5 | Group Model Building to Support Gender Equality Change[1]

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5.1 Introduction

Changing organizations in the direction of gender equality proves difficult. The theoretical reflection on the interplay between gender and organizational change shows gender inequality is connected to structural power differences in organizations (Baxter & McLeod, 2005; Benschop & Verloo; 2006; Hearn, 2000; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012). People tend to believe in the gender neutrality of their organizations. They believe talent and merit are all that counts in making a career (Connel, 2006; Gherardi & Poggio, 2007; Benschop, 1996). They favor the principle of gender neutrality in which gender differences are considered irrelevant over the contested principle of gender equality (Walby, 2005). However, believing in gender neutrality defines the problem away from more structural power differences that underlie organizational cultures and structures. Power differences are not only represented by the numerical dominance of (white) men over women and colored people, especially in higher organizational levels, but are deeply embedded in the dominant values in organizations. Linstead, Brewis, and Linstead (2005) argue that Western organizations are dominated by traditional masculine values, such as control and competitiveness. To support change processes, organizations should critically examine these dominant values and be more open to values that are traditionally considered feminine, such as dialogue and community spirit. Baxter and McLeod show how male managers support successful organizational change by involving marginal women in the process and encouraging high status men in supportive rather than leading roles (2005, 636).

The connection between gender inequality and structural power differences is described in detail by scholars reflecting on participative action research directed toward gender equality (Benschop & Verloo, 2006; Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Hearn, 2000). Here, we define participative action research as a research project wherein the researchers consciously aim to increase gender equality in an organization by

involving organizational members in the research process. Most examples of such research projects are relatively unsuccessful (Connel, 2006; Benschop & Verloo, 2006; Coleman & Rippin, 2000; Ely & Meyerson, 2000), although some examples show how individual change agents make a difference (Eveline, 2005).

Here, we reflect on a pilot study of participative action research to support organizational change toward gender equality in a Dutch management school. First, we discuss to what extent gender equality change operates in the same way as other organizational change programs. Second, we discuss an intervention method to support organizational change, (i.e. Group Model Building) and examine its merits and pitfalls for addressing structural power differences connected to gender.

5.2   Gender equality change

Consciously fostering organizational change in itself is fraught with problems. The difficulty managers have in reaching a shared definition of organizational problems is a recognized problem in management literature. Organizational problems can be defined as messy problems when they are analytically complex and when organization members differ in opinion about what the problem is and how it should be addressed (Vennix, 1996). However, even if the changes that are needed are clear, implementation of changes is difficult. Research has shown that only a small percentage of change programs in organizations are successful (Beer & Nohria, 2000; Scott-Morgan, 1994). To foster effective change, organizations need concerted action (Drucker, 1988) for which consensus on objectives and interventions is a precondition.

However, in the case of gender equality change programs, the situation is even more problematic. We define gender equality change programs as a (more or less) coherent set of policies to support organizational change in the direction of gender equality. We distinguish three main reasons for this lack of success. First, concerns the hierarchical ordering of organizational goals wherein the objective of gender equality is inferior to other objectives, such as increasing productivity. As Coleman and Rippin (2000) put it, gender equality change programs run the risk of losing gender, because changing the organization in itself takes all the attention and is complex enough. Second, managers often lack consensus regarding the problem definition of gender inequality. They do not agree on the causes of gender inequality, see it as a non-problem, or use defensive routines when discussing these issues (Benschop & Verloo, 2006; Connel, 2006). Finally, policies geared toward gender change are not fully implemented or do not make it from the drawing table to the work floor (Walby, 2005). Thus, there is a strong need for knowledge on effective organizational change toward gender equality and intervention methods to help produce this.

Our point of departure is that supporting gender equality in organizations requires changing organizational cultures and structures, rather than adapting women

to masculine standards. People must become aware of organizational routines that implicitly favor some groups in organizations and are disadvantageous to other groups (Katila & Mariläinen, 2002, p. 340-341). We agree with Ely and Meyerson that this takes "engaging organizations members up and down the hierarchy, men and women, to question their own and others' deeply held assumptions about work, productivity and effectiveness including what constitutes and contributes to individual and organizational success" (2000, p. 591). Raising this awareness and questioning implicit values is a process that takes the time and effort of a significant group of organization members in higher positions.

Some scholars argue that gender equality is best achieved by obliging organization members to act so that change in their attitudes and value systems will follow (Stark, 1998). However, others show that forced equality measures, imposed from the top, evoke escape attempts (Benschop & Verloo, 2006, p. 30), rendering implemented policies ineffective. This suggests that action needs to follow awareness, not the other way around. A more effective, although possibly more time consuming, method is to open an explicit discussion on the causes of gender inequality and facilitate that discussion in such a way that real change in people's problem definition of gender inequality is produced. To do so, mental models, which are the problem definitions, causes, and solutions people see regarding a concrete problem, need addressed (Doyle & Ford, 1998; Lane, 1999). This requires intervention methodologies that effectively foster changes in mental models of organization members.

5.3 Criteria for intervention methods

An intervention method needs to satisfy several criteria to foster organizational change toward gender equality. First, it should support gender to be and to remain an issue during organizational change programs. So, the intervention method should identify how different objectives, such as gender equality and productivity, support rather than compete with each other. Second, the intervention method should create a shared problem definition among organization members. Therefore, any intervention method should invite managers to change their mental models on the issue of gender inequality. Third, the intervention method should support the implementation of gender equality change programs. So, an intervention method should establish consensus and commitment on policy implementation among the managers involved.

We argue that an intervention method meets these criteria when both managers and gender experts collaborate in the process of defining the problem of gender inequality within organizations. The involvement of managers is required to create the necessary support for policies and the implementation of those policies. Managers need to take responsibility for integrating a gender perspective in daily organizational practices. This aligns with the approach of gender mainstrea-

ming (Verloo, 2005; Council of Europe, 1998; Walby, 2005). The involvement of gender experts is also required, since they identify organizational processes that seem neutral at first, but in fact reinforce structural power differences. Bleijen-bergh and Roggeband (2007) show that the presence of gender experts during policy making is a necessary condition for the introduction of gender policy change (p. 454).

Presence of gender experts during change programs also poses a threat in terms of changing mental models of managers. Organization members easily feel threatened when outsiders criticize standards, routines, and practices and, as a result, behave defensively (Benschop & Verloo, 2006). Hence, an intervention method should also create a safe discussion environment in which participants with different backgrounds can avoid defensive reasoning. The intervention method needs to surpass the contrast between insiders and outsiders to create an environment that fosters an open dialogue and supports reframing the problem of gender inequality and the development of new policies to address it. The next section elaborates on how Group Model Building meets these criteria.

5.4   Group Model Building

The process of building a system dynamics model with a management team became a tool to support consensus in decision-making: Group Model Building (GMB). GMB means that a team builds a causal loop diagram on a messy problem during a series of meetings guided by a facilitator. GMB is based on system dynamics as developed by Forrester (cf. Forrester, 1961, 1987). In system dynamics, organizations are seen as information feedback systems (i.e., a closed cycles of action and information) in which managerial decisions (action) lead to changes in the organization (environment), which in turn provides input (information) for new decisions. An important point of departure in system dynamics is that this feedback structure drives the behavior of systems. These feedback processes are typically represented by means of causal loop diagrams. Two types of feedback processes are distinguished: positive or reinforcing loops, which reinforce a particular behaviour, and negative or stabilizing loops, which counteract a certain behavior. An example of a positive loop is the price/wage spiral. An example of a negative loop is the process of market saturation after the introduction of a new product. Forrester (1992) states that most of the information required to construct a causal loop diagram of an organizational problem is contained in the mental models of the people within that organization. Scholars of system dynamics developed participative techniques to elicit knowledge by involving people in modeling the problem. This not only supports knowledge elicitation, but also creates consensus regarding the problem and commitment to a decision (Andersen, Richardson, & Vennix, 1997; Andersen & Richardson, 1997). GMB as a problem structuring method was applied to messy problem situations in which know-

ledge elicitation is important, but the creation of consensus and commitment is equally vital to be successful (Vennix, 1996, 1999; Rouwette, 2003).

Empirical studies revealed a number of critical conditions for the effectiveness of GMB (Rouwette, Vennix, & Felling, 2008). One of these conditions is an experienced group facilitator who guides the management team through the process of problem structuring. Another condition is the involvement of all relevant stakeholders in the model building process. We applied GMB on the messy problem of gender inequality since we expected various advantages. First, a causal loop diagram was particularly suited to show self-reinforcing and stabilizing processes (i.e., processes that in interaction will maintain or change a particular status quo). Given the difficulty of changing gender relations in organizations, we considered it useful to look at the processes surrounding the issue of gender inequality. Second, a causal loop diagram showed the links between gender equality and other organizational goals, such as productivity and effectiveness. This allowed discussion of the hierarchical ordering of the goals. Thirdly, like other problem structuring methods, GMB was directed at fostering consensus between participants and commitment to the outcome/decision. Thus, it eventually supported consensus on policy objectives and interventions.

In the remainder of this article, we reflect on applying the intervention method of GMB to support organizational change toward gender equality. By performing a pilot study in our own organization and putting our own experiences into the process, we step in the tradition of action research. We consider ourselves action researchers, since we performed this study as a participative process, involving organization members, starting from a critical perspective and aiming at transforming organizational practice (Van Marrewijk & Veenswijk, 2010; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000).

5.5   PILOT STUDY

We conducted a pilot study aimed at supporting gender equality change in the school of management of a Dutch university. The low number of female professors in the university was deemed problematic both by the University Board and the active network of female full professors (Netwerk voor Vrouwelijke Hoogleraren). The pilot study was initiated by Inge Bleijenbergh, a gender expert who had recently joined the Research Methodology department in the School of Management. Coming from another Dutch university at which the gender studies program at her former department had been cancelled, she was seeking support from senior faculty members for her interest in gender as a research subject.

Since the Research Methodology Department had a strong reputation in intervention methods, Bleijenbergh wanted to involve colleagues within the department in applying these methods to the issue of gender inequality. Moreover, she involved t Yvonne Benschop, a professor at the School of Management connected to

the Institute of Gender Research. Benschop had published on the failures of gender action research and had a strong research reputation. Benschop had previously been involved in participative action research directed at gender equality (Benschop & Verloo, 2006) and was very interested in intervention methods that could support these difficult change processes. She welcomed the opportunity to collaborate with experts in intervention methods and with Bleijenbergh, whose gender expertise she welcomed in the School of Management.

Jac Vennix, holding the chair of the Research Methodology Department and an expert in intervention methods, had applied GMB in different messy problem situations. He wanted to see if and how GMB could be helpful to support gender equality change in organizations, which is notoriously difficult, as he understood from discussions with Benschop. In addition to the three authors, three other faculty members of the Research Methodology Department were involved in the study. With this, the group consisted of two men and four women, whose hierarchical level varied from research assistant and lecturer to full professor. We conducted five sessions of 2 hours to construct a causal loop diagram on the causes and consequences of gender inequality in a period of 3 months. We decided to focus on vertical sex segregation (i.e., the lack of women in top positions), because it is one of the most pressing issues of gender inequality in Dutch public organizations, as well as in our management school. During these sessions, we followed the steps of a GMB process. We were seated in a semi-circle in front of a screen, which is the classical arrangement of such a process (Vennix, 1996). Vennix was the facilitator of the process and structured the discussion. He asked questions regarding vertical sex segregation. (i.e., What is the problem exactly? To what variables is it related?) These questions helped make the problem more explicit and forced us to answer concretely and clearly. Another participant supported the process by modeling the outcomes of the discussion using modeling software (VENSIM). This aided translation of the problem in terms of causal relations and feedback processes. Between the sessions, we carefully checked each causal relation in the model with workbooks.

## 5.6   Building a group model on gender inequality

As a starting point, we took the moving average of the percentage of women in higher positions in the Dutch public sector and in science, in particular (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschappen, 2007). We collected variables connected to vertical sex segregation and defined their relation to the issue. We incorporated variables on an individual, organizational, and societal level. After three sessions, we had a very complex causal model, containing 34 causal loops. Despite our enthusiasm, there was some uneasiness, especially among the two gender experts. They had to articulate gender inequality in causal terms, which they associated with a positivist paradigm, while these terms were used to

employ a more social-constructivist framework of analysis questioning standards, routines, and practices in organizations. Our gender experts feared that arguing in terms of causal relations would reinforce these standards, rather than put the standards up for discussion. After some debate, the group brought the standards themselves in as variables to explain their causes and consequences.

The first three sessions led to a very complex model. We all agreed it was too complex for the purpose of identifying concrete interventions. Therefore, we concentrated on simplifying the model in the last two sessions. The facilitator began to ask new questions (i.e., What would you do if you could take only one specific measure to diminish sex segregation? Which element of the model would you choose to intervene in?). By answering these questions, we simplified the model, which led to a causal model that integrated four main feedback loops and the external factors that influence it. We discuss the results in the following section.

The first main feedback loop refers to application profiles often not neutral, but rather implying a male standard. For example, competition qualities are emphasized at the cost of social qualities, whereas both are important qualities at a higher position. We formulated this as "masculine standards in application profile." As the diversity within selection committees increases, the application profile is likely less geared toward masculine standards (becomes more feminine), and the match between female candidates and the application profile will increase and more women will meet the standards. This leads to an increase in hiring women for a job, which will eventually decrease the amount of vertical sex segregation. This is a reinforcing loop: more diversity in selection committees will, in the end, lead to more diversity in hired candidates and helps to decrease vertical sex segregation. We called it the application loop.

Figuur 5.1
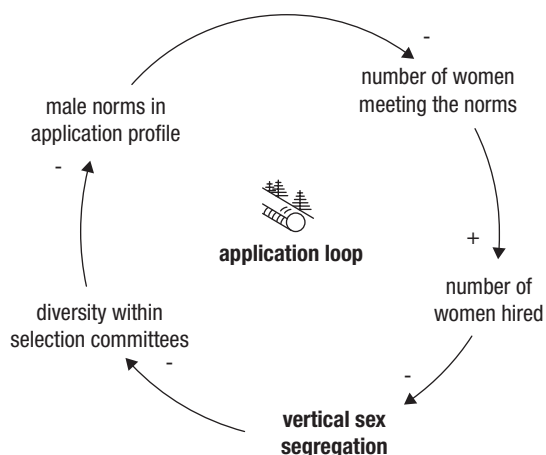
The second loop concerned availability of women and men for management positions. We argued that implicit standards determine the availability of women and men for these jobs. One of these standards is that management positions require full-time availability. One of the participants pointed out that the actual availability of women for management positions is influenced by an external condition: the division of household responsibilities between men and women. Here, the group drew on time studies, stating that women perform most of the caring tasks for dependent children, parents, and/or relatives. In the Netherlands, where more than 69% of women work in part-time jobs (Merens & Hermans, 2009), this leads to a part-time availability for paid employment during large parts of their life-time.

Our gender experts supported the analysis but felt uncomfortable with the reinforcing of stereotypes. Stating that women are part-time available reconfirms a traditional division of roles between men and women and ignores the women who do work full-time. After some debate, we put the supply of part-time management positions in, but separated it from the actual availability of women for these jobs. In this way, we showed these variables have relative, rather than absolute, values. Hence, the model shows that availability is influence by different causes. When the proportional distribution of work and care between couples increases, the availability of women for full-time management positions increases as well. In contrast, the availability of men for these positions decreases, since more men combine part-time work with caring tasks at home. However, the availability of women would also increase when part-time work became more a standard for management positions. This is a reinforcing process, which we called the part-time feedback loop.

Figuur 5.2
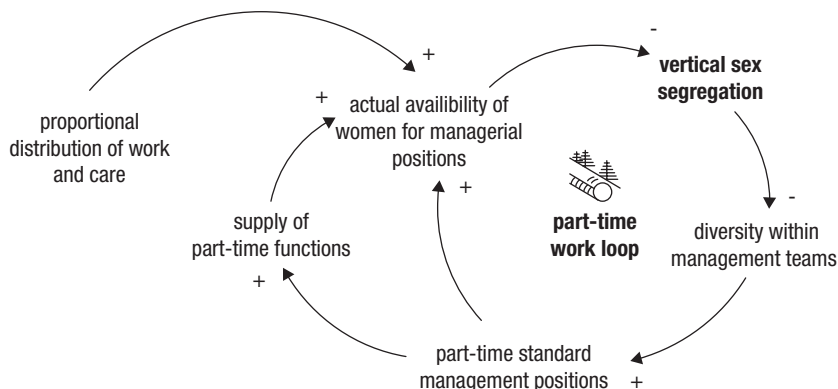
After addressing the role of application procedures and the combination of work and care, the group felt it had only covered structural aspects of the problem. We also wanted to discuss more cultural aspects, like the self-image of women regar-

ding their suitability for management positions. "Women don't consider themselves suitable for management positions," one of us said. "No wonder, with so few female role models," another pointed out. This is how we referred to the self-reinforcing process of gender stereotyping addressed in gender studies (Rudman & Glick, 2001; Powell, Butterfield, & Parent, 2002). We mapped this as the third feedback loop in the diagram, calling it the self-image loop. It refers to the reinforcing process that shapes the self-image of women regarding their suitability for management positions. As vertical sex segregation diminishes, the number of female role models in management positions in an organization or sector increases. This positively reinforces the self-image of women regarding the suitability for these positions and, thus, increases the number of women job candidates.

Figuur 5.3
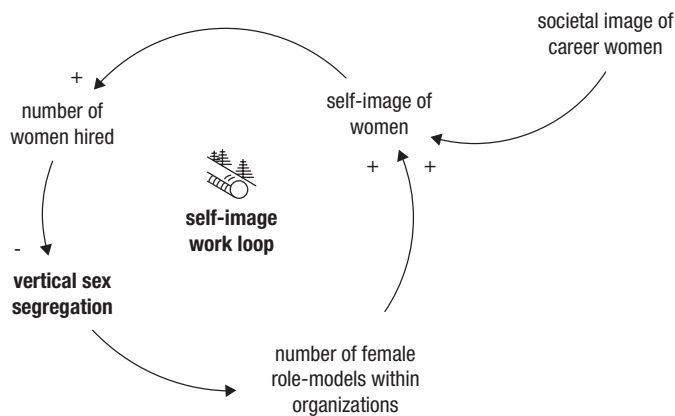
We also took into account the role of external factors in explaining the self-image of women. Self-image is not only affected by the number of female role models within the organization, but also by the societal image of "career women" (Rudman & Glick, 2001). The assumption is that, as the societal image of career women is more positive, this will positively influence the self-image of women regarding suitability for management positions. A more positive self-image will increase the number of women who apply for higher positions. This will have two effects: it will decrease the vertical sex segregation, as well as augment the number of female role models in organizations, which will positively influence women's' self-image. Here, the causal loop diagram shows how organizational and societal processes interrelate.

Having discussed the role of self-image of individual women, one of our gender experts argued that such subtle processes also take place in the interaction between people within organizations. Entrance of women into management positions is not only influenced by formal application procedures, but also by participation in informal networks (Benschop 2009; Ibarra 2010). When these networks

are closed to women, it negatively influences women's entrance to management positions. While discussing this issue, we identified a positive feedback loop at work here too, referring to the reinforcing process of the openness of informal networks and the entrance of women to these networks: the informal network loop.

Figuur 5.4
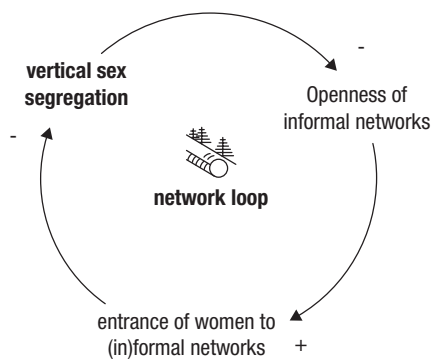
Finally, we discussed possible measures to diminish vertical sex segregation. Discussing concrete measures helped us locate the loops most important in explaining the problem. Moreover, it made visible how changes in one area of the problem are related to processes in another area. For example, an increase in the diversity within management teams might also stimulate the women in selection committees and the entrance of women to informal networks. The total causal model shows how the different feedback processes are strongly interrelated.

Figuur 5.5
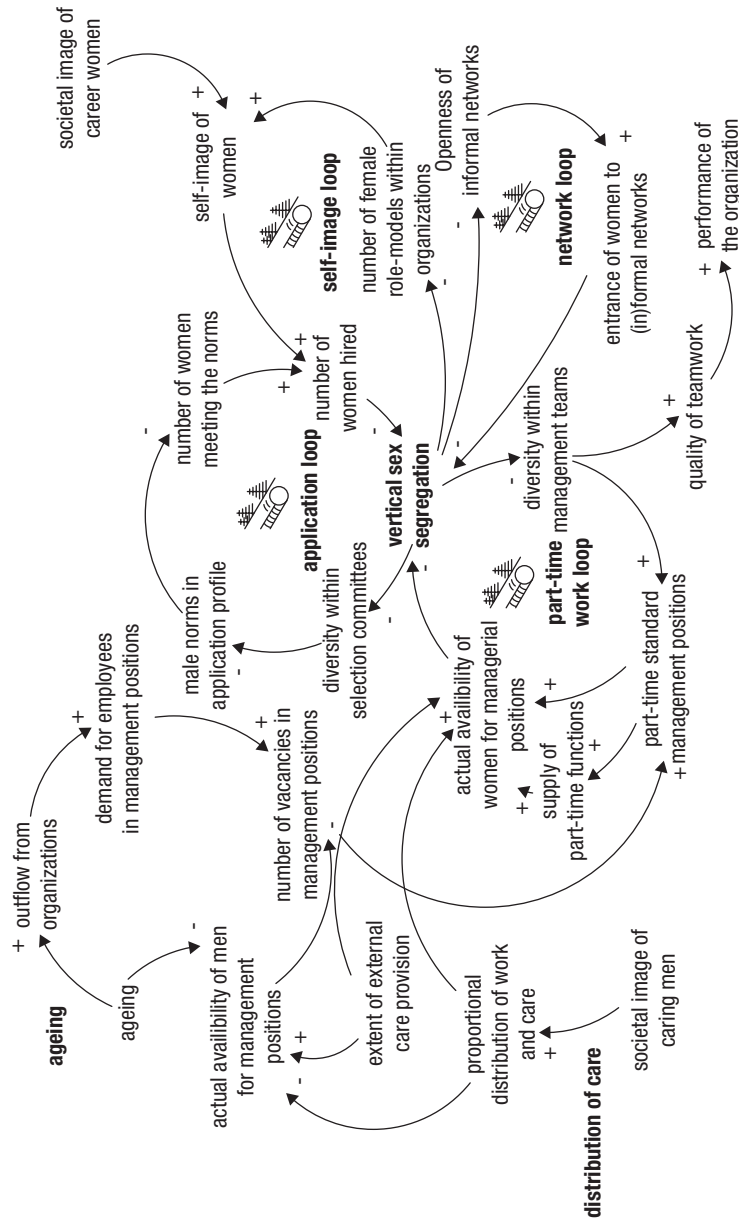
During the process, we discovered that modelling the problem sheds more light on the interrelation between the different processes connected to vertical sex segregation. Gender policies are often directed toward single aspects of the problem. For example, coaching women may positively influence self-image (the self-image loop), but this may be counterbalanced by the lack of diversity in

application committees or a lack of role models within the organization. We were amazed that gender inequality was such a reinforcing process. The causal loop diagram contains many positive feedback-loops, meaning processes have a tendency to reinforce each other. This may explain why, notwithstanding a continuous increase of highly educated women on the labor market, the low number of women in higher positions reinforces itself. Another insight pertains to the way individual, organizational, and social processes reinforce each other. The diagram helped identify factors outside the immediate influence of organizational policies. The proportional distribution of work and care at home affects the availability of women for management positions, as does the image of career women in society. To effectively intervene inside organizations, these external factors need taken into account and, eventually, compensated for by organizational policies.

5.7   Conclusion

We describe participative action research in a Dutch school of management, aimed at reaching a shared definition of the messy problem of gender equality. Initiated by Bleijenbergh, a mixed group of male and female faculty at different hierarchical levels analyzed gender inequality and, in particular, the issue of vertical sex segregation. We reached a shared problem definition on the causes and consequences of vertical sex segregation, including the processes of hiring new people, the culture regarding part-time work, the informal networks in organizations, and the self-image of women. External factors include the distribution of caring tasks between men and women at home, the process of aging in society, and the societal image of women. We do not claim these insights are new for scholars with a gender studies background. However, drawing a causal loop diagram enabled discussing the issue until all participants agreed on its causes. In this way, the intervention method supported the acceptance of these insights by the four faculty who lacked gender expertise, including the chair of the department. This indicates that a shared problem definition on the contested issue of gender inequality can be reached by involving managers in the analysis of the issue. The causal loop diagram showed the interrelatedness of different causal processes that reinforce gender inequality, enabling better understanding the complexity of the issue.

Taking stock of the merits and pitfalls of GMB for creating a shared problem definition on gender equality, this pilot study shows that this problem structuring method is applicable to model the messy problem of gender inequality within organizations. Modelling supported insight regarding how processes that bring about gender inequality are interrelated and reinforce each other. For example, the number of female professors is linked to both the entrance of women to informal networks and the number of female role models within an

organization. Both relations we previously identified in literature, however, the causal diagram shows how they are part of a dynamic structure.

Another merit of GMB is that it supports thinking in terms of feedback loops, rather than single causal relations. In this way, it does justice to the complex interrelated processes surrounding gender inequality. The non-hierarchical ordering of the feedback processes allows different factors and goals to exist next to each other, rather than to exclude each other. The causal model shows how increasing gender equality supports organizational effectiveness and productivity, rather than competes with these goals. For example, increasing the number of women in management positions would finally increase the performance of the public organization itself (see also Meier, Mastracci, & Wilson, 2006). Identifying this relation fits business case arguments regarding the cost of gender inequality (Dickens, 1999).

Modelling gender inequality in public organizations helped identify possible areas for intervention. Sponsorship and mentorship may provide women entrance to informal networks that otherwise remain closed (Ibarra, Carter, & Silva, 2010; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001; Durbin, 2011). The appointment of women in top positions provides role models for aspiring female candidates in middle positions, signalling that higher positions are indeed open to women (Chesterman & Ross-Smith, 2006). The causal loop diagram shows that not all causes of vertical sex segregation are potential areas for organizational intervention. For example, influencing the societal image of career women falls largely outside the scope of organization interventions.

Of course, GMB is not the cure for all gender ails. There are also pitfalls of using GMB for developing a shared problem definition of gender inequality. As described, GMB forces the framing of problems in causal relations. This entails a serious risk of reinforcing categorical thinking and reconfirming gender dichotomies. Merely acknowledging existing differences between men and women leads to a reinforcement and reproduction of gender stereotypes (Knights & Kerfoot, 2004; Nentwich, 2006, p. 502). Indeed, to reconstruct the causes of vertical sex segregation, we run the risk of reproducing the status quo of gender inequalities based on average statistics. For example, when we argued that women prefer part-time work, we had to carefully unravel the difference between the present status quo and the structural and cultural causes of this situation. The model we produced shows that women's and men's preferences for part-time work may change when the structural and cultural causes change as well, and that availability for functions may change when the standards for the function alter. In this way, we tried to avoid essentialism.

A second and related pitfall is the lack of attention we had for the issue of intersectionality (Verloo, 2005). We did not incorporate the relation between gender and other categories that impact social inequality, such as age, class, and ethnicity. We analyzed gender as if it were the most, or even the only, relevant category of inequality, whereas we were aware that attention for age, class, and eth-

nicity is needed to foster social equality within organizations. Further research would be needed to examine if and how intersectionality can be integrated in a causal loop diagram.

Our pilot study provided an opportunity to discuss the issue of vertical sex segregation in a process of open communication between gender experts and faculty with other disciplinary backgrounds. Building a model of the problem supported intensive deliberation regarding the issue between gender experts and other participants. This discussion proved valuable in the process of moving toward a shared problem definition. The problem definition is validated by the experiences of stakeholders and knowledge of experts in the field. A follow-up step of quantitative modelling is needed to assess the external validity of the model. Since the pilot study, GMB has been applied in different gender equality projects in Dutch universities with good results. This intervention methodology delivers on its promises to foster changes in the mental models of organization members and can make an important contribution to gender equality change.

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