanations.

To begin with, women are constructed as being emotional, as Linda says: “Women are emotional, it’s the way we are built, we are more emotional, we tend to worry about the detail, we tend to worry about so-and-so said this and so-and-so said that”. She also states that “I don’t know one woman that doesn’t display some or other emotional issue”, excluding herself from this, however.

The natural differences between men and women are also used to explain why complete gender equity will never be attained. Linda formulates this as “human nature. Not all women are highly motivated and aggressive” and she continues to say that “I think it’s human nature and I don’t expect there to be gender equity but I expect there to be fair treatment in the workplace and home”. Gender equity is therefore not obtainable partly due to how women (and men) are made.

Then, in contradiction to the notion that women are too emotional and not ambitious enough arises the notion that women get the job done. Many of the participants voice the opinion that women are extremely efficient, sometimes more so than men. Linda states that “I believe that depending on the woman, women are actually more competent and efficient than men above and beyond all the other issues and challenges”. Catherine’s MD told her that “he preferred to work with women. He found they are more capable of getting the job done, and less involved in politics and if he wanted something done he would give it to a woman”. Magriet says that companies realise that “as long as your ‘core’ has more women, you make sure that you get the job done”. She then adds another interpretation to the competence discourse by stating “I think it is everybody’s excuse that women are more

‘dedicated’ and that they can ‘multitask’ and all those good things. I think the reality is that it is simply easier for men to say no”. Here she accuses the discourse of female competence to be a way of getting more out of women. I will come back to this in the discussion of women and their workloads later in the discussion.

So far, in this discussion of the differences between women and men, we see again some contradiction. Women are talked about as being too emotional, not ambitious enough but at the same time also more competent and efficient than men. These constructions are hard to reconcile, on the one hand opening space for resistance as new definitions can emerge but on the other it provides the space for the discourse of woman and career as incompatible to remain invisible yet present.

As seen above, the commonsense idea that women are ‘built’ this way is used to explain this difference. This turn to nature and biology makes a statement irrefutable (reminding us of another discourse that constructs differences between men and women as God given). The differences constructed as part of our natural structure relate to aspects that are considered less desirable in the workplace, such as being emotional or not driven enough but also relates to aspects that are considered useful such as being hardworking and getting the job done.

There is another difference between women and men that is noted in the analysed texts: women can’t say no. Men can and do so with confidence. As an example, Delia notes that “if something has to be done and nobody puts up a hand” she does it as “I am just like that” and “ I just don’t say no to extra work”. This difference between men and women is not constructed in the same manner as the difference discourse discussed so far in that it is not described as given or ordained by nature. It is depicted as a flaw that women have. “Stumbling blocks again ... You can’t say no, so you are seen as the person that will do everything” (Magriet). This flaw also results in larger workloads in “having more work than I can handle” (Delia).

Magriet notes that “it is as if men get away with saying they don’t have enough time or they don’t have enough resources” where this is “definitely not with women”.

When Gillian talks about her workload and explains that she has a bigger workload, she says “It’s something you take. It’s your choice. It’s my fault”. This last statement of “it’s my fault” is significant and warrants further discussion.

### *It’s My Fault*

There are three discourses at play in this statement. The first is an internalising discourse where events and experiences, in this case, inequitable distribution of workload, is viewed as due to internal processes. This means that what could be framed as an interpersonal or social process is rather framed within an individual structure where the individual is considered as source of the process and therefore to blame for it. Social or interpersonal explanations for behaviour are scarce in the text and relate mostly to culture (another discourse that will be discussed in more detail later) where internalising language is very common with statements such as “it is just the inner me” (Magriet) or “it is not because I am a woman but because I am me” (Magriet) or “it is just the way I am” (Delia). Many women in these interviews described that they work too hard, that they struggle to say no and also noted that it was their fault. This theme then runs like a leitmotif through many interviews.

Further, the internalising aspect, the inability to say no to work, is described as a flaw that is particular to women in general.

In my view, we are all doing it. Submissive roles? I don’t know but my view is that we all want to succeed ... or perhaps we are allowing it to happen in a way, a bit (Gillian).

We do it to ourselves, probably, I don’t know (Magriet).

The only thing is about men, that they are not hard workers and that they don’t share information. That’s the only inequalities I can think of. But we allow them (Gillian).

This introduces a second discourse of psychopathology. These flaws are generally seen as psychological issues and therefore intervention on the individual level is required. Apart from the inability to say no, most of the women also mentioned the



well-known psychological drawback: lack of self-esteem or self-confidence, an aspect that many women mention when they describe their career obstacles. Statements such as “I think my biggest obstacle is myself” (Gillian), “it is about self image. We grow up being taught to be the least and that is where it comes from” (Magriet) or “We’ve got bad self-esteem and we need to achieve, we need to achieve” (Gillian). The idea that career progress would have been faster had it not been for this problem is also quite prominent with Catherine mentioning “my lack of self-confidence is a stumbling block. I could have progressed in certain areas earlier if I’d actually had the confidence to do those things”. Magriet reiterates the same notion when she says “Perhaps if I had more self-confidence I could have been in a different place right now”.

A striking feature of the use of the words ‘fault’ and ‘blame’ is that they are solely reserved or used in conjunction with the individual woman or women as a group. These words do not feature in the analysed texts in any other way (referring to men, society, the workplace) and even with a strong statement such as “men are lazy” (made by Gillian) the woman herself is still to blame for accepting this condition.

As such, internalising and pathologising discourses are rooted in a thorough individualism. The individual woman is to blame for her lack of self-confidence and her inability to say no. Sometimes this flaw is seen as the result of one’s culture or how one grew up. “We grow up being taught to be the least and that is where it comes from” (Magriet) or “I believe a lot of that comes through the home”, yet these constructions are an afterthought, a possible explanation but it does not translate into versions of reality that require social change. It is said with an acceptance and despite the fact that it might be due to a certain cultural upbringing. The flaw is still constructed as the woman’s own fault. In this vein Fatima states:

You know, I think you kind of become complacent, you kind of accept it a bit that you’re a woman and there are certain limitations. I don’t know why, maybe it is part of your socialising and upbringing. But you don’t, you say ‘well...’. So I am looking at myself critically and realise that complacency view of some of those things.

The individualist discourse, as it is prominent here, has a number of effects. It smooths over social issues or inequities and background. It locates the individual as the site for blame and also as the site of intervention. It is a form of essentialism with an acquired truth-value. In some ways this creates a sense of possibility in the sense that the individual can do something about it. The function of the individualist discourse here is that it constructs a sense of agency for an individual in that the point of intervention is the individual and change seems possible, as it only requires that the individual adapt to the situation. This construction detracts the focus from social inequities and serves to sustain the status quo as it draws the attention away from the social, into the realm of the individual.

The individualist discourse draws attention to the individual and particularly the psychology of the individual. This illustrates the centrality of the psychological discourse and the psy-complex as described by Rose (1985) as a causal and explanatory model in everyday talk. The psychological discourse, or rather, commonsense notions of it, is a prominent lens and is used to understand the person or the situation. The version of reality as described by this discourse prescribes individual intervention and attention. It encourages the individual to grow and to overcome obstacles, as these are largely internal anyway. It seems that individual psychology has won primacy as a causal and explanatory model in the context of middle management.

Other psy-complex terms also emerge such as the workaholic as seen in the following description by Andy:

But very clear was that I was at the bottom of the rung uhm, that I really have to work to prove myself. And I did, you know. I became a workalcoholic, really slogged. And it was also very clear that I worked harder than the male counterparts. Because almost that mentality of, you have to be more, run faster, you know.

#### *Hard Work Above All*

The phrase “hard work” is another leitmotif that runs through the text. This individual discourse is also seen in a commitment to hard work. Hard work is constructed as a

central aspect of any successful career path. There seems to be an almost unwavering commitment to this discourse and it is rarely questioned or resisted. Hard work is discursively constructed as an absolute essential to advance in a career but also something that women do quite naturally and easily. Hard work is required by the organisation and is also rewarded. The ability to work hard also adds worth to an individual. Individuals and here, particularly women who work hard, are considered to be valuable and worthy members of society. Most of the women I spoke to referred to themselves as hard workers and many mentioned that this was sometimes at the expense of the rest of their lives. This reminds of the protestant work ethic and is another expression of individualism.

Magriet describes her career progress: “You know, it was hard work, it was very hard work because I am a workaholic and I don’t have balance. This is a big problem on another level ... yes I believe I worked hard”. Linda also agrees with this: “What I can tell you is that I got where I am through hard work, integrity, honesty and by playing the political game”. Linda also mentions: “I think that the harder people work at their career, the more successful they are. I believe that ... if you work hard and lobby hard and network hard for a specific position ... I do believe there is a very good chance of that happening”.

In fact, when someone no longer wishes to work this hard, it is considered an obstacle and the only option for the person is to leave. Gillian states this clearly when she says:

I think my obstacle currently is that I don’t have the heart for it anymore. I want to get out of it. I am tired of corporate life, I am tired of the constant pressure and the unruly hours that you have to work. I think there is more in life, more to life than this.

Where hard work is described as a feature of success, it also emerges that women have to work harder than men and many comment on an increased workload because they are women and suffer from what they frame as the psychological flaw of the inability to say no.

In reflecting on the impact of gender on career, the issue of workload emerged a number of times. Referring to her gender, Gillian states that “I don’t think that it had an impact on my career at all. Because I *strongly* believe that I had equal opportunities, all the time. But I *do* believe that it has an impact on my *workload*”. Delia describes the impact of this as “the only thing it really influences is that I might have more work than I can handle” and “I sometimes miss the time to think more about things. There is sometimes too little time to really think things through, you just do. Either to finish things or just to get to everything”. There is some resistance to the idea of taking on a larger workload, and seeing it as a fault and problem implies that it is seen as an unwanted state of affairs.

The same cannot be said for the discourse of hard work. The discourse of hard work and its particular articulation for women ‘who can’t say no’ supports the institution of the organisation in its current structure. As I spoke to women and read the texts, Coser’s idea of the greedy organisation came to mind strongly (Coser in Maier, 1999). Very little implicit or explicit resistance to the discourse of hard work is to be found in the texts. That one must work extremely hard is constructed as a given and part of corporate culture and this is not questioned. Dealing with its effects becomes the individual’s problem. Linda has a husband at home dealing with all the complexities of a private life. Magriet reflects on this and says:

I don’t want to say that this is why I am still single, you know, but you are drained emotionally at the end of the day so you don’t want to go out and visit. And on weekends you feel that you have to recharge for the week ahead. So I don’t think I realise what a big role it played.

### *Elusive Balance*

The discursive opposite of hard work as represented in these texts is not laziness but rather work/life balance. A number of women talk about work/life balance as something desirable and something to strive for. Balance here refers to the ability to work hard but to still have a life outside work that is satisfying and rewarding. It is languaged as something you must possess, once again still firmly rooted in the individual discourse. Not possessing this attribute is a problem and something that needs to be addressed.

When I conducted the interviews I was curious to know about the relationship between work life and private life and what prompted my interest in this was literature that discussed the impact of domestic life on women's careers. My aim was to allow the women some space during the interviews to reflect on the relationship between their work lives and private lives. My intention was to frame the question in such a way that they could respond to it as they wanted to. As the interviews progressed I used the phrase work/life balance when enquiring about this topic without intentionally enquiring about this discourse. The work/life balance discourse as it has emerged in recent years has become part of employers' and employees' vocabulary in an attempt to address the distress that emanates from very demanding work environments. It also forms part of the public discursive space in women's magazines, newspapers, and television programmes, and is powerfully constructed in the social domain.

It is ironic but not surprising that it is deployed here as another yardstick to measure oneself against and to fall short of. Magriet confesses: "I know there is a problem with balance in my life" and Delia is proud to announce: " I have at least started cycling and I've started with adventure racing ... so yes I am now getting a bit of balance". It seems that the introduction of this term work/life balance into these women's lives did not relieve their distress but rather introduced another possible pathology to suffer from and a commodity to obtain. Thus the self is now policed with this form of the psy-complex, according to the normative expectation of 'balance' to fit into the corporate machine as a mentally healthy individual.

In terms of this issue only one participant is not distressed. Catherine states that work/life balance "has been a feature of most of my career". She therefore feels that she has reached this expectation.

The reverberation of the discourse of hard work is thus strongly present here and it has an ambiguous hold on the person. It is something that is required of an individual, it adds self-worth and if you happen to be a woman, you have a natural talent for it, yet much of this positive attribute can also be a flaw that needs to be addressed. If you

take on too much work you are not assertive enough and if you don't have work/life balance it reflects poorly on your psychological make-up.

### *Public and Private Split*

Other aspects on the relationship between work life and private life also emerged here. The work life and private life are constructed as two separate aspects that need to be split, and encroachment of one on the other is undesirable and possibly damaging. Linda reports that she has had mentors in her life but also that she would not discuss "anything personal" with them "never, never, ever, ever. I will not discuss any personal matter ... I will discuss no *petty* [my emphasis] matter with them whatsoever".

Women talk about ways and mechanisms used to keep these two separate, generally finding ways to keep a private and home life from being visible in or hampering the work life:

I will not say that I have two different personalities but I think each one of us *does* have it. I walk into a meeting and I look and talk the way I do. But in social situations it is harder (Magriet).

Fatima reflects on this and says:

But I think you know, when you look back also, you pay a price, because all of us, especially Indian women that get to the top end up sacrificing. You give your whole life for your career and you wanted to achieve and prove this, but at the same time you lose things like marriage, love and children, those kind of things, you know?

### *The Mother*

The split between public and private life is also very pertinent in terms of children and motherhood. This aspect of women's lives is kept separate from the working life, generally with some effort. Single women feel that they are lucky, as they do not have to deal with the issue of children as they see what difficulties mothers are experiencing. The presence of children in a woman's life requires planning and

support from either husbands or family members and the possibility of motherhood is also a factor employers consider. Catherine reports that she was told “ja, but you are going to go off and have a child” and that “in terms of me being in management or me having a role in the company ... it’s a factor considered” and that “she is not as secure as a male counterpart”.

As with other private life issues, motherhood and its effects should not be allowed to encroach on the workplace but the assumption is that it will eventually do so, due to its very nature. Single women with no children are described by themselves and others as lucky as they are not burdened with such matters that would inevitably become an issue as they see it happen with their colleagues. When Lulu discovered that I had no children she said: “so you don’t have kids yet. One of the lucky people”.

Women with children describe themselves as lucky if they have supportive spouses or family members or if their children were bigger when they started working. “I was fortunate in that my family lives close by, so I had that support structure” (Dominique). The motherhood discourse constructs motherhood as such that the responsibilities would inevitably be problematic for the mother in terms of her work environment. Lulu says: “when you start having children your attention gets divided”.

Therefore the expectation is that most women who are mothers will have problems in this regard and that motherhood makes it harder to maintain a public life that is separate from the private. This is given and not resisted. If motherhood does not cause the expected problems this is considered to be an exception to the rule and something to be grateful for. The construction of motherhood as an aspect that invariably implies difficulties or problems, postulates motherhood as something that does play a role and does impact career functioning.

Fatherhood is something that does not enter the discursive space prominently and it is a clear absence, and not part of the discursive structures around children. From this perspective, the presence of children in one’s life is another aspect that should be kept very separate from the working environment if one wants to avoid one’s career being negatively influenced by it. In terms of parenting, there is an almost unwavering consensus that it largely remains the responsibility of the mother. Fathers are

constructed as those who help out, who assist but who cannot take away the ultimate fact that the responsibility of parenting is that of the woman. Motherhood is more fundamental than fatherhood in parenthood and this is inevitable: “you are still the mother, you are still the wife, you need to do what you need to do” (Dominique). Nobesotho agrees with this when she says: “but most of the time, men just don’t do enough in terms of taking care of the children, but I feel that my husband does more than what most men do”.

Motherhood thus creates the need for another fundamental split between private and work lives. The split is also one of paid and unpaid work where domestic work and childcare is unpaid work that is required but not acknowledged. The notion of domestic work as unpaid work is a silence in the text and none of the participants refer to the unpaid nature of domestic work. One wonders if they are paying other women to perform some of the domestic work. Children are also a messy aspect that should not be visible in a working life as they are an outcome of the unruly nature of female bodies that will be discussed later.

### *The Wife*

The position of the wife accompanies the position of mother and the wife is a subject position that remains fixed with certain expectations and behaviours. If you are a wife, there are certain things you need to do. If you have a wife it makes other options available. When talking about working late, Lulu relates that “my sister would say ‘bye bye guys, let me leave, you have wives who fetch the kids, I am the wife so let me fetch the kids’” and Andy notes that “if I had a wife, my wife would also be taking my kids to the doctor”. Being the wife is problematic because “in the work place, you are judged by whether you can stay until eight” (Lulu) but one’s position as wife makes this problematic. Despite the fixedness of the role of the wife, being a housewife is not the solution. Workingwomen distance themselves from housewives and construct housewives as less intelligent and less independent. The discourse of housewives is evident when Lulu says: “there are housewives who are not stupid. So I wanted to be a housewife but it is not for me. I get bored, I get irritated with this begging like a child”.



Being a woman who works or a “mom who works” (Andy) is a way of avoiding the negative connotations of being a housewife, of being dependent, uninteresting and even less intelligent, but working does not change the role of the wife. The wife remains and has to be managed. Thus being a woman, an adult, independent, intelligent woman requires one to work and being a housewife is constructed as not fully reaching one’s adult potential and in this way remaining childlike. Having a career or being employed is constructed as a necessary developmental task to complete in order to be seen as a fully functioning adult woman. At the same time, one must not take the working too far, by becoming like a man or neglecting fundamental aspects such as motherhood, wifeness and one’s femininity. Where there was a time where being a housewife was constructed as the ultimate expression of femininity and what is considered to be feminine, this is now considered as a lesser form of womanhood. The norm of womanhood now includes a career, independence (but not too much) and intelligence (not taken too far) as part of the construction.

#### *The Feminists and the Importance of Reason*

The feminist is another category of woman that is present in the texts and constructed as an undesirable position that participants tend to distance themselves from. The dominant social discourse of the ‘bra-burning feminist’ is invoked with ease when the feminist comes into the conversation. The feminist or women’s libber is constructed as a woman who is radical, who takes things too far, who is hard and competitive, who wants to compete with men. She is aggressive and she is also unreasonable. Most women in this study construct themselves as reasonable, and the discursive persuasive mechanism of most of the interviews is one of reason. Reason is used as a device to convince and to situate oneself as a reasonable person/adult/woman. Feminists on the other hand are unreasonable and take things too far by not approaching the issue within the frame of reasonability. They act on feelings of hostility and they become aggressive. They do not wish to accept the status quo of the natural differences between men and women, they argue against the nature of things. They are therefore somewhat unnatural, they do not act according to their nature and design. When talking about feminists or radicals or competitive women, participants do not need to do a lot of explaining as there is an implicit understanding of what is meant with this. This reflects some of the dominance and the singularity of the ‘bra-burning feminist’ discourse and this discourse of the feminist has very little complexity and

contradiction in everyday talk. As there is no contradiction or complexity in everyday use of this discourse, use of it does not require explanation or effort as it is self-evident.

This is in contrast to other categories of being female such as the career woman or the mother that were discussed earlier. These categories are socially constructed in more complex ways and therefore require that the participants explain in detail what ‘version’ of worker or mother they are talking about. The discourse of the feminist as used here is assumed to be clear and refers to a singular undesirable category of woman. It therefore only requires a word or phrase to be evoked and also to be distanced from: “not because I was radical in any way” (Dominique) or “not in the form of an ambitious ‘women’s group’” (Magriet).

Some participants generally urge young women to “go ahead without having this anti men competitive nature” (Fatima) because being competitive results in losing “that wonderful feminine compassionate side” (Fatima). They are urged not to go overboard: “Now you go overboard the other way” (Gillian) and not to have such a strong focus on men:

Usually when I read things in magazines and so on about the oh, men are doing this to us and so. I don’t have that thing. What I have is what this person is doing. I don’t feel like this is a man’s doing (Nobesotho).

One or two participants urge women to compete:

And also just for them to, as I have done, keep on empowering. Because if you are a woman and you are empowered, then you can compete with the men. If you have done nothing to empower yourself then you won’t be able to control it, and you won’t be able to do that (Dominique).

### *Other Women*

One of the aspects of the texts that I found most interesting was the construction of other women in the workplace. As we have seen in the discussion so far, there is a lot of distancing from certain female positions in the text. The woman who works

distances herself from the career woman and both the career woman and the woman who works distance themselves from the bitch. Women further generally position and situate themselves as not being feminists or radicals.

Other women in the workplace are constructed as problematic and obstacles as can be seen in the following quotations:

Andy: And as women ... we are so scared of each other. You know. Because the yardstick is 'Are the boys going to like you or not?' You know.

Annalie: Are you saying that women are competing for the boys?

Andy: For the patriarchy. For a space in the patriarchy. So even the women's networks are networks who by design, complement the patriarchy. There is no network that is completely outside of the patriarchy.

Andy further describes her biggest career obstacles as "other women. Women in power. And I think that the thing about that, about other women is that we are so easily threatened by each other".

Nobesothe also formulates this:

The problem is we might think men are standing against us in terms of our advancement. But I think it is worse what we women are doing to each other. Whether it is white women or black women. It is worse what we women are doing to each other. I think men have become more accepting about women in the workplace, than women being more accepting of other women advancing towards and beyond where they actually are.

Dominique reflects on her experience as a young woman:

I haven't really found that with the males, rather with some of the older females you know, because they look at you, you're young 'what do you know about the thing?' you know. So you gotta, even with the females you've gotta work harder to prove yourself because women can be just as bad as what men

are. Hey, they pull you down and especially when they see that you are younger and that you've made this progress.

Other women also try too hard to prove a point:

But other women feel that 'I can do it' and work long hours, get worn out and all those things because you are trying to cover. The day is eight working hours, but you work ten or fifteen because you want to cover everything.

Other women are constructed as competitive and as trying to hold other women down. The construction of women is that they fear each other and compete with each other. Where men are constructed as forming networks and supporting each other, women are doing the opposite. The discourse of other women being problematic has the function of isolating the speaker from other women, distancing herself from them and therefore taking a stance of a counter identity. This distance and counter identity can say 'I am the only one who deserves to be here' or 'I am not like those who act against female nature'. The distancing from other women provides legitimacy, a permission to be here, suggesting that being in the workplace is problematic to begin with and that it therefore requires careful identity-footwork. The distancing also creates isolation between women and reminds of the isolation of the Panopticon regulation happens through separation and self-regulation.

The discourse of women being competitive and aggressive towards each other is an interesting contrast to the discourse of women being cooperative, soft and focused on relatedness. On the one hand women are naturally caring and soft and feminine, and on the other they compete with each other and undermine each other in the workplace.

### *The Female Body*

Most of the women in this study were asked about their experience of having a female body in the workplace. The most prominent construction associated with this question was dress and dress code, how to dress and what to wear to be considered professional. The body in the workplace needs to be structured or shaped into something that is professional. The professional dress code becomes a way of creating good impressions, protecting oneself against unwanted sexual advances (also

encouraging wanted sexual advances for other women) and making statements of identity. This was also apparent during the interviews and there was a remarkable difference between women in their work clothes and women in casual wear.

The female body is, however, unruly and has an impact on a woman's functioning. Menstruation causes distress as it makes emotions ungovernable, and it can also become visible in the form of pimples on the skin or dirty clothes, in this case, giving away a dirty secret, making one's irrationality and therefore vulnerability visible to everyone. Dominique describes some of this:

You know, when you uhm, like something when you have on a monthly basis, your period and you know, that women ... you don't feel nice that time of the month and even your emotions are different, so you always have to be worried about it. And I think people ... are wondering at some stage, do you give everything away, that type of thing you know, so yes, it probably does influence you. Because now you have got to even plan what you got to wear that particular week. It must not be light clothes it must be dark clothes, you know.

Bodies have to be managed, they have to be dressed properly, their biological functioning should not be allowed to slip into awareness and they should not be allowed to make one vulnerable in this way.

Bodies as the site of sexuality and sexual interaction make them even more complex. From Gillian's perspective the benefit to be gained from this is at most ambiguous. She describes how a young body draws attention and draws compliments but that those compliments fade in settings where one wants to be heard and therefore that the young attractive body as vessel makes it hard to be heard. One is seen and then "they make you feel good" (Gillian) but they don't listen to you. Linda comments on this too: "The younger you are, the harder it is to get respect". Gillian comments that now that she is older and "part of the furniture" she is free and "equal to everyone". Age and a female body are therefore closely related. A young body is more visible and the site of male interest and approval with young women being sometimes unaware of it as is seen in Dominique's experience:

You're young and you come into the profession. You know, this young student, and the males would now always be talking to you and laughing and stuff like that. So, there was now another connotation to that from the older females you see. So they read something else into that. And it was just being friendly, talking to the people, no ulterior motives or something like that.

Andy describes another more distressing experience:

The Deputy Director at the time was male, and was giving me at the time a little bit of extra attention. You know, and I think the thing that was fascinating of that is that everybody could see that I was uncomfortable but also treated me that as if I was in some way responsible and to blame for all this attention that I was getting. Nobody ever came to my rescue, nobody ever, you know, assisted me. It was my first job, you know, I didn't know what to do with the person in power who is fawning all over you and being inappropriate. You know, even my female boss. And I am sure she saw it, but left it there. And she also in turn victimised me even further or held me responsible for his behaviour.

The visibility of the female body as sexually attractive has the paradoxical effect of making the woman in the body less visible. Andy here explains her struggle of being respected and seen for who she is despite having big breasts:

And they are punishing me for it. They are punishing me for the physicality, and I mean, it is not even that I am thinking like that. I mean, I am not focusing on it, I am focusing on my brain and how smart I am, you know. And other people are concentrating like on my big boobs.

Thus, being taken seriously within a young body, especially if that body happens to be considered to be attractive, is a struggle that participants report. Early working experiences are described as struggles for acknowledgement of competence and contribution with a general experience that the contributions of men are more easily recognised. Participants observe a pattern where men's work is acknowledged where female colleagues are more harshly judged.

As age steps in, the sexual attractiveness of the female body becomes erased. This implies that a body is considered female largely because of its attractiveness. With the erasure of the femaleness comes freedom, being able to say what one likes. One has to become “part of the furniture” (Gillian) one has to be seen as losing one’s sexual attractiveness to become an equal participant. This is a double erasure as sexual attractiveness in women is constructed as a vital part of their femininity. Losing this attractiveness is then a further erasure, this time of femininity in itself. In other words, age steps in, making the body less visible and therefore erasing the femininity and only when this happens can the person perhaps become more visible and can she be taken seriously.

Thus the femininity of a female body is problematic. When visible, it creates another form of invisibility and it therefore has to be managed and controlled. Participants here are generally in agreement that dress code is vital in this process, from small aspects such as a decision to keep a jacket on or not, or more important factors of managing the hemline of the skirt and covering the cleavage. Andy describes being more unaware of this when she was younger “there was this wild massive hair to here you know, so I mean I just left it uncontrolled but at that stage I didn’t understand”. Later in her life this changed:

When I started my own business I put on my suit, I put on my armour ... so I also had fitted into the mould. So I had my suit and I had my hair and I power dressed you know and nobody is messing with you, nobody is making jokes. So that is the thing the dress did for me.

The way the body is dressed is constructed as of utmost importance when it comes to engaging in meetings, as clothes are the armour needed for the modern day battleground of challenge, of being discredited, of having to prove your worth.

Women’s management of their bodies in the workplace involves control of the unruly: hair, bodies, bodily fluids. It is a process of making the femaleness and sex of the body less visible. It is in interesting contrast to the notion of natural differences. Although there is an almost unwavering acceptance to a difference discourse with all

participants, this ‘natural’ difference should not be allowed to be present and evident in the physical. The injunction of remaining feminine at all times, not becoming the bitch, has a limitation or limit. Remain feminine at all times but do not become too feminine or too sexy by being a “girly-girl” (Andy) or a “whore” (Andy) as these are undesirable expressions of femininity.

Andy describes the reaction to being too feminine in this way:

We had this receptionist, who was this adorable like Tinkerbell girl, you know, she was just fine and pretty, and soft and you know when she made signs they always had little flowers, you know, she was really this beautiful person, I got on really well with her. My boss tortured this poor girl. Every five minutes she was in trouble, it was just horrendous. Horrendous to watch.

Some women express dissatisfaction with this, with Catherine stating that she sometimes decides that she is “fed up and is not going to cover up her cleavage” or Andy stating:

And you know the women I am talking about, you know. Always with the cleavage, the too short skirt. I personally don’t think that there is anything wrong with that. I don’t think that they should conform to the suit and the tamed thing. You know, they can be smart, they can be good at what they do, but you know, by men and women, they are just crossed off as the whore.

Fatima also resists this notion and says:

I mean Sweden, the women, they are just all dressed up in this one fashion, uncolourfully, you know, everything is in this like jacket, tie, not showing any parts of their body, I don’t know, I just think that you are becoming void of who you are, fighting against your own race as female. ‘I am not a female I am male.

Fatima further comments:



And I think that is ridiculous, so I've used it in a positive way. Of course not to the extreme way, I have *never* used it to get favours, or to sleep with someone to get something. That is like out. But I will wear something sexy to work and show a bit of a cleavage if I have to, not that I want to entice to get the other thing, but it just it adds a bit of personality.

### *Constructions of Men*

The discussion so far has focused mainly on constructions of being female and femininity. As we can see so far, the constructions of women are complex and contradictory and the same applies to constructions of men and masculinity with men and masculinity being constructed in a number of contradictory ways.

Where a number of participants reflected on the importance of hard work in their life and career, when they reflect on their workload in comparison to men, men are constructed as less hardworking. Gillian states this directly: "I believe that men are lazy ... and it I believe it because that is what I see". Men also tend to get away with more:

I mean, it was just astounding what the two good-looking men got away with. It was astounding. It was, I mean, it was, I can't even tell you. And then now in retrospect I know I was doing a lot of their work, but this is in retrospect.

(Interesting here that male attractiveness is constructed as allowing men to get away with more where female attractiveness is generally seen as creating invisibility.)

This reflects back to the earlier discussion of men having the capacity to say no and to manage their workloads. They are described as being more assertive, with the capacity to control or manage their workloads. Their ability to say no puts them in a better position in the workplace. Magriet reflects on this by saying:

I think it is because so much in their life is done for them, and now I am generalising wildly ... I really think, and as I say, I am generalising, but it is perhaps the way they grew up ... or perhaps it is the model we put them in. Everybody always says that they cannot do it and perhaps we want to believe

it ... Maybe we think they are stronger people, perhaps that they can just say no. They are dominant.

Men are further constructed as not being cooperative and not wanting to share information with women. Gillian says: “you don’t get information out of men. Men generally tend to keep information to themselves, they are not as sharing as women are”. Men also tend to stick together:

and although he is told, like you are supposed to be to promote women and give women the opportunity, but behind your back they will kind of give the information to men and they will outshine you in some way because they had more access to the information

or

“there is such a thing as an old boys network because men do look after each other, its an absolute fact” (Linda).

As such, organisational culture is often described as male centred and men are therefore more comfortable in the workplace and they can also have more fun there:

There is more, yes, there is more space for fun in the work life and because of this strong male orientation of the fun that is to be had in the work place. That is what enables you. Like I don’t see any work place having massage parties, facial parties. [Laughing] You know? It is that whole, it is just that whole club of drinking and watching sport and it is this and it is almost you know, designed that way. You know, how many work places have a book club? That’s fun, and I mean that’s where you get that kind of inculcation that seems to be there for men. Men seem to be able to tap into a sort of social life at work. There is no social life for us at work (Andy).

This male culture then also applies to organisational development strategies and Andy has a strong opinion on recent forms of team building activities:

Look at all the team building things, you know? .... And then the people who can't do that get hurt. So not only are they excluded from the team, they hurt as well, they are physically injured when they get back to the office and we call that team building. I think it is team destruction. [Laugh] Let's see who gets hurt.

Men also stick together and this is experienced as an overtly or covertly threatening process. Gillian remembers her early working days:

I started working when I was seventeen ... and I was so scared of those men, and they knew it, and they made fun of me. And they were right to make fun of me because I fell for it.

Andy also reflects on this:

When I worked in a clinic, the male clerks, security, they would make jokes about the nurses and us. And I am just thinking, 'guys!'. And I know it is very difficult to articulate, but it makes the work environment charged. Because I walk into work and I hear this joke, or something happens and then I am already, like I am already off balance. Now I must refocus myself but then something else would come and knock me off balance again.

Magriet also offers a further explanation of the men in her work environment (that she describes earlier in the interview as very Afrikaans male dominated):

I also think, it is because they, I am just thinking of Afrikaans culture, many of them, have women at home that do things such as check the vehicle licences and so on. And it does come through to the work environment as they don't have to take responsibility for it. But we [referring to women] take the responsibility for everything.

These quotations illustrate the natural difference discourse discussed earlier. This discourse constructs men as different from women, they do not have the same natural talent for working hard and they are not cooperative and sharing. They also tend to

stick together. Men's constructed ability to say no and to control their workload discursively creates dominance and in terms of social positioning where men are constructed as being more powerful in the social hierarchy because of their ability to say no.

While men are constructed as dominant and also as competent in terms 'assertiveness', this dominance is in contrast to statements of male incompetence. Men do not have the ability to work as hard as women, and, as was discussed earlier in the chapter, the ability to work hard adds worth. Men are also sometimes constructed as less efficient:

I would then delegate to the men, you know, because I thought they were not working. You know, to get the materials ready, correlate everything or get it to the venue and to the conferences. Always a mess up, always not done, never held responsible, you know. No sense of urgency. So, in retrospect I wonder, is it because they were inefficient that she just let them be, and completely overloaded the women, or was she too afraid to tackle them (Andy)?

Social dominance and competence here intersect in an intriguing way where work competence is not constructed as leading to dominance. Participants generally describe themselves as competent in terms of work but perhaps incompetent in terms of constructed personality traits such as assertiveness. It is, however, competence in the realms of assertiveness and related control of one's workload that is discursively linked to achieving social dominance.

Men are discursively constructed in a socially dominant position and generally viewed as having a preference to remain dominant to a certain extent. Here Linda says: "It depends on the individual but I would say that most men ... in my opinion, still prefer women to play a subservient role" although "you do run into people who genuinely do recognise talent when they see it and are willing to give people a chance". Men also "enjoy looking after one from a certain point of view ... I expect men to open doors for me" (Linda).

Men are not constructed as being overtly hostile but they challenge women more than they would their male counterparts “Because they always test. Men have this thing that they always test” (Lulu). They also “do undermine, they do treat you like ‘oh, you have breasts’”(Lulu). They do not maintain a position of social dominance through overt hostility but the dominance is constructed as being maintained through challenge of authority: “There was always a challenge, and more so especially from the male colleagues that I was working with” (Nobesotho). Dominique relates how a male colleague openly did not want to accept her authority “because he made it quite clear he was not gonna take instructions from a woman” but such utterances of overt refusal to accept female authority were rare in the texts. What was more common was awareness that women were challenged in meetings:

The men would, like, in a meeting, they would say to them, uhm, ‘no but your idea’s not a good idea’ you know, blatantly and ... put them off and say ‘but no you can’t do something like that’ and I would sit there thinking ‘but why can’t you?’ It’s, it’s making sense what this lady is saying but because she is a woman, you not gonna take her idea or her suggestion (Dominique).

The social dominance of men is constructed as being maintained by their competence in terms of asserting themselves, sticking together and subtly challenging female authority or work.

#### *Equity and the Changing Social Structure*

At the same time, the social situation is constructed as in the process of change although the change is still happening. Things are changing but have not changed completely. There is thus the discourse of the past where there was no equality and the discourse of change in process of moving towards equality and equity. Society and the workplace is constructed as changing: “In terms of gender, yes, things have progressed, but not in terms of race” (Dominique) but gender equality is generally constructed as an ideal that is impossible to reach. As Lulu says: “I don’t think we will ever be equal. You know, I don’t think we will ever, you know, it is in the minds, we can be equal in other things”. The natural differences discourse plays a strong role here where the fundamental differences between women and men make complete equality impossible. This is seen in the statement by Nobesotho:

I am very sceptical. I am hoping against all hope that some day we will all be equal. But I doubt it will ever happen. Gender-wise I do not think it is possible to ever be equal, because men and women are not the same. First in terms of physical strength, secondly, the way we portray our empathy and our emotional being, and just the way we do things. We are just not the same.

Magriet feels that equity is still a long way off: “I would like it to be a natural thing that happens but it is not going to come right soon because there are too many places with men in the majority” and Catherine feels that it makes more sense to replace equity with a search for humanity:

It is kind of a strange notion of what equity is, because I think it is almost like it is a personal thing. I think that rather than having equity in the workplace, you have to have humans in the workplace.

Apart from this construction of society as being in process towards more equality and the impossibility of the equality project, there is still reference to and belief in a ‘just world’ that will acknowledge and promote those who deserve it. In this regard, Lulu says: “If you know what you are doing, if you are the best at what you are doing, you would be able to do it” and Linda also reiterates this: “if you’re willing to work hard and lobby hard and network hard for a specific position or a specific career I do believe there is a very good chance of that happening”. Andy also reflects this:

I mean, I don’t even want to say the patriarchy, because I think that when you are confident and strong enough to find identity and then to say ‘this is my identity’, and this is how I work and you really do good work, work will be coming to you. And I think I have proven that now.

This belief in a ‘just world’ with reward for the hardworking is in contrast to the idea that complete equality does not and will never exist. The individualist discourse with its belief that the capacities and behaviour of the individual carries more weight than the social structure makes it possible for the social inequities to be denied and a strong belief in the agency of the individual makes inequalities in the social structure almost

invisible or at least less significant. Social inequities and inequalities are therefore constructed as an inevitability that has to be accepted but that also has to be overcome with hard work and dedication. This is a dominant feature of western capitalist societies and reflected in many cultural narratives, for example many books or 'manuals' on how to achieve in business as a woman.

### *Gender, Culture and Race*

When talking about being in the workplace, the issue of culture emerges as part of the complexity of the picture. Culture is here often described as something that creates or impacts on how women and men relate to each other and what can be expected from women and men within certain circles. As such, culture is used as a category to understand behaviour and to know what to expect. Reference to specific cultures, one's own and other cultures, makes it possible to explain the gendered world. Culture functions as a determinant of ideas.

Culture featured in talk about men and what men are like and how men from different cultures can be expected to behave and think in certain ways. A number of different cultural groups were referred to: white Afrikaans men, Black men and Indian men.

Men from the different cultural groups are constructed in a number of ways:

Fatima: A lot of the African males still wouldn't absorb that kind of thinking, because it was seven years later, but their culture was still a factor very deep down.

Fatima: There were quite a lot of the white males coming from a very traditional background, with a very sort of selected kind of thinking and mindset that those males have. And alongside that goes with it the traditional views that those males have, you know, they haven't gone through the liberating process.

Andy: A very warped urbanised African male patriarchy, because African male patriarchy was not faded out, it is this kind of morphing of the urban patriarchy, you know, that is sick and disgusting

Linda: My approach to a young black man is very different than my approach to an old Afrikaans man, for example, so it depends entirely on the individual but I would still say that, that, that most men are inclined to do that because most men in my opinion still prefer women to play a subservient role.

Linda: I am married to your very, very typical Afrikaans-speaking man who was brought up in an Afrikaans ... I think it was a hell of a shock to his system as well and his friends were also quite shocked because I was very different from the typical Afrikaans girl he had dated before.

Andy: Richard and I met and at first started living together ... there was no, I mean I didn't even have to negotiate with him. Whoever came first, started rocking and rolling. If you are first, you put on the pot, you get the dishes, you get, you know. You put the washing in the washer, you know, you just start. And when I come in, you know, I help. But I know that if I had married any South African man ... I think I would really have a struggle.

Andy: I have always wondered whether it is my husband in particular, or because he comes from Ireland. So I have always wondered about that, but then you know, we have travelled amongst his social circle in the UK and I mean, the men and women help each other out. You know, we were just there on holiday, and it was interesting going to a five-year-old's birthday party and to see the mom and the dad *completely* engaged in everything.

Here, the reference is often in terms of 'traditional' men (from whichever culture) but also to men who do not adhere to traditional values anymore. As such, culture and 'traditional' culture are constructed as a determinant of attitudes and values that impact on women in the workplace. Culture is therefore a pre-determinant and also difficult to change. The way it is talked about implies that it is problematic in terms of equality. Culture is constructed as a form of embeddedness that determines certain attitudes and values that can be restrictive for women in the workplace. One is embedded in culture, a deep structure of meaning and predetermination. A distinction also emerges between home and work where the culture and its implications are retained at the home front but the same cultural ideas are problematic and difficult to



work with in the work context, creating different sets of meaning to adhere to. At home, more traditional cultural values are constructed as valued where these same constructions are problematic at work:

There are quite a lot of contradictions in the culture. Where you are saying ... women are equal and then there is that traditional thing where, hey, I expect that my mate has to make supper and all of that stuff. So there was a contradiction (Fatima).

South African men are generally constructed as embedded in traditional cultures that have strong implications for gendered behaviour where non-South African men are constructed as essentially different from South African men of all cultures with a culture that is less deterministic of gendered behaviour and roles. It is interesting to note here that race sometimes intersects with culture and that reference to culture generally involves a reference to race as well. Men are then referred to as 'Black', 'Indian' and 'White'. White men are typically described as Afrikaans-speaking white men and there is no mention anywhere of English-speaking white men, thus the norm becomes invisible again. Despite references to differences in terms of culture and traditions, men from all these groups can be 'traditional', thus having restrictive ideas about equality and women.

This is a fascinating merger of race and culture here as race and culture function within one discursive category. What emerges from this is that when a focus on gender becomes primary, culture and race becomes secondary, and culture and race are unified into the same category. This is particularly in terms of constructions of masculinity (not necessarily femininity). Being male, despite one's culture and race, forms a primary position in terms of gender as most traditional cultures are constructed as having particular and restrictive ideas on gender. Men are not so much distinguished in terms of their culture or race but rather in terms of the age and their adherence to traditional values where younger men can be more progressive.

Culture also featured in women's talk about themselves, here also in the form of something that women are embedded in and that they need to become disentangled from in order to develop the qualities they perceive as necessary in the workplace.

Fatima describes this as such: “ ... think my culture. I still haven’t come to terms with it. If I was given ... if I didn’t have the cultural issues I think I would have been further right now” and “so I come from a very strange background and to overcome that kind of obstacle was quite a journey in itself”. Culture thus creates and determines certain expectations and ways of being but one needs to ‘overcome’ these in order to adapt to the working environment.

### *Resistance*

The discussion so far illustrates how the different discourses and the contradictions between them can support the status quo. At the same time it has to be said that these contradictions also provide an important space for resistance as power always implies resistance (Powers, 2007). The contradictions allow some manoeuvring space as it is possible to speak and act from different discursive positions and one is free to invoke a particular discourse that can be useful when one needs it. Different interpretations of the world are available. The discursive contradictions therefore make it easier for participants to seemingly accept the dominant discourses discussed so far. They generally do not confront the regime directly and their talk is not littered with many overt statements of resistance (with a few exceptions). Mumby (2005) points out how resistance happens in the ambiguousness of meaning, as “the struggle over meaning is always open-ended” (p. 33). By accepting the discourses and not challenging them overtly, participants gain the opportunity to do what they wish to do without any challenges from the environment and their seeming collusion with dominant notions of femininity, the family and the organisation is a form of resistance. The invisible contradictions between discourses create the opportunity for them to strategise and use these contradictions. In this way, participants participate in their public and private worlds and they create careers without having to sacrifice a feminine identity. By distancing and disidentifying themselves from ‘unacceptable’ forms of femininity, they are able to engage in a complex process of managing their gendered identity. This form of resistance is similar to how Mumby (2005) describes resistance as identity work. The process of collusion and resistance is often recursive and here it is clear how collusion with the dominant discourse is a form of resistance but this form of resistance that allows for gendered identity work is at the same time colluding with the status quo. An example of managing one’s gender identity is Andy who describes herself as “a mom who works”. Here, she intersects the discourse of motherhood and

the discourse of the workingwoman in a complex way to create a gendered identity that allows her to operate in her life in a manner that works for her. As power and resistance always go hand-in-hand, this identity that allows her to function in a certain way has the effect of supporting the dominant discourse of motherhood.

### Conclusion

In this discussion so far, it is evident that gender discourses and constructions of femininity and masculinity are and remain filled with contradiction and complexity. When participants talk about themselves, their gender and their work, they are confronted with a number of different available discourses.

What emerges from the analysis of the texts is that the identity positions of woman and career do not have a comfortable discursive fit. The category 'woman' has so many discursive contradictions and women who work need to do a lot of identity footwork to reconcile different positions within this discursive web. Femininity is constructed in contradictory ways with women being constructed as soft and cooperative on the one hand while at the same time also aggressive and dangerous toward each other. A lot of effort is needed for women to identify with some form of femininity and to distance themselves from other forms of femininity seen as being contrary to a constructed norm and ideal of femininity. The normative femininity is constructed as a woman who remains feminine, who retains the so-called female attributes of softness and cooperation but only to a certain extent. Femininity can be taken too far, women can either be too soft or too sexually feminine or too dependent, attributes that do not reflect well on a woman who strives for a place in the discursive ideal. Thus one of the core contradictions is the contradiction of the natural differences discourse (women and men are different and should act differently) with a discourse of equality (women and men are equal and women should have equal treatment and independence). The interplay between these two discourses is seen in a number of different ways particularly in the construction of the female body.

In terms of constructions of femininity and work, women are constructed to have a number of attributes that make them ideally suited to the workplace. They are primarily hard workers, they are reasonable, they are competent and they are willing to prove themselves. One of the central constructed flaws of femininity is seen in the

lack of self-confidence and assertiveness and this flaw results in a constructed male social dominance. The capacities that women have by nature are not enough to result in a social equity as the lack of some other qualities results in social inequity. This flaw is constructed as an internal and individual matter, something that can and needs to be addressed and rectified.

The individualist discourse is present in the text in a number of ways with a strong value of the individual overcoming the social constraints and restrictions. Participants generally construct a social system in the process of change toward equality but that is far from reaching this goal. The social inequities are accepted as a given and the individualist discourse serves as a solution for this, a way of addressing the problem. The social system then remains largely unchallenged with an acceptance of the status quo. Resistance happens on the level of the individual.

One's culture further forms another complex structure. Culture is constructed as a deep structure with strong influence in terms of thought, ideas and behaviour and therefore can serve as an obstacle in terms of one's functioning as a woman but also in terms of how one is treated by men. The relationship to this deep structure is ambiguous and rarely openly rejected but women and men manoeuvre within this structure, almost choosing when to adopt the values of it or not.

The status quo of the organisation remains untouched with very little overt resistance to organisation structures and expectations. The nature and structures of organisations are constructed as given and women are constructed as having to fit in with this and to do what is required, generally to work hard. Again the focus falls on the woman and if she manages to fit in with expectation, she can expect to be successful, she can expect that there will be justice, despite another discourse of inequality also being present. The onus is on the woman to manage the requirements of the organisation while retaining the highly valued capacity to balance work and private life.

The status quo of the family also remains largely unchallenged where motherhood and wifehood are filled with basic requirements and expectations and although some of these are open to change and challenge, female and male nature determine that the

essence of the structure remains fixed as the construction of motherhood requires that women remain responsible and involved on a fundamental level.

Constructions of gender, of work and of society therefore contain a number of contradictions and these intersect in terms of how femininity and masculinity are constructed and how the individual relates to the broader social structures within these contradictions. This will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter where the discourses discussed in this chapter will be explored in terms of the available literature. The institutions supported by these discourses and their intersections will also be discussed in more detail.

## CHAPTER 7

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The discussion of the data in the previous chapter introduced different discourses as they emerged in the text and also reflected on the effects and impacts of these and how they interact and relate with each other. In this chapter I wish to summarise some of this and explore in more depth how certain institutions and organisations are maintained or challenged by these.

#### Different discursive worlds

Working with the discourses in middle management women's talk reminded me of the seven-volume science fiction series "The Dark Tower" by Stephen King (1982). The main character, Roland, is in search of a dark tower, a place of magic where he will find a remedy for his decaying and defragmenting Midworld. He is confronted with different worlds and different characters from these different worlds. These characters come to help him on his quest towards the dark tower by stepping through magical doorframes that allow them to pass from one world to the next. Later in the story, the separation between the worlds become less and characters pass through "thinies" which takes them from one world and time into another, sometimes without them realising that it is happening. When the main characters realise that there are different worlds, their initial response is to try to protect their own world as they are fundamentally rooted there with a life-story and loved ones. As the story progresses, they realise that these worlds are all inextricably linked and then their attachment to their own world becomes less. One of the characters in the story, a young boy called Jake, dies early in the story when the hero, Roland, faces the choice of saving him or continuing with his quest. In a horrifying moment where Roland is holding Jake's hand as he is hanging from a cliff and as Roland decides to let go, Jake says: "Go then, there are other worlds than these" (King, 1982, p. 191). He can say this because he reappears later in another world. His death in one world did not mean that he died in all the worlds and the presence of the other worlds makes it possible for him to be almost detached from the world he is dying in.

The discursive space on gender and gender equity is similar to this story. There are different discursive worlds present at the same time and we often pass through

discursive thinnies, moving from one discursive world to another without noticing that we have moved from one to the other. Our connection to each different discursive world has an almost Buddhist-like detachment from the discursive space, as there “are other worlds than these” and we move between these worlds with seeming ease.

In “The Dark Tower” each world has its own time and its own characters. Some of the worlds are completely different from each other with different languages while other worlds are remarkably similar. The characters in the story sometimes have to really scrutinise a world to realise where they are. At one stage they arrive in a world that seems very similar to Jake’s world and time. They only realise that it is a different world when they notice a bumper sticker that refers to a sports team with a similar but different name from the one in Jake’s world. So they need to pay close attention to the signs and symbols of the world to realise that they are not where they thought they were. The discursive gender worlds are similar and discursive thinnies cause slipping from one world to the other without one recognising the signs and symbols of the world immediately. Sometimes the new discursive world becomes visible only when the language structure and symbols are scrutinised and discourse analysis is a useful tool in this regard. Thinnies take the shape of contradictions and contradictory commonsense notions of reality.

#### Characters, discursive positions and identities

So what are the discursive worlds that the participants in this study pass through and inhabit? Who are the relevant characters and from which ‘when’ are they talking? In terms of female characters, different female characters from different worlds are constructed.

There is the bitch. She lives in a highly competitive world and she is very ambitious. She is aggressive, she is manly and she is not in touch with her feminine side anymore. She is not trusted by women and despised by men for the fact that she is not true to her feminine nature. She has decided that her success and her career are more important than staying true to her feminine nature. The world of the bitch is constructed as a corporate, high-powered world of the present day and perhaps even the future, an apocalyptic figure of how things can go wrong.

Then there is the hardworking woman, who does what she needs to, and more, who enjoys what she is doing but who does not have an ambitious career plan. She does not employ conscious career strategies, she is not aggressive, and she realises that it is important to remain true to her female nature. She is sometimes very successful but she does not need to sacrifice her femininity to become successful. She has a tremendous workload but she soldiers on with this with acceptance of the nature of things. Her world is a world where the corporate and workplace take secondary importance to other aspects relating to her femininity.

There is also the modern-day mother. She realises or accepts the duties and responsibilities that come with being a mother and she also wishes and desires to fulfil this role as well as she can. She knows that her very physical and emotional attributes are what make her a mother and she knows that these qualities ordain her to be primarily responsible for her children although various others such as the father, friends and family members can help her out. Her world is a combination of an older world of the past where she finds fulfilment in her mothering but also a newer world that describes mothering as not quite enough. The mother is also often the wife, the one who automatically picks up the children from school, the one who makes it possible for the husband to do what he needs to do. Both the mother and the wife are well-liked and admired characters. They do what needs to be done, they remain true to who they really are, but they have also now developed a modern-day requirement of independence, autonomy and intellectual development.

The housewife on the other hand, is not a character to admire as she inhabits only an antiquated world before the development of female autonomy and independence. She is like a relic from the past and although she was a character to aspire to she is now looked at with sympathy and sometimes disgust for her inability to have progressed to a newer, more developed and advanced version of the wife and mother.

Lastly, there is the feminist. She is a warrior character from an earlier time, a time where women did not have the rights they have in the contemporary world. In order for her to have achieved her goals, she needed to be radical, unreasonable and aggressive. She is no longer needed in the contemporary world and has outlived her



purpose. If she is still present she is seen as radical and unreasonable and she takes things too far and is always reminded to calm down.

Given all these possible characters, what is a young heroine to do? In terms of the available options, the hardworking mother and wife who does what she needs to and does not complain too much is a character that does not evoke criticism or dislike and being this character allows her a position in the social structure as a legitimate, adult woman and worthy individual. She does not overtly resist the situation but realises that her seeming acceptance of what is gives her the most scope to manoeuvre and structure her life without the judgment of others or herself.

In terms of male characters, there is the malevolent man who actively tries to undermine women. He is the kind of man who will make it clear that he does not respect women in the workplace and that he will not take orders from a woman. There are not many of these characters around as this is a breed that seems to have disappeared with time.

The malevolent man has been replaced by a few different modern-day versions of men. The first modern-day version is one who is an old-fashioned man from an earlier era. He is not necessarily malevolent but his culture and upbringing gave him certain values he cannot escape from. Although women cannot expect him to act according to ideas of equality, they can understand where he comes from, and, given knowledge about him and his upbringing, they can work with him (and on him) and act towards him in ways that allow them to function and progress in the workplace.

In contrast to him is the younger man who is more progressive than the old-fashioned version. We know very little of him at this stage, apart from the mere mention of him here and there. There is also another kind of male character here, one who is not necessarily old-fashioned or progressive but who still has dominance and achieves this through assertiveness, networking with other men and challenging women more than other men.

In terms of these characters, if the male character wants to be a liked and respected hero in this story his choice is to become the young, progressive man. It is unfortunate

for our hero that this character is not well developed at this stage in the story and he will have to use his imagination or search in other stories such as men's studies to find ways to portray this character realistically.

The metaphor of different characters in different worlds used so far in this discussion is another way of exploring the different subject positions that are available in terms of gender and work. These subject positions are cultural repertoires of available discourses that allow individuals to manage themselves in terms of moral location and social interaction (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008). A subject position is a location with different rights and duties for those who occupy it (Willig, 2008) and participants in this study negotiate the various subject positions with a process of distancing by identifying and describing subject positions they did not wish to occupy, distancing themselves from it and in this way constructing a subject position that is seen as socially and morally acceptable. Their positioning of themselves as hardworking, reasonable and feminine allows them to find a moral location (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008). This location has certain duties, as described above, but also implies certain rights, here the right to proceed with one's life without having to explain one's actions and motives, without the judgement and disapproval of others but mostly the right to keep her feminine identity. What is seen here is what I call identity-footwork, a careful positioning of the self to maintain what is considered to be a vital aspect of an identity (femininity) despite engaging in contexts and behaviours that seem to be in opposition to this aspect of the identity. This brings me back to the question asked in chapter 6: can it be that being a woman and being a career woman are still opposing identities? It seems that the answer is that these different positions are still in contrast in the societal discursive space, prompting such fine footwork.

### The Rules of the Game

In "The Dark Tower", each different world has its own dialect or language, its own history, its own system of metaphysics and its own set of rules and procedures that provide a way of understanding the world. For example, Roland, the main character from the Midworld, lives according to Ka, the principle that drives the outcome of all things. Ka is like fate, it determines what will happen and Roland uses Ka to understand the world and to guide his actions. Ka forms the rules of the game and

determines the procedures to follow. As the participants in this study move from one discursive world to another they sometimes encounter a number of different rules of the game that inform different subject positions and different choices. Discourse is described earlier in chapter 2 as a set of rules and procedures (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008) and the following discourses emerged.

#### *The Natural Differences Discourse*

The natural differences discourse (Dick & Nadin, 2006) as referred to in chapter 4, forms a basic rule in terms of understanding gender and the functioning thereof. This discourse views women and men as fundamentally different due to their biology, psychology and upbringing and sees difference as part of the natural order of things. It assumes that the differences are basic and unchangeable. This difference becomes a practical consideration to consider (Whetherall, Stiven & Potter, 1987) in terms of equality and makes complete equality impossible. It is therefore in contradiction to a discourse of equality but these two differences often co-exist and intersect in participants' talk. Given that the differences are constructed as natural and given, they are accepted into commonsense notions of femininity, masculinity and particularly parenthood. This discourse justifies structural inequalities and requires subjects to submit to its descriptive and prescriptive capacities. The effect of this discourse is an unequal distribution of domestic labour and the maintenance of structural inequalities in social systems such as organisations. Both the resistance and the maintenance of the status quo lie in the acceptance of it. Quietly doing your own thing, getting where you want to be, and using knowledge of men and systems to survive is a way to make space for yourself.

#### *The Discourse of the Family*

The discourse of natural differences supports a traditional patriarchal family structure where commonsense notions of motherhood and fatherhood determine the structure of the family and the duties and rights of those in the family. Although reference is made to some changes in the traditional family structure, with women being more independent and men being more involved in the household and childrearing chores, the natural difference discourse ensures that the basic aspects of the traditional patriarchal family remain in place. The discourse of the family as constructed by the participants, structures the modern-day family as a structure where men and women

both have some independence and autonomy and where there is some distribution of domestic and childcare duties within the limits of the constructed natural aspects of motherhood and fatherhood. The mother remains primarily responsible for the children due to her nature and this cannot be changed due to fundamental biological and psychological differences between men and women. The discourse of natural differences and the discourse of the family are related in their manner of constructing and being constructed by social structures into a subset of ideas that are considered to be so logical and commonsense that they become invisible. In terms of the metaphor of the thinny, these discourses are invisible thinnies and a speaker can be in a world of equality one moment and stumble through an invisible thinny where other rules apply, where the rule of the mother and wife demands other behaviours. Passing from one discourse to another happens smoothly and it is generally unnoticed.

In chapter 3 I stated that many studies show that few couples develop egalitarian relationships in terms of domestic and childcare duties and the double day of women was described where women perform paid and also unpaid work. The discourse of the family as present in the participants' talk is the discursive structure that contributes to or informs the practice of this double day.

#### *The Discourse of Individual Psychology*

The discourse of natural differences and the discourse of the family smooth over structural inequalities and invite individuals to turn to themselves as the point of investigation when they experience distress or discomfort in their lives. This turn towards the self is supported and informed by a strong individualist discourse. The individualist discourse was seen in chapter 3 with the discussion of studies that focus on the individual and individual processes. Here we saw a focus on internal aspects of the individual such as career attitude, career choice, career knowledge and self-esteem. These studies introduce a psychological discourse where the point of intervention is the individual. In this study, the participants use the discourse of individual psychology with which to regulate themselves. The discourse of individual psychology provides a form of technology of the self (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008) that participants can use in terms of self-management. Lack of career success and a heavy workload are ascribed to lack of assertiveness and a struggle to negotiate private and work life is constructed as a lack of work/life balance. The discourse of

individual psychology here has the effect of providing a diagnosis of the problem (such as being a workaholic or not being assertive enough) a source of the problem (the individual) and also suggests that these problems or pathologies can be and should be addressed. The psy-complex (Rose, 1985) emerges here as participants describe themselves in terms of psychological deficit with regard to aspects such as self-esteem, assertiveness and balance. The psychological technology of self-improvement is introduced in this way and “moral management of the self ensures that material contradictions of political economy, community and employability are transposed into personal difficulties” (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008, p. 105). The technologies of self-actualisation operate as such that when change is difficult, it brings further intensification of moral management (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008). The participants’ responses to distress arising from the intersection of the natural differences discourse and the discourse of equality becomes a facet for self-regulation and self-blame. This form of self-regulation maintains the status quo of the organisation and the family and leaves the discourse of the organisation as a primary unquestionable.

#### *The Discourse of the Organisation*

In chapter 4 I referred to the company-based discourse (Kugelberg, 2006) that focuses on the requirements of companies to grow, using concepts such as productivity, competition and financial gain. This discourse was noted to be in contrast to an experience-based discourse that focuses on own experience. The company-based discourse here featured in participants’ talk with an acceptance of the needs and requirements of companies; participants were willing to do what the organisation needed. Self-improvement is the means toward eliminating distress, and the structure, function and requirements of the organisation are rarely challenged. The self-regulating techniques become ways of creating docile workers (Powers, 2007) who comply with the demands of the organisation. In this way, there is more than a company-based discourse at work here as the organisation is constructed as unquestionable, unchangeable and fixed. It also retains a masculine character, a hierarchy and it has the power to make demands whether they are reasonable or not. Success in the organisation is defined by climbing the organisational ladder without rocking the boat. The company-based discourse takes shape in talk and text when there is a reference to the requirements of organisations but a broader discourse of the

organisation functions as a backdrop to much that is said in participants' talk about gender and work. This discourse can therefore be defined as a discourse that constructs the organisation as a fixed, masculine and hierarchical structure with demands and requirements that have to be met if one chooses to be part of its world. So the discourse of the organisation creates a world with an unwavering acceptance of the demands of the organisation.

This intersects with the discourse of the family that also demands acceptance of the status quo and where self-regulation is used in the face of distress or when in need of advancement. I wonder at this point if this discourse has more impact on women than men, given that women are still in a process of achieving equality in terms of seniority in work environments. The position of outsider trying to gain access to this world perhaps has the impact of creating greater acceptance of the discourse. When one passes through a thinny into the organisational discourse, the rules are clear: adapt or die. As such the organisation as institution remains supported with a total silence on the taken-for-granted nature of it that illustrates some of its power.

The discourse of the organisation supports the general economic status quo and capitalist economies depend on the maintenance of this discourse. Its impact is far reaching and possibly one of the discursive cornerstones of our society today. It requires that workers remain willing, able and docile and it ensures that this docile workforce is reproduced (Powers, 2007). It is interesting and unfortunate that the introduction of women into the workforce did not do much in terms of undermining the status quo. Women were initially clustered together (as nurses, teachers, etc.) and systems were developed in these contexts to allow women to continue fulfilling their other responsibilities without changing the broader structures of organisations in general. The developments discussed in chapter 3 such as work/life balance programmes, diversity management and flexible working hours do not feature in the participants' talk. The following questions then arise: does this mean that these developments do relatively little to nothing in terms of changing women's lives or discourses? Or are these developments not yet significant in South Africa but more prominent in other countries? What emerges, however, is that the developments to address the issues and difficulties of being a woman in the workplace are not reflected in the discursive, suggesting that they have very little impact or prominence.

The discourse of the organisation requires a docile workforce with compliant bodies that are managed and structured to fit with the requirements and demands of the organisation. Female bodies here require particular attention due to their tendency to be unruly, to overflow and to attract attention. Female bodies need particular care and attention in terms of how the femininity of the body is managed and structured into a docile body.

### My Journey: Personal Reflections

I set out on this journey with a mission, similar to the hero of *The Dark Tower*, admittedly of much smaller and less grandiose scale, but my search was for some exploration that would lead to a better understanding of the gender stratification of the workplace that could lead to possible remedies. This project took me from a place of curiosity about how women construct themselves in the workplace within a complicated and contradictory discursive domain to a place of new curiosities. My initial intention was geared toward finding ways of improving the lives of women and using discourse analysis as a tool that might elucidate the meanings, rules and procedures that keep the structures in place.

Along the way I learnt a great deal about how women construct and make sense of themselves in a world of work and I was astounded by the fine footwork sometimes required in this process. I was also surprised at the different kinds of positions available to women and the desirability of some and the offensiveness of others. This made it clear to me that to be a woman and to have a career requires identity manoeuvring amidst dominant discourses that sometimes support and sometimes oppose each other.

A discourse of prominence for me from the outset was the discourse of equality from my position as a woman and a feminist and therefore my position within this discourse is clear. Although I recognise equality as a discursive product of liberal ideology, my approach to it is pragmatic as it contains the possibility to create societies and structures that allow women and men to have more say in the structure and nature of their lives. It became clear to me during this study that a discourse of equality is by no means a holy grail and should also not be left unexamined or

unexplored. It should also be said that the position of the women in this study (middle management women) is a particular position within the social economic structure. Women in other positions in organisations or women outside the organisation are possibly subject to different experiences and different discourses. This probably applies to women in executive management positions but also to women in lower and more marginalised positions in the organisation and the economy and this is an avenue for future research. At this stage I am curious to know what happens in the discursive field of women in executive management. I am also wondering about the marginalised and disempowered women in organisations. I suspect that similar discursive processes are at play at different points in organisational hierarchies but imagine that these processes are embedded in different bodily and material effects. Future research could address this issue and also overcome some of the managerial bias of general research on women in the workplace.

This journey has now taken me to a realisation that it is difficult to think about women in organisations without becoming part of the discourse of the organisation. Wondering about the gender stratification of the organisation immediately assumes and accepts some of its basic structures, its hierarchy and its relevance. When we study the organisation from the inside, is it ever possible not to reproduce the discourse of the organisation in some way or another? The criticism of Hook (2001) as discussed in chapter 2 is relevant here. He notes how important it is for discourse analysis to move in and out of the text, to incorporate the extra discursive and to acknowledge the materiality, history and conditions of possibility of the text. I attempted to reflect on some of this in this chapter but think that this exploration could be dealt with in more depth and detail in future research. In this regard future research on women in the workplace could provide more of a genealogy of the discourse of the organisation to enrich the understanding of women's place within this discourse.

Having said this, this study has brought me to a point of greater awareness of some of the discursive activity and provides me with some structure to think with and approach this issue. An understanding of how different discourses such as the natural differences discourse, the family discourse and the organisational discourse support the status quo presents a frame or perspective that, for me, seems useful in thinking



about women in organisations. The awareness of discursive thinnies as it emerges in this study provides an interesting framework for interventions in organisations. Conversations on the different thinnies and how we pass from one discursive world to another could be very useful in terms of making the effects of the invisible discourses visible and provide other ways of thinking about gender and work. The awareness of discursive thinnies and discursive worlds makes a difference to the way the worlds are inhabited. They can be inhabited with less attachment and their effects can therefore be less prominent. Interventions where women and men can wander together through the different worlds available to them and explore the effects of these on their lives can therefore be useful. As such, organisational interventions and conversations with this awareness in mind can perhaps do more than trying to develop strategies to break the glass ceiling.

#### Finding the Dark Tower?

In the fictional work *The Dark Tower*, Roland, our hero, follows the path of a magical beam that leads him to a tower that he hopes will rescue the decay and the fragmentation of his and other worlds. The discursive worlds of gender and gender equality are similar to Roland's in that they remain fragmented, different, contradictory but in close proximity to each other. In terms of gender, our hope does not lie in a miracle remedy for the fragmentation but rather in awareness of the discursive thinnies that take us from one discourse to another without warning. The heroes (if such characters exist) in our story are practitioners of awareness that have become both detached from but also fully present in the world of discourse.