OMEGA’S STORY: THE HETEROGENEOUS ENGINEERING OF A GENDERED PROFESSIONAL SELF.

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What makes us who we are within the particular historical gender arrangements and organizational culture dominating the community of practices to which we feel that we belong? How do we learn to embody and enact the gendered professional selves required by and considered appropriate to particular workplace situations?

Answering such apparently simple questions becomes more complex once we abandon essentializing modes of thought about gender and identity for a conception of them as cultural achievements located in material and semiotic practices. This shift entails the treatment of notions such as culture, organization, identity, gender and knowledge not as ‘substances’ but as ‘achievements’ performed in – and through – sociotechnical relations.

Identity can be analyzed as the product, unstable and only partly under the individual’s control, of what Law calls a “heterogeneous engineering” which arranges human and non-human elements into a stable artifact. Following John Law we can assume that:

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1 A previous version of the present paper was published by A. Bruni and S. Gherardi in M. Dent, S. Whitehead, Managing Professional Identities: Knowledge, Performativity And The ‘New’ Professional, Routledge, London, 2001.
Each one of us is an arrangement. That arrangement is more or less fragile. There are ordering processes which keep (or fail to keep) that arrangement on the road. And some of those processes, though precious few, are partially under our control some of the time. (Law, 1994: 33, original emphasis)

Continuing this line of thought, and assuming a sensibility moulded by anti-essentialist assumptions inspired by ‘actor-network theory’, we may state that identity is the effect of a network of relations which give material form and stability to an artifact. Identity therefore is not a substance but an enactment performed into being as heterogeneous practices are engineered into an action net. The idea is not that enactments are deliberate and motivated performances – even though they may partly be such – but that subjectivity and objectivity are produced together. Performativity and belonging are concepts central to the feminist debate (Bell, 1999, McNay, 1999), and ‘actor-network theory’ has borrowed them for the purpose of problematizing the notions of subject and agency.

These processes have not yet been satisfactorily identified and described empirically for several reasons. In the first instance because a theory of identity as performativity is still in its infancy, given that the concept was first introduced by Judith Butler (1990, 1999) and further developed within an Actor network sensibility (Law, 1994). In second instance the organizational literature on culture and gender – even in its interpretative and symbolist tradition – was largely gender blind until the poststructuralist and postcolonial turn (Calás and Smircich, 1996). As a consequence, few attempts have been made to conduct empirical research intended to describe how performativity is accomplished in practice.

The aim of this paper is to describe the attribution and stabilization of a gendered professional identity to a young woman as the effect of her performance in a community of practices. Learning how to master professional practices, a novice learns how to enact the professional identity that his/her community of practice judges appropriate to the situation at hand. Workplace learning is therefore a social and situated process that takes place in a context of participation. It may be described as “unhampered participation in a meaningful situation” (Illich, 1971) involving commonplace discursive and practical activities. From this point of view learning is a social process which takes place within a community of practitioners and is mediated by artifacts; it is not a cognitive process. Lave and Wenger (1991: 98) are the main exponents of so-called ‘situated learning theory’, and they define a community of practice as:

...a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice. A community of practice is an intrinsic
condition for the existence of knowledge, not least because it provides the interpretative support necessary for making sense of its heritage.

Knowing is therefore a matter of displaying competencies defined in social communities (Wenger, 2000) and negotiating our belonging to them (Bell, 1999). A community of practice may represent the appropriate organizational level for analyzing the culture of practice which produces, maintains, reproduces and changes the values, norms, symbols, rituals and artifacts that sustain a professional identity. Since organizational cultures ‘do gender’ and have codes for performing professional gendered identities which differ greatly even within the same organization (Gherardi, 1995a), the analytical level of the community of practice is the one which enables study of the arrangements and the ordering processes which keep (or fail to keep) a professional identity aligned. Practice is a concept which articulates both the spatiality and the fabrication of knowing, and reconciles doing with being (Gherardi, 2006). It is starting from a situated practice that a community of practices takes form as an actor network of more or less precarious and partial accomplishments of order.

The community of practices we studied consists of four persons responsible for a longstanding consultancy project within a branch office of an international consulting company. We ‘shadowed’ a young woman for three months during her affiliation to a group of men.

The status of novice is a vantage point for getting to know a culture of practice and for forgetting how it was done. In the shift from novice to expert – in the acquisition of affiliation – innocence is lost and the knowledge thus acquired is taken for granted and no longer seen. We shall describe how acquiring a professional identity is a construction that conceals its genesis. In learning how to belong, the tacit and collective agreements that perform and sustain a professional and gendered identity within a community of practices is obscured and taken for granted.

Central to the description will be the performance of a gender identity situated in a context of work practices connoted as a male dominated environment. The ethnographic study of the trajectory of becoming an insider in a community of practice will report what happens when the insider is female, and when aligning a gender identity and a professional identity requires competence and experience to cope with the requirements of the ‘dual presence’, i.e. the ability to stage both a professional self and a gendered one. This ability will be described as competence in gender switching, i.e. in positioning oneself discursively as the masculine subject, or not, according to the situation at hand. When competence in crossing gender boundaries is achieved, then the practicalities of how to do it and the associated emotions become ‘black boxed’ and the tension comes to a closure.
The knowledge yielded by the paper should therefore be twofold. On the one hand the intention is to continue reflection in gender studies which consider gender to be a practical accomplishment (Poggio, 2006), a persuasive performance (Gherardi, 1996). On the other hand the intention is to offer a critical contribution, based on a practice-base theorizing of knowing (Gherardi, 2000) to studies on communities of practice, since these to date have not considered gender to be one of the social practices of a community and a body of practical knowledge learnt and transmitted internally within it.

1. Professional identity as a network effect

The ‘decentering of the subject’ has been one of the major achievements of post-structuralism, and for many feminist poststructuralists (Butler, 1990; Calas and Smirchich, 1996) it is only in the dynamics of intersubjectivity and interobjectivity that the subject’s gender and sexual identity is achieved, even if such ‘identity’ is always contingent and precarious. Therefore the social agent can be thought of as being constituted by an ensemble of subject positions that;

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... \text{can never be totally fixed in a closed system of differences, constructed by a diversity of discourses among which there is no necessary relation, but a constant movement of over-determination and displacement.} \quad \text{(Mouffe, 1995: 318)}
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Consequently, every subject positioning (Davis and Hare, 1990) is constituted within an essentially unstable discursive structure. An actor-network approach has another dimension to add to this debate: the materiality of the practices which perform the subjectivity. Materiality was already present in Foucault’s (1977; 1984) definition of discourse: “an agent is a network of different materials, a process of ordering that we happen to label ‘a person’” (Law, 1994: 24). Then how that effect is generated becomes an important topic to address in empirical research. As Gomart and Hennion (1999) have done in their study of music amateurs and drug users, instead of focusing on capacities inherent in a subject, we may observe the emergence of a subject-network through the tactics and techniques deployed in situated practices.

In order to understand how identity is generated we shall examine the practices – both material and discursive – which support a subject position, since practice is the theoretical and material locus which articulates doing and being.

Although we borrow the concept of ‘community of practice’ from Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998), we intend to criticize their concept of identity and to point out their neglect of
gender. Wenger’s book opens with a vignette describing a community of practice from the standpoint of a participant Ariel, a claims processor, who is said to be a woman, but is composite in character. We know nothing about the gender composition of her co-workers, nor when reading about identity (to which one-third of the book is devoted) do we learn anything about the negotiability of gender or associated issues. It appears that a community of practice transmits a neutral code of professional identity. When Wenger asserts that learning is the vehicle for the evolution of practices and the inclusion of newcomers, and that it is the vehicle for the development and transformation of identities, he refers to theories of identity as the stable social formation of the person in a context of mutual constitution between individuals and groups. By contrast, relying on poststructuralist theories of identity, our aim is to demonstrate how understanding gender identity and professional identity as practical accomplishments within a community of practice contributes to an anti-individualistic and anti-essentialist theory of knowledge.

We therefore assume that gender identity, too, is a precarious achievement and that it is learnt and enacted in appropriate situations (Gherardi and Poggio, 2001). Moreover, professional identity, as a collective achievement, can, or cannot, be coherently inscribed in the same symbolic universe as gender identity.

The culture of practice expresses the codes for a situated professionalism at the level of artifacts, of behaviours, of ethics and symbols. Absorbing and being absorbed into the culture of practice may require knowing:

…who is involved, what they do, what everyday life is like, how masters talk, walk, work, and generally conduct their lives, how people who are not part of the community of practice interact with it, what other learners are doing, and what learners need to learn to became full practitioners (Lave and Wenger, 1991:95).

But we should consider that organizational cultures are not gender neutral, and that also ‘professional identities’ are therefore forged within gendered practices which may be more or less sexist. Here we shall examine the dual presence in the case of ‘crosswise’ presence (Lorber, 1999), since we are interested in understanding how gender identity and professional identity are handled when they clash, as often happens when a professional woman enters a male dominated culture of practices.

The ‘dual presence’ (Balbo, 1979; Zanuso, 1987) is a category invented by Italian feminists in the 1970s to indicate cross-gender experiences and the simultaneous presence (in the consciousness and experience of women) of the public and the private, of home and work, of the personal and the
The expression 'dual presence' denotes a frame of mind which typifies a growing number of adult women who think of themselves in 'crosswise' manner with respect to different worlds - material and symbolic - conceived as differently gendered and in opposition to each other: public/private, the family/the labour market, the personal/the political, the places of production/the places of reproduction (Zanuso, 1987:43). More and more women find themselves operating in a plurality of arenas in social practices; they break with traditional role models; they create a space which is practical and mental, structural and projectual, adaptive to given constraints and productive of new personal and social arrangements. In short, the boundaries between the symbolic universes of male and female became fluid, negotiable, they intersect and they merge. Handling the dual presence may therefore be conceived as a practical capacity, a skilful practice of gender enactment.

The concept of dual presence enables us to deconstruct essential gender identities and to recognize the contingency and ambiguity of every identity and the political conflicts associated with the permeability of boundaries between female and male symbolic universes. In the ethnographic study described below we shall describe the modes of handling the dual presence by a professional woman, and we shall show how she resolved to assume (or reject) a ‘masculine subject position’.

For Kerfoot and Whitehead (1998: 436), ‘the term ‘masculine subject’ best exemplifies those men, and women, who seek to invest their sense of being in masculinist discourses’. We like the idea that the masculine subject positioning may be assumed either by men or women, but we prefer to see this process in more dynamic terms as a temporal and fluid enactment which sometime aligns the person and the subject position within the same symbolic universe of gender, sometime fails to do so, and sometimes create new crosswise hybrids.

The concept of the masculine subject as a performative accomplishment allows us to see masculinity as a practice and not an attribute. Patricia Martin (2001) proposes the concept of ‘mobilizing masculinities’ in interpretation of ‘the practices wherein two or more men jointly bring to bear, or bring into play, masculinity/ies’. In mobilizing masculinity/ies at work men may mobilize the material and discursive codes of practice of the profession. The ritualistic repetition of these normalized codes gives materiality to belonging to the community and may explain the persistence of masculinist discourses, jokes, behaviours, styles even in mixed gender practices. The counterpart of mobilizing masculinity becomes competence in handling the dual presence.

Taken together these are all practices of heterogeneous engineering of gender and professional identity. We shall describe them by means of an ethnographic account of how gender is learnt and enacted as a situated practice, and of how the codes of a professional gendered identity are passed on to a novice.
2. An ethnographic approach to gendering practices

The focus of the study was the ethnographic observation of the trajectory of learning of a novice in a community of practice, since at the time we were interested in the circulation of organizational knowing, and in organizations as distributed communities of knowledge. The organization studied was a branch office in northern Italy of an international company (‘Alpha’2) which divided into two large groups providing consultancy services on tax and organization. It was the latter that was the specific context of research. It was selected for study because of the knowledge-intensive nature of the organization: since ‘expertise’ is the central aspect of organizational consultancy, we expected to observe a community which based its main practices on the management of knowledge, and we had no expectations nor hypotheses regarding the relationship between gender and knowledge.

In order to observe the learning of work practices, it was decided to flank – or to ‘shadow’ – a newly-hired employee. By coincidence the management of Alpha had selected a team which was about start a new project and had also just hired a young woman for her first job as consultant. If the newly-hired employee had been a man, this article would probably never have been written. In research as in life, plans and surprises are inextricably linked, and following causality can be a research rationale (Becker, 1994)

The employee was shadowed through every stage of the consultancy project. For ten weeks, three days a week, one of the two authors (the male) followed the Analyst in the office, on visits to the client, and in other organizational situations, so that her process of learning could be watched in itinere. In the case of this organization, in fact, newly-hired personnel are immediately involved in the management of a consultancy project, working with a group of several expert consultants. The path followed by a newcomer forms a situated curriculum (Gherardi, Nicolini, and Odella, 1998) of acquisition of practical knowing of the group’s codes of practice, and it is through work practices that the novice may legitimately assume the professional identity intrinsic to those practices and recognized as competent behaviour by the group.

The community of practice studied consisted of the following:

– ‘Omega’, the Analyst (a young woman, 27 years old, recently hired by the company);
– ‘Delta’, a ‘Consultant’ (a young man, 29 years old, hired in the past two years, but who was already experienced)

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2 The names of the persons and the organization are imaginary, the outcome of an elementary abstraction from the specific which ensures the anonymity of the people concerned.
- **Gamma**, a ‘Manager’ (a man, about 40 years old, an expert consultant who closely supervised every phase of the project),
- **Beta**, a ‘Partner’ (a man, about 40 years old, an expert consultant in charge of the project and who ‘signed’ the project agreed with the client).

We would emphasise that gender difference, was an important factor in the ethnographic observation in that as the researcher (male) sought to adopt the perspective of the novice (female), he contaminated his sense of male self. In postmodern ethnography the relationship between the observer and the subject observed is a reflexive reciprocal construction. Reflexive ethnography uses data collection techniques which respect the subjectivity of the Other, combined with critical social theoretical ideas. The relation between the ethnographer and the subject observed is a relation of reciprocal implication and participation: while the researcher observes, s/he is observed, so that ethnography can be viewed as the result of a textual collaboration, as the outcome of this dual hermeneutic process. The ethnographer is considered to be engaged in a symmetrical reflective exercise (Linstead, 1993) and, far from being an ‘alien’, the ethnographer conveys cultural assumptions and preconceptions, and enjoys an active presence which makes his/her role different from that of the ‘professional stranger’ (Agar, 1980) as an “uncontaminated expert” (Van Maanen, 1988; Tedlock, 1991). ‘Shadowing’ someone of a different gender from one’s own, for example, may be an opportunity which reveals the gender bias acting in the relationship.

When presenting our field observations we will give voice to Omega by drawing on an interview recorded during the last day of our fieldwork using the technique of the ‘interview with the double’. The ‘interview with the double’ is a projective technique (Oddone, Re, Briante, 1977; Gherardi, 1995b) in which the interviewee is invited to imagine that s/he has a double and sends him/her into the office in his/her place. The interviewee must therefore instruct his/her double on what s/he should and should not do in order to prevent the switch being noticed. The text of the interview (which has been abridged for reasons of space) will sometimes be interrupted by ‘black boxes’. These are excerpts from the ethnographic notes taken during the shadowing. In the text, the researcher’s speech is enclosed in brackets, while Omega’s is written in italics. The ‘black boxes’ can be read in another sense: to paraphrase Latour’s use of the term, in the creation of a professional identity as an effect of an actor network all kinds of ambiguities, conflict, ambivalent emotions are forgotten (black-boxed) after the closure or completion of the project. And also for the ethnographer the black-boxes represent the location of his reflexive labour.

We would emphasise that this format is not intended to suggest that the ethnographer’s point of view is ‘truer’, or that it is objective while Omega’s is not. Quite the opposite. We believe that the
same situation can be interpreted in a variety of ways, and that it is much more interesting to dwell on the relations among these interpretations, rather than to assert their ultimate truth. The ethnography is one of several possible stories – more ‘plausible’ than ‘true’ – and intended to emphasise inconsistencies and contradictions, rather than a model’s adherence to reality. Every ethnography is “essentially contestable” and “intrinsically incomplete”, to quote Geertz (1973: 29), and it is practically impossible to “step outside” one’s own research experience to adopt a “professionalized distance”, as suggested by Silverman (1972:189). Ultimately, the reason for “selecting one methodological approach over another is an issue of aesthetic choice, involved more with what a researcher desires to study than with how she or he will do it” (Rosen, 1991: 21).

3. Gendering as a situated practice

Omega has just been hired by Alpha. She has a degree in business studies and has already completed a six-month internship (while preparing her degree thesis) at Alpha. One month after graduating she officially began her job at the company. Two months have passed and Omega has completed her first consultancy project. It is my last day of ‘shadowing’, and I ask Omega if we can go over what has happened in an interview.

Being Omega’s double in Alpha

“Let’s pretend that I am your double … I want to know what I have to do so that no-one realizes that I am not you.”

*Right ... you have to go into the office on the ground floor and say “ciao (name of the person in the lobby)”; go upstairs and say “ciao Sigma”, “ciao Tau” (two secretaries) ... then you have to go to a free desk and put down your computer, your briefcase, your hand-bag...*

Black box 1

Together with an ‘identification number’, on the first day of work each consultant receives a large briefcase made of maroon leather with the Alpha logo gilded on the inside. Together with the portable computer, this briefcase constitutes the consultant’s essential equipment. Each briefcase contains pens, pencils, stationery, a notebook, and various documents. Omega only kept her briefcase for half an hour and then gave it to Delta, who wanted to have a new one. In any case, she did not like it because it was cumbersome, had little room inside, had to be kept away from the body because of its bulk and could not be slung over the shoulder. *They gave it to me because they...*
said it was comfortable ... but as long as they tell me that I have to carry it like part of the uniform, that’s all right, but if they tell me its comfortable...

“So I go into the staff room and where there’s a place I sit down?”
That’s right, you sit down, put your things on the desk and switch on your computer. You switch on your computer and the first thing you do is check your e-mail ... to see if someone has sent you a memo ... it often happens in the evening that the managers or the people you work with send you memos from home, so you read them the next morning... (...) You stay there a couple of hours or even more, then at about half past ten you go up to the third floor, you get some water and you bring it downstairs, you say hello to everyone who comes into the staff room, the managers... (...) there may be other people who know the projects you do and ask for details...

Black box 2

On the first day, a consultant comes into the staff room to advise Omicron (a man, also just hired) to ‘draw inspiration’ from a presentation that he had just prepared for a project similar to the one that Omicron is developing. Omicron says that the consultant is highly qualified and also very likeable. Beside work information, in fact, he circulates games, files of images and porno clips.

“Do you greet everyone in the same way?”
Yes, yes, a “ciao, how’s it going?”, cool ..., and at about ten to one, a quarter to, your stomach tells you its time to go to lunch ... you have a sandwich, ask your colleagues what they’re doing, what they aren’t doing...

Black box 3

It is Omega’s first day at work and together with seven other consultants (males) we go off to eat at a restaurant. During lunch they talk about work and/or how to make money and/or how others make it. Omega joins us after some time because she has had some personal matters to attend to. She arrives when lunch has almost finished, in fact, but sits down at the table anyway. Two consultants jokingly (and provocatively) ask her if she would buy a ‘Lady Piss’, a gadget which enables women to urinate standing up. After some joshing they ask her about her first consultancy project.

“Do I take an hour for lunch?”
An hour’s lunch break... it depends, it may be an hour and a quarter, or it may be ten minutes... it depends on the situation, on the day, but you usually take at least half an hour. (...) You come back from lunch, perhaps you check your e-mail to see if you have any messages, and you get back to work on what you were doing before. You try to concentrate as much as possible until mid-afternoon, by which time you’ll have finished your water and you have to go back upstairs to get some more. Until you’ve finished what you're supposed to do (unless you decide to finish it the day after), you stay in the office until half past seven, eight, nine, ten.

Black box 4

On leaving the offices, I notice that Omega has brought trainers and a track suit, hiding them in the office as soon as she arrived, to go running. If she had to go home to change she would never make it. She did not get changed in the office, but in the basement before leaving. I thus realize that Omega has the keys to the office, and she tells me that she was given them by Sigma (a secretary introduced to me as the “historic and living memory of the organization”) on her first day at work. In theory, you don’t get the keys until you are a ‘Senior’, but she has them and finds them very useful, because she can work on Saturdays or at times when the offices are shut.

Being the ‘double’ in the project

“And when I’m not on-site, that is, when I’m not in the office but with a client, is there anything I should know in particular?”

The situation differs according to what you’re doing in the client company, whether you’re on your own or accompanied by the Senior or even the Manager of the project. Until now there have been two types of situation. Situations in which we’ve gone to make presentations of a general kind about the project ... or presentations on things arising from the project, and situations in which we’ve done interviews. So, in the former case my role is a role, I’d say, more marginal than that of the project Manager and Senior. I usually try to listen, to grasp everything presented and the comments made about the project. But unless I’m asked something ... or there’s something that I feel that I really must say ... I don’t usually speak. Not because someone has explicitly told me not to but because I think ... I don’t have any experience, I have a specific role and the client knows it; the role of Analyst... the junior in the project... (...) the person... who, I don’t know, the person who’ll write the minutes of the meeting, the person who’ll contribute but doesn’t take the decisions about the project... a person who physically writes the questionnaire, or who helps with the content, a person who ‘grinds out’ administrative matters... Or the person who’s led by the others, the
youngest person, therefore with least experience, who’s growing with the company, who perhaps knows something because she’s got a qualification, or a specialization, but who knows less about the typical aspects of the project. So, because it’s explicitly stated in the project proposal, the client knows that there’s a Manager, there’s a Senior and there’s an Analyst, they’ve already got a clear idea of the persons and the roles.

Black box 5

Omega is in the office to draft the final version of the questionnaire. She searches the net (the consultants are linked by an intranet) for a project that might give her some ideas, but fails to find anything. [I notice that for every project the names of the Partner and Manager are given, but not those of the Analysts or Consultants, for whom the term ‘Team’ is used]. She leafs through the material given her by the client, she searches for other information by computer, further information she marks in her notebook, she attaches coloured post-its to some photocopies. Then she writes an e-mail to Gamma and Delta telling them about the new interval schedule in the client company.

After the lunch break, Omega again sits down at the computer to choose the colours to assign to concepts so that they can be differentiated in the questionnaire. In the afternoon, Delta calls her to finish the work to be presented. We go up to the first floor and sit around a table. [I note an advertisement for Alpha published in Sole 24ore in 1996. The caption reads: ‘Is your organization in shape?’ and the picture shows a shoal of fish arranged in the shape of a shark]. Omega shows Delta what she has prepared this morning. She complains that she too little information and, speaking about the forthcoming interviews, says, we’ve got to really squeeze them!

A telephone call arrives to change an appointment fixed for the following day, which means that diaries will have to be rearranged. While Omega reports on Delta’s appointments, she tells him: I feel like I’m your secretary… He answers: In that case I’ll feel you up (laughs).

Gamma calls, agitated because he thinks that Omega has already gone home. [Two consultants have told him that they have seen Delta and Omega leaving a room with briefcases and computers and thought they were going home]. When the telephone call is finished, Delta and Omega begin working on the advice given them by Gamma. Their client company does not know how to ‘attract’ the customer (because it is expensive, it does not offer anything new, it does not explore the market). Delta comments: like a woman who treats you bad! (laughs). Omega nods. Delta and Omega continue their discussion and reach the conclusion that the Consortium is a way to make the others come, and Omega makes a pun on ‘come’.

Delta says that he thinks that he should be at the presentation as well, because Beta tends to cock these things up… Omega reassures him, saying that in any case she will be there as well. Yes, but
since they know that you’re the Analyst... Omega says, indeed, but Beta will be doing the presentation. Exactly, if I’m there as the Consultant... then Beta can do the presentation and I’ll intervene from time to time.

“But I know that you made all those calls to arrange appointments…”
Yes, as project secretary I do some interviews, make appointments, see you on day x, that sort of stuff, but it’s no big deal. Now that we’re drafting the questionnaire I’m the person who talks most with the client about what to put in the questionnaire ... what to write here, what to write there, but these are ‘administrative’ matters, I don’t know what to call them... a bit of basic information for the questionnaire.

Black box 6

We are in the car on our way to the client.

Delta asks what he should say if they ask whether this is the first time that they have done a project of this kind. Omega says that they could say that the individual parts we’ve already done, but we’ve never combined them in a single project... which is half true and half untrue.

(Delta) Meaning?

(Omega) Well, this is the first form of integration, the perfect response to the client’s needs.

(they laugh)

We have almost arrived, and Omega and Delta review the various stages of the project, from when they were happy for the first time to when they were depressed because the client had rejected their first project. Joking, they say that they could put together all the projects that they have prepared and presented in the past. Omega adds that then we really would be whores (they laugh), referring to the fact that they have always catered to the client’s desires. Delta concludes by saying that, anyway, he has never presented a project on any solid basis, he has always had to improvise.

On arriving at the client company, Omega exclaims: Come on guys, let’s go for it ...!

Being the ‘double’ in gender

“According to you, is consultancy work for a man?”

I get the impression that everyone conceives a ‘consultant’ as a man. So in this sense there’s a perception of the male consultant, which if you like is a cultural characteristic or a common bias, so it gives me the idea that women have to conquer... the authority to do this job. I’ve talked about it with two or three other women at Alpha ... with one in particular, a Senior Consultant who’s
about to be promoted to Manager … who’s had considerable difficulties in her career, because she said to me. “Men get further ahead in their careers!”

Black box 7

It’s Omega’s first day in the office and she tells me that she hates cigarette smoke.

(Omega): Just think that (in the office) there are four smokers and one non-smoker…

(Omicron): And you’re a woman, so you’re doubly in the minority!

A little later, while looking for some files in the computer, Omega says: Omicron, are you under (name of a female consultant) or under (name of another female consultant)? The question (which refers to folders in the computer) prompts the inevitable jokes from the other three (male) consultants in the room. After laughing at Omicron’s ‘pleasurable’ position, they respond to Omega’s timid protest with: “But you really asked for that one!”

There’s the idea that women are a bit… then you should realize that there are certain aspects of being a woman that restrict you in a job of this kind. Mainly the family… it’s obvious that it’s quite heavy work, with lots of travelling, which requires time, which takes up a lot of time. Because as well as your work you also have to promote the company, you have to keep in contact with universities, you have to try to… update your knowledge, read the newspapers, there are lots of aspects to this work that drain what I call your psycho-physical energies…And if you want to have a family you have to devote part of your energies, affection and psycho-physical energies to your family. Because that’s right, according to me. Because if you have children … you’re a mother!… that certainly limits you a bit. Its basically a limitation. Symptomatic of this is that one day… (…) I was at a work meeting, the day after I graduated, and I didn’t feel very well because the day before I’d been drinking, what you always do on graduation day … I arrived late at the office with my head exploding and a stomach-ache, your normal post-degree hangover. So I found it difficult being in a darkened room with the slides, the air… I felt sick. I stood up and left the room for a breath of fresh air. At that moment my reference Partner, Beta, arrived, he saw that I wasn’t feeling very well and asked (without any malice): “You’re not pregnant, are you?!” So if I have some doubts about these limitations… that was symptomatic. Having a child is a problem, could be a problem. There are some aspects, plus the fact that you have to cope with a heavy workload, cope with the stress, cope with the travelling … there’s no gender, it’s the person, absolutely, that’s my opinion, I’m convinced.
4. Discussion: how Omega became competent at gender switching and unaware of it

The episode recounted by Omega at the end of the interview highlights, ironically, that the community of practices has marked ‘gender’ characteristics. It suffices to ‘switch’ Omega’s story into the masculine (imagining that the protagonist of the situation is a man) to realize that Beta’s remark was based on certain gender assumptions. That a person of female sex, the day after her graduation, feels ill, is interpreted as a ‘symptom’ of an unexpected pregnancy (girls don’t drink!). This suggests that, if the protagonist had been a man, Beta could have ‘inferred’ with equal certainty that his discomfort was due to a hangover (men don’t get pregnant!). Beta’s irony was not directed simply at Omega’s malaise and her absence from the meeting, but at both things in relation to her being of female sex. Beta relates to Omega on the basis of her ‘gendered self’ and her effective capacity to participate in the community’s practices.

Doubt concerning the ability of a woman to participate competently is stressed also by Omicron – the other newly hired person but of the ‘right sex’ – when he labels Omega as being twice in the minority because she is non-smoker and woman (Black box 7). Apparently Omicron’s remarks refers to smoking, but there is no doubt that he is also comparing himself to Omega, and despite their being both newcomers he bears only ‘one minority’ condition. His competent participation in the community was already underlined (Black box 2) when he gave to Omega the tip on the consultant circulating porno clips. Assuming Omega was not interested in joining that exchange of materials, what Omicron was symbolizing was his status of ‘insider’ in a masculinity mobilization, while Omega did not share that secret knowledge.

Omega denies her status of minority by gender by adopting a genderless stance when she states at the end of the interview, “there’s no gender, it’s the person”: as if to say that gender is one of the aspects suppressed while learning a ‘professional self’ which pretends to appear ‘neutral’ but is masculine to the point that it is unwilling (and unprepared) to differ. This process lies in the background to the protagonist’s entire socialization to the community, and it is therefore advisable to foreground practices in order to show how the positioning of the masculine subject is the effect of the actor network which sustain the ‘Alpha consultant’ identity.

Consultancy as a ‘masculine’ job

Immediately evident of a male dominated environment is a ‘quantitative datum’. In her everyday work, Omega almost invariably has to deal with persons of male sex. The only exception is her

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3 Unfortunately we could not study Omicron’s entry in his community of practice and compare the two processes. He came into contact with us only when he was present in common organizational spaces and, given the nature of the project, this did not happen very often.
relations with the administrative department, where there is a normal probability of encountering a person of female sex. This feature probably reflects the gender division still distinctive of the Italian labour market, and in Alpha it is surrounded by an aura of ‘normality’ which impedes its discussion and recognition. Thus the gender arrangement of the organization and of daily practices of organizing remains invisible to most of those inculcated with its discursive practices.

Masculinity is also apparent at the symbolic level and is practised and circulated in discourses, artefacts and in the physicality of the space. Consultancy work, with its characteristics of ‘winning the client’ is represented as typically male terrain. It is made explicit and justified by the categories of ‘rationality’, ‘efficiency’ and ‘strategic acumen’, ‘killing the competition’, ‘squeezing the others’. It is also reflected in material artefacts (as Omega explains, the ‘briefcase’ issued on the first day at Alpha contains corporeal constraints, a script which presupposes a male body), in verbal artefacts (the jokes among the consultants, the imaginary object called Lady Piss, the sexual innuendo and the sexual metaphors privileging men’s bodies) and in the internal decoration of the organizational setting. In the advertising of Alpha, when the organization is in shape, it takes the form of a shark (Black box 5). It compels those who participate to be constantly present (it is considered legitimate to make work phone calls during the week-ends, work late at night) while the ‘private’ is dismissed as a residual category.

To be a man in such an environment yields rent from keeping all the previous elements aligned without putting much effort into aligning them. Masculinity constitutes a position rent for the arrangements of all the masculine materials in a network that is male dominated. For a person of another gender or for non hegemonic forms of masculinity such an environment is demanding in terms of legitimation and appropriate gender enactment.

That Omega’s learning comes about in a ‘masculine’ setting is therefore a matter of importance, especially in her circumstances as a ‘novice’ or someone who has not yet fully mastered the community’s practices. But Omega, in giving instructions to her double, glossed out all the masculinist style aspects of her working environment, as is done in editing work. How did Omega learn to ‘edit’ her participation in order to support the mobilization of masculinity, how did she learn to handle her dual presence without losing face as a gendered person and as a competent professional?

We shall now examine two processes (previous mentioned in passing) which apparently predominate in Omega’s learning path: (i) constructing (internally to the community) a ‘gendered self’ and a ‘professional self’; (ii) handling the tension between the two and thereby demonstrating competence in becoming a member of a masculine community of practice.
Aligning a gendered self with a professional one: knowing how to keep your place in the community

Omega is still unable to handle the community’s practices with ease, not only because she is a ‘novice’ but also because she belongs to a category (‘woman’) which has only residual citizenship rights in the community. The possibility of legitimate peripheral participation in the community’s practices is made even more unlikely by her being ‘doubly in the minority’, as her colleague Omicron points out (Black box 7). The social distance between her colleagues and herself is too wide for to consider her on the same footing. But at the same time in order to be recognized as a member of the community she must differentiate herself from the other women – who are secretaries – and whose image is used by her colleagues to undercut her professional identity. For Omega to handle the dual presence – to enact her gender competence and her professional one in a male dominated environment – requires coping with a double bind (Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson, 1967), while her male colleagues simple do not see the problem since she does not enter into their area of social comparison. In a work setting connoted as male territory for men the problem of social comparison with a group – women – perceived as distant may not arise at all, while these men compare the professional woman with the group of women making up the administrative staff.

The concept of social comparison (Festinger, 1954; Berger and Luckmann, 1969; Tajfel, 1981) may be of help in explaining how the process of alignment performed by the subject-network Omega differed from that of a male newcomer. Social comparison, and the sentiments associated with it, operate in accordance with the individual personality, but also and especially in accordance with the social distance among persons or social groups. For comparison to take place, the social distance must be perceived as minimal, and the Other must be knowable and known on a plane of social proximity. Societies organized into rigidly distinct social classes favour an objective conception of distance and therefore foster social comparisons only within the same class. The same applies to the rigid gender (class or race) division which imposes social comparison and the sentiments of competition or emulation only among persons of the same gender. In other words, maleness yields a ‘position rent’ and a ‘competitive advantage’ to the point that embracing its stereotypes and values can be cited as an example of competence and likeableness (Black box 2).

In trying to mobilize a professional identity aligned with the material and semiotic practices of her community, and thereby proving to her colleagues her competence at doing it, Omega takes up a masculine discursive position: she produces double entendre and puns and complies with their time requirements and male style (Black box 5 and 6). But using verbal expressions at odds with her
gender identity may provoke scorn whenever a colleague wishes to show that she cannot share the community’s linguistic and discursive practices (Black box 7). Her participation in the community is in jeopardy whenever she tries to save her gender identity and her professional membership. Mobilizing masculinity is an exclusion practice performed whenever Omega is compared to a secretary, compelled to do secretarial work, and symbolically forced to join the group of ‘the other women’.

As recounted in the interview, and as shown by various ethnographic ‘asides’, the only female figure contemplated by the community is that of the ‘secretary’: a support figure which recurs whenever mention is made of ‘peripheral’ practices (arranging appointments, keeping the work flow constant) and which male ‘rationality’ typically relegates to female ‘relationality’. Omega refers to this figure when she complains about the marginal role assigned to her in management of the project. She could have complained for being treated as the last incomer, or the youngest, or the less experienced; instead she did so by comparing herself to a secretary. The fact that she compares herself to a ‘secretary’ and not to a generic ‘newcomer’ is an effect of the acquisition of a gendered self and at the same time the expression of her need to perform a process of differentiation.

During Omega’s first months of involvement in the project, it is repeatedly pointed out to her that she belongs to a gender not countenanced by the community. Omega notes that her colleagues relate to her on the basis of gender models and that her organizational position is directly influenced by that fact. That Omega views her situation as that of a ‘secretary’ is therefore an effect in terms of social categorization: an orientation which helps define an individual’s specific place in society (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). In Omega’s case, she compares herself with those who, like her, are ‘gendered’ in the community: ‘the secretaries’. It is both ironic and cynical that on the only occasion when Omega explicitly states the relation that ties her organizationally to another member of the community (“I feel like I’m your secretary”, Black box 5), the latter answers that “In that case I’ll feel you up!”, which implies an obligatory component in all relationships between ‘managers’ (men) and ‘secretaries’ (women).

At this stage, Omega realizes that her biological gender makes her ‘gendered’, and that a ‘gendered self’ is a stigma (Goffman, 1959) in that community. Enacting a ‘professional identity’, therefore, can only pass through a process of differentiation from persons in the (gender) category to which Omega sees herself as belonging by gender, not by profession. The differentiation, however, cannot take place at the level of work practices, because the peripheral position occupied by a ‘newcomer’ prevents Omega from participating fully, and it tallies (too much so) with archetypal models of gender relations like boss/secretary. The enactment of her differentiation is staged for the audience of her colleagues and it is discursively achieved by joining in a masculine positioning.
On the other hand, membership of ‘another’ gender places Omega in ‘another’ community. And to some advantage: it is through Sigma, a secretary (the gate-keeper of the community of secretaries) that Omega has obtained the keys for the basement where she stashes her track suit for after-work jogging, even though she was not yet a Senior (Black box 4). Her gender identity is recognized by the community of women, and this enables her to share a secret and to indulge in a non-canonical practice with another community.

For Omega, assimilation and differentiation are processes which are never complete; on the contrary, they are constantly ‘managed’ both by her and by all the other actors (or actants) in her network of gendered and professional relationships. We use the term ‘gender switching’ to denote the dynamic by which Omega takes up a masculine positioning, acts from within it, leaves it and defends her gender identity, is second-sexed by her colleagues, affiliates herself with other women or differentiates herself from them. Any gendered subject positioning is unstable and precarious, and keeping all the elements aligned is a collective achievement.

**Professional self: the tacit knowing of gender switching**

Omega’s strategy is therefore to share the community’s discursive practices and become an expert in gender switching. These discursive practices represent a reality with markedly masculinist characteristics, and endorsing them may provide entry for those (like Omega) who find themselves “doubly in the minority”. According to the interview and the field-notes, this acquisition of discursive practices moves through two fundamental and intertwined stages: acquiring ‘macho’ language, and consequent symbolic participation in the project and the community.

In the course of the project Omega’s language gradually changes. Not only does her ‘technical’ vocabulary become more graphic, but she develops an ability to deploy humour and avoid expressions that might provoke the scorn of her ‘more expert’ colleagues. The episode when Omega and Delta work together on an organizational analysis (Black box 5) is exemplary: after Delta has twice made a ‘gender translation’ of what Omega has said, it is the latter who notices a *double entendre* in her words. When the two visit the client for the last time, Omega compares the consultancy business with prostitution (Black box 6): not that there is any explicit moralism, merely the easy-going humour with which males indicate the (female) capacity to ‘accommodate’ a client. The ‘amiability’ and the ‘non-judgementalism’ arise from the reformulation of people’s work in a different symbolic universe of gender. The expression is ‘professional’ insofar as the person who says it simultaneously demonstrates knowledge of the male symbolic universe in which the community inscribes itself and an ability to act in accordance with it, regardless of that person’s gender membership. Omega uses a male stereotype to identify herself vulgarly with a typically
female category, and doing so enables her to differentiate herself from the category itself of ‘woman’, equally gendered, shared by the community.

Omega’s competence at taking and leaving a masculine discursive positioning is signalled by her being no longer aware of doing it; it is what enables her in the course of the interview (which was recorded, note, when the consultancy had been concluded) to review the stages of her first two months as member of the community in absolutely ‘genderless’ terms. The work of an ‘Analyst’ seems to be a purely functional role performed in an organizational setting shorn of any attribution of gender. The view of Omega’s work group as a ‘community of practice’ would be weak if it were based solely on what emerges from the interview. It is symptomatic that the only truly ‘intimate’ detail furnished by Omega on how to be her ‘double’ was that he should ensure a regular supply of water. Not that Omega was being untruthful, but her ‘professional’ rhetoric produced a reconstruction of events which sometimes appears very distorted if compared with what was observed during the ethnographic fieldwork. The most evident discrepancy is between Omega’s account of her participation in the project and what is described immediately afterwards by the excerpt in Black box 6. In fact, Omega’s duties and participation do not seem to result from a pre-established sequence of tasks, but rather from the contested management of her participation. On this occasion too, a tension arises between a perceived gendered self and a sought-after professional self. Omega complains that she is given gendered tasks (arranging appointments), while at the same time she interprets her peripheral participation as necessary to acquire improved professional skills. Symbolic participation in the project, therefore, takes place not through particular ‘legitimizing’ practices but through differentiation from one’s gender milieu. Symbolic participation in the project consists in the newcomer’s ability to figure in a community to which she still does not belong, and to adopt a masculine positioning in defining the boundaries and parameters of evaluation.

Omega’s interview at the end of the project expresses that her re-construction within a professional identity has been successfully accomplished, all the elements have been aligned and the stabilization of the network has been achieved. Therefore the black boxes come to a closure and in her process of engineering a gender identity and a professional one the knowledge of how to do it becomes tacit knowledge. Gender switching is now just a tacit competence….but remains always unstable.

‘Consultants’ or ‘mothers’? A ‘professional’ solution

We have seen that learning to enact a professional self enabled Omega to ‘by-pass’ certain ‘gendered’ aspects of her ‘apprenticeship’. During the interview, Omega makes no mention of gender: she only starts talking about it when the researcher asks a specific question (see ‘Being the double in gender’). Her answer is unequivocal: everyone ‘perceives’ a consultant as a ‘man’, to the
point that the phenomenon assumes the features of a gender bias at the cultural level. Women must “conquer authority” (Omega continues) in order to become a professional. Thus formulated, the expression evokes the dimensions of power and conflict within the performance of professional competence, and it implies that masculinity has hegemony in them. This hypothesis seems to be borne out by the episode cited by Omega as an example, when a ‘man’ seems to have a ‘genetic’ advantage in ‘building a career’. But Omega’s remark has a further significance.

The solution to the tension that arises (in the final phase of the interview) between awareness of a gendered self and the construction of a professional self. This tension can be viewed as a continuum between the two extremes of (gendered) ‘mother’ and (professional) ‘consultant’. The tension of the continuum consists in the fact that the two terms comprise a symbolically contradictory relation which prevents intermediate positions from being taken up and compels self-location at one of the two extremes. Motherhood, for example, is presented as inevitable and natural, and as a constraint on one’s professional positioning. The discourse proceeds as follows.

Omega says that “there are certain aspects of being a woman that restrict you in a job of this kind”. Put this way, the image conveyed is one where a ‘job’, the main actor in the discourse, is restricted in its development by certain typically female characteristics. The family is mentioned, but Omega continues by listing the characteristics of her job, which is highly demanding in terms of time, travel, workload, and stress in general.

The image gradually changes: the initial (and presumed) neutrality of work practices acquires gendered meanings, and relational dynamics move back to centre stage. This happens narratively when Omega cites a personal episode as an example. Her assertion of the central importance of motherhood in a woman’s life (“you’re a mother!”) clashes with the organizational reality of her community of practice.

The instability and the precarious alignment of gender and profession become evident if we try to formulate the initial sentence in reverse. What would have been the meaning of that phrase if Omega had said that it is the job that restricts certain aspects of being a woman? We believe that it would engender an image which places at centre stage a person whose aspirations may be restricted by several factors, and in Omega’s case by a particular kind of job. But this image would be at odds with the ‘gender practices’ of the Community, and it would impede Omega in her endeavour to construct a coherent and competent professional self. As long as Omega wants to keep her belonging to a male dominated professional culture she needs to keep her gender and professional alignment in an unstable but stabilized order.
**Conclusions**

We have described the heterogeneous engineering of a professional identity as the effect of the action net which performs it. In the activation of the subject-network, Omega is only one of the elements alongside other people and a set of artifacts which ‘make’ the consultant, like the computer, the briefcase, the projects developed by other consultants but which can be recycled, and the staff room. Omega’s professional identity is sustained as much by her colleagues as by Alpha’s clients and its administrative staff. We may therefore say that her professional identity is the effect of the engineering of heterogeneous elements which has fitted together Omega + artifacts + specialist knowledge + a community of practice + an organization + a market.

All these elements are assembled symmetrically so that one does not predominate over the others, but the arrangement is precarious and can only ever be achieved momentarily, and then through constant and active identity work. That is to say, if sociotechnical relations are to fulfil their relational work of fitting together they must be ‘performed’.

To describe the learning process of acquisition of a professional identity within a community of practices as mastering the skilful engineering of heterogeneous elements yields deeper understanding of the following points:

- How the decentring of the ‘self’ as the privileged site of thinking and knowing, of identity and gender may be pursued further by stressing the material and the discursive construction of the subject position within situated practices of subjectivization and objectification;
- How gender and identity are staged through the workings of power and how a subject position is constituted by power relations,
- How belonging to a community of practices is highly negotiated and how belonging is inscribed in ritualized semiotic and material practices,
- How achievement of belonging is a construction that conceals its genesis and obscures the collective agreement which sustains a situated professional identity.

In Omega’s story we see how she developed a social competence at gender switching: being able to take up the male subject position in discursive practices and at the same time trying to save her gender competence. Behind gender switching as a social practice that, in male dominated environments, only women are forced to perform in order to maintain gender and profession aligned lie the workings of power and the meaning of masculinity as a position rent.
In male dominated environments belonging to the ‘right’ gender makes a great deal of ‘doing’ unnecessary: the male subject position is taken for granted and with it the repertoire of rights pertaining to the male discursive position and all the resources for domination over the non-masculine or the non-hegemonic masculinity. The alignments hold with less effort even when the male is younger or inexperienced. If Omega were a man, many of the interactions we have described would never occurred. For example whenever Omega joins her colleagues in sexualized conversation and assumes the male subject position, she may either been accepted (and her belonging to the community ratified) or disqualified as regards both her gender identity and her professional competence. Her participation and belonging are constantly at stake, and any man at any moment may call her competence into question.

Masculinity therefore – like capital or land – by birthright gives men a rent position that may be spent in a sociotechnical network dominated by male values, symbols, and artifacts. The effort required of men to align materials that are heterogeneous but inscribed in the same symbolic universe of gender is not comparable with the effort required of women to achieve a nodal point in the articulation of power. In this sense, the politics of identity is a concern for both women and men. Masculinity may very easily be mobilized, especially in a male dominated organizational culture, to exclude or marginalize women. Therefore, how to handle the dual presence is a matter of micro-politics of everyday life for both women and for men who do not wish to reproduce hegemonic masculinity.

References


