

Breaking Patterns? How Female Scientists Negotiate their Token Role in their Life Stories

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Building upon token theory, this paper analyses coping behaviours of women in Science, Engineering and Technology (SET) through a professional identity perspective. It proposes that female scientists need to negotiate and balance conflicting aspects of their professional and gender identities throughout their career. A reconstructive biography analysis of *Leitmotif* and *Gestalt* of 15 life stories reveals that gender is the structuring element of the female scientists' self-presentation. The paper presents two key cases which exemplify two alternative coping strategies: the women either use a *similarity strategy*, relying on full assimilation to the masculine norms in SET, or a *difference strategy*, highlighting their otherness and their struggle for equality. The in-depth analysis reveals that both strategies cannot 'break patterns', but instead leave the dominance of masculine norms in SET unchallenged. Implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords: women in science and technology, professional identity, coping behaviours, biographical research, tokenism

Introduction

In Science, Engineering and Technology (SET) there is still distinct horizontal and vertical gender segregation (see European Commission, 2009, 2012). Studies point to the prevalence of male norms which impact the low number of women and their high dropout rate all along the academic career path. The salience of a masculine understanding and notion of the profession and its career models (e.g., Bird, 2011; Britton, 2010), powerful male networks that are disadvantageous to women in informal selection and promotion processes (e.g., van den Brink and Benschop, 2012), and denigration and stereotyping of feminine qualities in daily interactions (e.g., Faulkner, 2007, 2008; Gilbert, 2009) isolate the female minority.

Token theory has been widely used to explain patterned interactions and responsive coping behaviours of women in such gendered environments (e.g., Kanter, 1977; Laws, 1975; Yoder, 1991). It explains the lack of career advancement of women in male-dominated organizations as a consequence of numerical imbalance: minorities, who make up less than 15 per cent in organizations, face structural barriers, a lack of access to informal power and networking, and systematic marginalizing and stereotyping in patterned social interactions (Kanter, 1977). While lower ceiling tracks allow for 'feminine roles' (e.g., motherly secretaries), upward mobility is restricted to few women who adhere to majority expectations and become 'one of the boys'. Facing isolation pressures through boundary heightening activities by the majority (e.g., misogynistic jokes), an assimilated token reacts by demonstrating loyalty and exaggerating the dominant norms. Accordingly, she trivializes conflicts and gender discrimination, moreover opposes affirmative action and 'radical feminism';

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her career is living proof of the meritocracy and fairness of the system (Kanter, 1977; Laws, 1975; Young *et al.*, 1980).

Laws (1975) thoroughly portrayed the evolution of a token woman in academia from the social psychological perspective. Laws assumes that women, who only in the course of their career become assimilated 'tokens', tend to enter academia with a specific biography: a girl with a sparkling talent stands out from the group of women and attracts sponsors throughout her education. They encourage her to excel in prestigious male-dominated fields. She becomes accustomed to the interaction with men, and her identification with their norms as well as the dissociation from other women grows (thus Laws calls her a *double deviant*). During her career course, she learns — just like the male peers — to justify her success as individual merit.

Laws (1975) suggests that only those female scientists who adhere to the token role at the mercy of a senior male sponsor would succeed and reach higher echelons. The relationship between the woman and the male sponsor is presented as probationary and contingent: he benefits from her exceptionality and scientific output and gains a safeguard against allegations of gender discrimination; in return he advocates for her in the male peer group and enables access to information and resources (Laws, 1975). According to Laws, women would fail if they relied exclusively on their own extraordinary performance or if they took a cynical approach and refused to adhere to the respective token–sponsor relationship as described above.

We see a need to re-evaluate the conceptualization of token behaviours as (mere) *responsive assimilation* strategies. In this paper, we propose that coping behaviours of tokens are not only the result of marginalizing interactions, but they are also expressions of long-drawn (gender) identity formation processes and are influenced by professional norms. We therefore suggest that female self-conceptualizations in gendered professions are both a reaction to an experienced identity threat and a self-enhancing strategy to maintain a positive self-concept (Hunter, 2002). In the following, we analyse *how* female scientists construct and negotiate their professional identity in a highly gendered work environment by applying biography analysis.¹ With this exploratory method, professional identity formation becomes not only visible in what women recount in their life stories but also in how they present their own professional formation.

In the following section, we extend token theory with findings from the social and professional identity research. The third section comprises method and study design of the biography case analysis. The fourth section presents two key cases (biographies) and their systematic comparison as a result of the in-depth analysis. In conclusion, our findings are discussed and integrated into contemporary discourse.

Theoretical background

Token theory has been criticized for its simplistic majority/minority approach (Acker, 1999; Benschop and Doorewaard, 1998). The focus on numerical under-representation ignores persistent gender roles and the social status of the respective minority (e.g., Allmendinger and Hackman, 1999; Powell *et al.*, 2006; Williams, 1989; Yoder, 1991, 2002). However, token theory's strength lies in the differentiated analysis and description of the various aspects and dynamics of the token–sponsor relationship. Social capital of sponsors and informal networks have proven to be decisive factors for female careers in science (see, e.g., Etkowitz *et al.*, 2000; van den Brink and Benschop, 2012). Empirical evidence supports token theory by pointing to various patterns used by women to cope with their deviance. On the one hand, female scientists are often found to deny being different from their male peers (e.g., Etkowitz *et al.*, 2000; Jorgensen, 2002; Powell *et al.*, 2006, 2009; Rhoton 2011; Wenneras and Wold, 1997). This process also includes the denial of gender discrimination in science to promote a gender-neutral meritocracy (Bird and Rhoton, 2011; Rhoton, 2011). On the other hand, female scientists are found to take a more stereotypical 'feminine position': they sell their (gender) difference as an asset and strength and praise their emotional labour or their competencies in transformational leadership (Ecklund *et al.*, 2012; Simpson *et al.*, 2010; Wilson, 2005).

Both the frequent denial of difference and discrimination and the emphasis on being different have to be analysed with scrutiny: 'Difference' is not a value per se, but derives its meaning within a specific bipolar framework as the derivation and antithesis of a primary term, e.g. sameness vs. difference or identity vs. difference, etc. (Scott, 1988). Within assimilation approaches, gender equality, i.e. the lack of gender discrimination, is implicitly equated with 'sameness', the denial of a difference between men and women and the assumption of gender neutrality (see Felski, 1997). If difference is then constructed as the antithesis to sameness (and, implicitly, as antithesis to equality), then equality and difference are unattainable simultaneously (Scott, 1988).

This inherent dilemma between sameness/equality and difference becomes even more salient in token situations: for acceptance in the majority group, tokens are supposed to assimilate over time and erase the differences to their male peers. Riegraf (2005) calls this the 'difference taboo'. The paradox that tokens often uphold the meritocracy and equality in science, even with evident discriminative incidents (e.g., Dryburgh, 1999; Hunter, 2002; Powell *et al.*, 2009), is then to be interpreted not only as proof of loyalty and a reaction to boundary heightening activities (see Kanter, 1977), it is also an (unconscious) defense of a self-image that is 'not different' (see Laws, 1975). However, at the same time, the majority expects tokens in professional contexts to also uphold femininity, which has been denoted as 'sameness taboo'. Violating the sameness taboo, i.e. being 'unfeminine', also bears the risk of discrimination, exclusion from male networks and harassment (Berdahl, 2007; Bird and Rhoton, 2011; Williams, 1989).

Yet, emphasizing 'difference' to resolve the token dilemma is also not necessarily emancipatory: the construction of a difference might just as well be a (secondary) ascription within a bipolar gendered framework, where masculinity remains the unquestioned norm. For example, the need to emphasize that 'female' behaviours are an asset for research groups may not only foster gender stereotypes, it also brings out that 'femininity' is a deviation from the masculine science ideal (see Felski, 1997).

Consequently, the question needs to be raised whether tokens can resolve this dilemma, and if so, *how* they could 'break patterns'. There is empirical evidence that, despite the above-mentioned evidence for tokenism, some female scientists (even in high ranks) have always challenged the belief in meritocracy in academia, and, concomitantly, have shown high awareness of gender discrimination (e.g., Bagilhole and Goode, 2001; Bennett *et al.*, 1999; Powell *et al.*, 2009; Young *et al.*, 1980). This suggests that women have developed coping strategies other than to assimilate over time.

Token behaviours as part of professional identity formation

The alternative response behaviours of women have been explained using social identity theory (e.g., Derks *et al.*, 2011; Ely, 1995; Ryan *et al.*, 2012). This theory puts forward that individuals enhance their feeling of self through belonging to a specific group, for example to a profession (Ryan *et al.*, 2012; Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Furthermore, depending on the context, a group membership can be perceived as highly salient or not, or as positive or negative (Ely, 1995). Accordingly, when women are rare in numbers and ascribed a low status, they are confronted with an identity threat qua gender. In such situations they are more likely to choose a 'social mobility' strategy, i.e. apply a self-enhancement behaviour through distancing themselves from other women. Alternatively, yet less likely, with a collective enhancing strategy, women would try to increase the status of their own group by upgrading or demanding social change (see Ryan *et al.*, 2012; Tajfel and Turner, 1979).

Professional identity is formed through accumulated individual experiences within a profession over time and is strongly influenced by norms, attributes and motives for the profession (Ibarra, 1999). In SET, the pervasive professional norms like analytical competence, objectivity and rationality have been unmasked as a masculine idealization of the science profession (Faulkner, 2007, 2008). This places women in academia in a dilemma between contradictory yet interwoven gender and professional identity components. Consequently these women have to learn to cope with this contradiction.

In-depth studies from the engineering field show that women are socialized very early during educational training (see Ibarra, 1999; Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010). Here, they endure passages of hard

work, insecurity and anxiety. Over time they learn to adopt a positive, confident and 'gender-neutral' professional identity as well as to dissociate from other women (e.g., Bennett *et al.*, 1999; Dryburgh, 1999; Powell *et al.*, 2006, 2009; Rhoton, 2011).

Furthermore, professional identity *negotiation* is an ongoing reflection of experiences in the context of social and institutional practices in which the individual is embedded. Impression management tactics (Goffman, 1959) are mostly learned during socialization in training to show identification with the profession, a willingness to collaborate, and solidarity with the work-hard male culture (see Dryburgh, 1999; Hunter, 2002). Therefore, signalling 'sameness' also constitutes a proactive boundary-heightening activity to signal belonging to a socially closed professional group. Over time women internalize these projections, and they become a fixed part of their own professional identity (Dryburgh, 1999; Laws, 1975). Hence, women have learnt how to proactively 'justify' their presence. Gherardi (1996) therefore proposes the view of identity as a narrative, which is institutionalized and recognizable by repetitions (see Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010). In self-narratives people adopt storytelling patterns to make a point about their identity conceptualization (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010).

Both the propositions of token theory and social identity theory seem to be relevant for professional identity formation: organizational demographics, group identification processes, gendered professional norms and accumulated individual experiences impact how women in a token status negotiate their professional identities. In the following analysis of female biographies we shed light on these dynamics and interrelated aspects of gender, profession and biography.

Method and sample

So far, in-depth analyses of identity formation processes of female scientists in SET are rare (exceptions are Engler, 2001 and Flaake *et al.*, 2006). In our study, we asked female academics to give a full extempore narration of experiences and events from their own lives. In order to leave the compositions of the narratives up to the interviewees, interviewer interference is reduced to only slight (non-verbal) encouragements to continue. By means of the ad-hoc narration, interview partners are encouraged to become absorbed in their story by remembering and re-living former experiences (Schütze, 1983). Biographical-narrative interviews thus place the perspective of protagonists and their daily experiences and interactions in a central position (Rosenthal, 2004; Schütze 1983). By asking the interviewees to recount their whole life stories, important aspects of their lives are narrated and interpreted by the interviewed women, leading to a self-definition: *Who am I?* and *How did I become who I am today?* Thus, the process of perceiving, interpreting and re-interpreting their own life story and establishing a professional identity can be best understood by analysing the whole biography of a person. Through the biographical narration, it becomes visible how the interviewees perceive a certain situation, how they make sense of it, and how they cope with a specific situation or institutional arrangement. Recurring and central themes in narrations reveal the *Leitmotif* (e.g., Engler, 2001), the manner of their presentation reveals the *Gestalt* (Rosenthal, 1993, 2004). *Leitmotif* and *Gestalt* are closely interrelated, and their analysis makes the process of professional identity formation visible.

We chose a European SET university for this study. In this university, 20 per cent of the scientific positions are held by women, but only 9 per cent of all full professors are female. At the masters level, 23.4 per cent of the graduates are women, at the PhD level the percentage is 16.2 per cent (BM.W_F, 2011). The selection of interview partners was based on the principle of maximal variation from grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and started with the selection of women in diverse research disciplines at distinct career levels. In order to find out why women leave the university, we also elected to include women who had valid contracts but chose to resign from their jobs and continue their careers elsewhere (three changed to other universities, three went to non-university research institutes and two went to companies). We further included masters students in order to emphasize early socialization during training as well as the critical entrance stage into science.

The fundamental mode of biographical case analysis is based on theoretical as opposed to numerical generalization. By determining the 'typical' in a life story, this method aims to detect the rules

which generate and organize a case type (Rosenthal, 2004). The typical only becomes visible through systematic comparison of stories starting with the first interview. Saturation of a sample is achieved when additional interviews do not reveal any further (new) aspects — and was reached after 13 interviews (cf. Miller and Rayner, 2012). However, we continued with two further interviews to ensure that the data fully illustrate the relevant conceptual aspects of (professional) identity formation. The final sample comprises three women at the student level and their first encounter with the academic environment, two women at the junior research level during the preparation of their master's theses, four women working on their PhD, three women at the post-doc level, and three interviewees were in the post-tenure period (see also the sample description in Appendix Table A1). The narrative interviews lasted between one hour and two and a half hours. For the analysis of the transcripts, we followed reconstructive case analysis according to Schütze (1983) and Rosenthal (1993, 2004) by systematically comparing *what* was told and *how* it was told.²

Results

The systematic comparison of cases revealed, that the life stories resembled each other in predominantly *how* they were told. The focus of the interviews on *Gestalt* and *Leitmotif* allowed the narrations to be transferred into a theoretical category on the interrelationship of the individual biography and the social processes — often referred to as a 'typology' (Rosenthal, 2004). As a result, two distinct self-presentation patterns became evident, which are exemplified in the following by the two most contrasting cases of the sample. The approach to presenting key cases allows for a holistic and process-based reconstruction of identified types of biographical narrations and has been a common method in previous biographical studies (e.g., Engler, 2001; Rosenthal, 2004; Schiebel, 2008).

In the presentation we use pseudonyms instead of real names, and sensitive and precarious personal details are excluded or altered in order to prevent drawing conclusions about their factual identities. A detailed presentation of all biographies would not reveal alternative or different insights into the identified *Gestalt* patterns. However, we include a table listing the individual positions and references to coping behaviours of all interviewees to give an overview of the full sample in Appendix Table A1. We also present a *Gestalt* sameness/difference continuum in Appendix Figure A1.

Stefanie

Short biographical profile

Stefanie has grown up as the elder of two children in a medium-sized town in Austria in the 1960s. Her parents are both employed; her father is a teacher, and she does not mention her mother's occupation. After high school she chooses an engineering university next to her parent's home. She meets her boyfriend during her master's studies and moves with him to another town, changing universities. Just before the end of engineering studies, Stefanie gets married. Despite the offer of a PhD position with her current supervisor, Stefanie opts for a PhD in Switzerland and follows her partner. She finishes her dissertation there and receives a managerial position at a research institute in Germany. After her habilitation at an adjacent university, Stefanie gets appointed as the director of a scientific research institute close to her new partner's hometown.

Recounting the upbringing

Being asked to recount her whole life, Stefanie starts with a brief summary of her family background and upbringing. She refers to the teaching profession of her father and the fact that she lived in an extended family setting with uncles, cousins and grandparents. During the phase of further narrative inquiry, Stefanie goes into greater detail. She talks about her father as an important role model and promoter of her interest in SET:

... my father had workshops in the house: a woodworking shop, and also, a metalworking shop, and we always helped [...]. We always fixed our own bicycles. (p. 7, 206–9).³

In this statement, the father is portrayed as someone with high mechanical skills who made home repairs and allowed the children to help and develop similar skills and abilities. The father also taught his children mathematics before they went to school. In this context, Stefanie talks about being 'bored' and argues that she was happy to invest her time in sports with her younger brother and his male peer group. By referring to excellent school results and presenting them as a 'logical' result of her father's efforts and her own cognitive abilities, Stefanie at the same time downplays her accomplishments, constructing them as 'normality'. She emphasizes that her male peers triggered her interest in engineering and points to her insider status in this group.

I was always in a sports club, where it was mostly men. I had two or three female friends, yes, and, other than that I had male friends. [...] At that time everyone had an Opel Kadett B and everyone was always changing out the engines. Whenever one was broken, a new one was put in. And, yes, I found that normal, that somehow, when the Opel Kadett stopped working and the motor was broken, that a new one was put in. (p. 26, 864–76)

Recounting career development and promotion

In the interview Stefanie soon moves on to her professional career. In discussing her decision for an engineering university, she presents a pragmatic approach, and reasons that she, like her whole family, was interested in technology, and that the university was close to her parental home and had a good reputation. She also stresses the impact of her peer group and mentions that engineering offers broad options in professional life.

The choice for further doctoral studies is presented as follows:

[...] the professor, who mentored me throughout my studies, he said 'oh, just stay and do your PhD with me.' He also gave me courage to do it. Otherwise I may have said, 'well, okay, I might not be able to do it'. The other people that I associated with during my undergraduate studies were mainly postgraduates, who did their PhD under that faculty and I knew them all [...]. Those were the people, with whom I would have coffee every day. [...] I thought to myself, if they can do it, why shouldn't I be able to do it? (p. 17, 524–39)

Stefanie recounts an informal selection process for PhD students here, since the professor just asked her if she would like to continue studies and work. Only after being asked does she reflect on her scientific capability by comparing herself with the peer group. The decision is presented rather passively and coincidentally, but at the same time shows her self-confidence. Consistent with former statements, we learn about the importance of her peer group for her professional choices.

Further narrating about the new position, Stefanie mentions that it was quite difficult for her to integrate into the research group due to different social backgrounds and language barriers.

I had to really integrate myself into this troop. That was really difficult for me. I often considered, whether I should go or if I should do something else. In the end, I had to suck it up and stuck with it and I completed my PhD. (p. 14, 457–61)

This quote refers to an interesting point of reflection in Stefanie's narration. It is the only time when she talks about being different, which was a difficult experience. Yet, she presents her manner of coping with this situation to be endurance and performance. She further continues:

[...] my supervisor at the time supported me over time more and more. [...] at first not at all and then as he saw, the PhD was going well, um, after the first publication it was clear and then he, then he really supported me. Yes, and then I stayed longer (laughs a little). (p. 14, 461–5)

Her persistence and proof of scientific excellence at the PhD level eventually assure the support of a senior male and integration within the scientific system. In the end, she comments about her outsider

position with a light-hearted remark and reports using sports as distraction during this time. We interpret through her narration that Stefanie copes with the difficult and unfamiliar situation of not being part of a group by making sure that her work and performance becomes visible. Securing her status in the group becomes continuously less important as soon as she catches the attention of a senior who takes her under his wings. For the next career step, the habilitation, she again was encouraged by an elder male colleague:

And he always said, 'Why don't you do your habilitation? You could actually do your habilitation.' And then he always explained, [...], 'You will then certainly have [better] options' [...] good, somehow I realized that this was a good argument. And I did that then from April to August every night, that particular year, I wrote my habilitation. (pp. 17–18, 568–81)

Stefanie presents the rapid completion of a high-level scientific qualification as an ordinary occurrence. Through this understatement, she signals not only her exceptional capability, but also the ease at which she advances in science. At the same time, it becomes apparent that the invitation of an established (male) colleague and his social network contributed to her advancement.

And very soon after the habilitation, I received a job offer from the German University of Technology. I was negotiating options and during that time I worked as a scientific research associate at the International University of Technology. And I helped my boss at the time, who became a professor there, to establish his chair position in the department. (p. 2, 43–9)

Stefanie says that she received the job offer from the German university 'very soon' after habilitation. It seems important to her to present her efficiency by repeatedly demonstrating how quickly she climbed up the career ladder. Accepting the lower ceiling scientific position after her habilitation, only at a time when she was negotiating different options and when she supported a colleague to set up his research group, further establishes a presentation mode of the successful scientist.

Recounting the experience as a female scientist

Throughout the interview Stefanie appears to sidestep the topic of gender. Although aware of her token role in different situations, she refrains from talking about possible disadvantages and gender issues. However, at some point she mentions how women were treated in this male-dominated environment by remembering her studies:

I had very pleasant professors. Yes, and in [city], I must say, at that time, — there were professors, who really promoted women. There were also some who did not promote women. Yes, I had, for example, the best grade on the exam, but that professor fundamentally would not employ women as assistants. And later, after I habilitated and came back in, he was my colleague. (p. 4, 118–23)

When the interviewer asks about how she experienced this situation, Stefanie just says that she found it 'amusing' to become his colleague later on. Although she experienced direct discrimination she plays the situation down. When asked about gender discrimination, Stefanie reacts as follows:

We had one guy who told misogynistic jokes, but that's how it was. These were some really old hats. Such things were categorized as 'it doesn't get dumber than this', yes, and, ah, jokes were laughed about, they were actually funny, one really must admit. They were funny, yes. God, but that was, — my God, the rest of the group was not like that, and one would say, 'okay — there always have to be a few idiots' (laughing), right? (p. 18, 602–11)

With this statement Stefanie again ignores discriminative behaviour. Her strategy to cope with sexist behaviour is not taking it 'too seriously'. She also recounts that a male colleague approached her after a scientific presentation with a compliment about her dress. Stefanie classifies neither this nor the former examples as negative experiences. Due to the interviewer's further inquiry, she expresses anger about being presented publicly as one of the few successful women in SET.

I somehow always had to do interviews for some insignificant newspapers, for instance (laughs). Or, be invited to some kind of talk, for which I did not really have a desire to go, but where I had to go anyhow. (p. 32, 1058–62)

Stefanie's self-presentation pattern

Regarding the interview style, Stefanie uses concise communication with brief statements. During the first five minutes of the interview, she focuses on her professional life, and it appeared well-rehearsed and frequently narrated. After that, Stefanie indicates that this was everything worth mentioning and asks if there were any questions left. When the interviewer encourages her to provide further details, once again she talks mainly about positions and job offers, quickly switching from one milestone in her CV to the next. Shorter time periods at universities or low ceiling positions are presented as important experience. Her presentation mode shows how she is used to giving interviews and how she presents her life as a series of continuous advancements and promotions. In her communication mode she gives a casual impression, often filling statements with laughter. Stefanie displays her eagerness to impress as a scientist who is fully integrated in her profession by repeatedly referring to the ease with which she moves within the scientific community and how well she copes with adapting to professional norms and advancing in science. The whole narration is characterized by an understatement of her exceptionality with which she intends to say that it is normal for women like her to be in her position. Therefore, we label her self-presentation pattern as *'My Life is Unexceptional'*.

Irene

Short biographical profile

Irene was born in the 1980s in a small town outside of a German city. She grows up with a younger brother, and both of her parents are physicians. She attends primary and secondary school in her hometown and college in the nearby city. In order to study biotechnology, Irene moves to another city, where she finishes her master's studies after only five years and immediately joins a PhD program. During this time she meets her current life partner.

Recounting the upbringing

After the introductory question, Irene starts with briefly recounting where and when she was born. She immediately comes to her interest and decision for studies in SET.

[During school time] I was participating in the biology and chemistry Olympiad, which finally interested me. During the summer vacation, I was always at the university [...] and did my labs, unpaid, to get a whiff of university air. And that was always very interesting to me. Then I immediately decided to study biotechnology. I thought about [general university] or [SET university]. Then I thought to myself, yes, I mean, [SET university] is a bit more applied and maybe a little different to [the] humanities-centred high school and then I went to the [SET university]. (p. 2, 39–48)

Here Irene refers to her early socialization into (academic) science and technology. By recounting her participation in the biology and chemistry Olympiad, Irene shows her competitive attitude and the fact that she belonged to the group of the best pupils. Irene never questions if she will go to college, but rather talks about how and why she chose a specific university and city. Irene reasons that her choice for biotechnology is an interest in the topic, but she also says that she wanted to do something 'different' than her parents.

When asked about her childhood and youth, Irene briefly summarizes her childhood as 'sheltered'. Irene reports to have been bored at school, spending most of her time jogging and reading books. She repeats her argumentation on study choices stating that she wanted to do something 'different', something 'new', but also something more 'pragmatic'. Only here do we learn that she had several

role models with an academic engineering background within her family, and that she had a boyfriend who supported her decision to sign up for studies in SET.

Recounting career development and promotion

Irene finishes her master's studies after only five years, which she attributes to strong ambition and efficiency. In the interview, she soon comes to her decision about staying at the university and reports that she overheard about a job vacancy at an adjacent department. She takes the initiative by informally applying for a PhD position and gets invited for an informal job interview.

We had been talking for, I guess, two hours about my diploma thesis and then about his research and then he offered me a PhD position and since this is not a common thing and as I was searching for some job anyway and I liked the field of research and I found the professor very nice, I, yes I agreed the day after. (p. 2, 74–9)

The informality of the job offer becomes visible in Irene's wording — she discusses 'having talked' to each other, about 'liking' his research, and that she found the professor 'very nice'. Additionally, she mentions that the social network and the resources of her supervisor played a major role for her career development:

Initially — the first year and a half, I was extremely supported. I went to international conferences, held presentations. I produced an excellent publication, which of course turned out to be something only because of his support. And I know professors all over the entire world. I know the most important players, of whom I read papers and who I know through the conferences. Well, he really did support us a lot, or me and especially a colleague, we were so-to-speak his favourites. (p. 4, 109–18)

While highlighting the early relationship with her sponsor as very positive, the wording in the quote above foreshadows a change. Jointly reviewing a master's thesis, Irene and her supervisor are of different opinions about the quality of this work, especially in relation to Irene's data used in the thesis. She openly calls for the rejection of the thesis, but is overruled by the supervisor's decision to not sanction the student, and instead to hire him as a PhD student. After this incident their exceptional relationship begins to fall apart. The supervisor gradually pulls back his support and networks, and Irene sees other — male — PhD students being favoured over her. At this point Irene's narration style becomes highly emotional and judgemental; she frequently evaluates the supervisor's reaction to the conflict and puts herself in his shoes, highlighting what she would have done in his position.

Recounting the experience of being a female scientist

From the beginning, Irene mentions and reflects on her specific (gender) status in the male-dominated environment, like, for example, when she entered the PhD working group.

We — he [her supervisor] just finished assembling the work group. I believe, I helped a lot. I was well integrated. Again, I was the only woman, but initially there were five, six people and all of them were really nice. (p. 3, 96–9)

Irene starts her statement with a 'we', reflecting again on her positive relationship with the supervisor and the work they did hand in hand. In fact, she speaks about supporting the setup of the working group which refers to the scientific as well as administrative tasks that she assumed for the whole group. Irene raises the issue of her status as the only woman in the work group, but emphasizes that she got along well with everyone. Explicitly mentioning her good integration as the only woman implies the self-perception within an outsider position that she — by doing hard work and 'supporting' the team — was able to overcome. She further lauds her social skills which contributed to a positive climate and to the development of her social and professional network. By doing this, she emphasizes her own achievements and her pro-active approach in career decisions during this part of the interview, but also being different, i.e. positively reflecting on her outsider status in a special role.

And I am totally different. I mean, I am (a) a woman (b) and then from an academic household. I do believe, that it played a certain role. I was then, perhaps, simply sometimes a little, yes, more open, polished, quick-witted, talkative, a little, perhaps one could say more arrogant, pushy, I don't know how you would say it, but it was simply a different way. Moreover, I am a woman. That means, I have simply, a lot more ambition, and I am substantially more communicative, that also makes a difference. (p. 31, 1031–40)

Continuing her narration about the conflict with her supervisor, Irene reports that she faced a situation where her supervisor considers another candidate for a vacant tenure position. She is offered a less prestigious, administrative one despite her well-established publication list by this point.

[...] he then started writing down formulas of what he would consider good professors. And then he said, yes, there is an undefined factor, which enters the calculation with a high value. Where you already think, I mean, I can pull my own leg. What does undefinable factor even mean, that's really, yes, he might as well write down the sexism factor — it enters with a very high value and the publications and the presentations, these are actually only luck. He then started to systematically downgrade my work. (p. 13, 409–17)

Although aware of the previous conflict, Irene feels that her career course takes an unexpected turn — her potential life-concept as a scientist is losing ground. Again being pushed to the back for the benefit of a male colleague, Irene starts attributing these events and the low-status job offer to being sexist and discriminative. Through the use of expressions like 'pulling my own leg', it becomes visible that she is angry while narrating.

The situation worsens for her, as the supervisor further restrains access to resources and withdraws his support for conferences and/or fellowships abroad. Irene seeks organizational support by reporting to the head of the institute and the gender bureau, and follows their advice to confront her supervisor once again.

When her supervisor offers the administrative position because it would ensure her work–life balance, Irene concludes that his withdrawal of support is related to her gender:

[...] if someone uses that, too, that one shoves women into stupid positions, so that they have more time, then it is not justifiable. I, as a woman, can very well consider where I will work so that I can manage somehow to have children and a career. (p. 56, 1900–4)

Irene insists on having 'both' a family and a career, and emphasizes that it should be her own decision how to 'handle' it. Although pointing to an individualistic self-concept, she is now well aware that structural and cultural barriers impede women's advancement in academia, exemplified in her own experiences. At this point of the interview, she starts not only to argue in favour of her own career but to debate the situation at the university for women. Over the course of the interview it is gradually conveyed how her sponsor knocks her down a peg. She concludes that due to lack of an adequate post-doctoral position offer, she decided to concentrate not on the conflict but on the finalization of her PhD thesis. She does, however, feel forced to leave this university after finishing her PhD as career opportunities are rare without a powerful sponsor's help.

Irene's self-presentation pattern

On the whole, Irene presents an emotion-laden story using extensive statements and long narrative parts. The use of highly emotional language can be partly attributed to the current conflict with the supervisor. But even in other parts of the narration, she analyses her life and career thoroughly, including strong moral judgements and evaluations for her as well as for others. For Irene, career is a consequence of hard work, an ambitious and autonomous character, and supportive structural conditions. The whole interview is characterized by statements in which Irene presents a self-image in which she is individualistic and self-determined in her decisions. She conveys pride of not complying with the sponsor and not giving in to hierarchical pressures at the university. She presents being 'different' (to the parents, to the sponsor, to the male co-workers, etc.) as an asset, but at the same time she understands that this difference and her non-compliance causes obstacles for her career. Irene

presents the story of a warrior who, after having undergone suffering and discrimination, goes her own way and stands up for her rights despite unfavourable conditions. We label her self-presentation pattern as '*I am Different*'.

Discussion

The reconstructive analysis of the cases allows us to hypothesize as to how coping behaviours and gendered practices of the women are related to accumulated experiences in their biographies and how their story presentations are embedded in given structural conditions. In this section, we systematically discuss commonalities and differences in Stefanie's and Irene's narrations with regard to (i) the institutional context, (ii) the *Leitmotif* in the story presentation and its interrelation to the *Gestalt*, and (iii) their individual coping behaviours as part of their professional identities.

Both women we analysed are confronted with cultural and structural barriers in their career advancement in the university. In line with token theory, the powerful sponsors and their networks play a paramount role in both women's careers. It becomes apparent that informal recruiting, promotion and networking practices are prevalent at this university: the scientists recount that they have been discovered by a male sponsor and have been asked to join the scientific community instead of going through formal application procedures. This confirms earlier studies (van den Brink and Benschop, 2014). In contrast to mentoring, we learn that the emphasis in these sponsoring relationships is not just placed on the actualization of the sponsored women's potential. Rather the women are selected because they increase the sponsor's scientific output. This relationship is vulnerable, as best demonstrated by the story of Irene. While at the beginning the relationships to their sponsors do not differ in general, there has been a significant turn in Irene's career. During a work-related conflict, which retrospectively can be denoted as a 'defining moment' in her career, she confronts her supervisor and pushes against gendered structures. While a fully assimilated token would have proven loyalty, Irene refuses to accept a lower ceiling position at the university and signals non-conformity. The reconstruction of her biographical narration shows that this outcome does not come as a surprise. Her justification for her occupational choices is markedly different from Stefanie's and becomes visible in the *Leitmotif* and *Gestalt* of her presentation. Irene has an individualistic *Leitmotif* which becomes apparent in several recurring patterns in her biography. When she presents the decisive moments in her life, she portrays her choices as being not influenced by others, strictly following her own interests, and 'doing something different'. In contrast to that, the *Leitmotif* in Stefanie's narration appears to be related to 'belonging': she wants to show that she is no different to her (mostly) male peers and can do the same.

Both women construct their professional identities around aspects of excellence and hard work, and they refer to the need to permanently strive for scientific recognition. They stress their scientific excellence in the interview by referring to long publication lists (Irene), or fast-track careers (Stefanie). However, while Stefanie downplays her excellence and highlights that she just did what excellent (male) scientists do anyway, Irene regards her achievements as exceptional and mentions skills that have been vital for her success.

While both women show an adherence to meritocracy, they have understood that science also requires windows of opportunities, networks and support of powerful members. Stefanie fosters her view of 'gender-neutral' science and — in a subtle mode — conveys pride about being 'invited' into the highest career levels. Furthermore, her presentation contains notions of luck and coincidence — two aspects often related to scientific careers (see Engler, 2001). Concurring with Laws' proposition, Stefanie's identification with male norms thrives within male peer groups and is fostered through continuous support by various sponsors. According to her, she has not experienced major disruptions during the process of professional socialization. In only one instance, when she obtains an outsider position within her PhD peer group, is there cause for her to re-evaluate her position. She has already learned that exceptional performance and endurance can consolidate dissonances, and that not only individual merit but also vertical orientation and closeness to the male sponsor are essential for career advancement. Retrospectively, she

constructs her gender-neutral professional identity by sidestepping the gender issue, yet repetitively signalling belonging to the (male) peer groups and conforming with their expectations. Stefanie thus resolves the dilemma of contradicting identity components through work group identification and solidarity with male norms. Even in instances of gender discrimination she does not experience an identity threat, as she has dissociated herself from her female peer group. Exposure to discrimination could distort her social identity as being 'same', therefore she tends to avoid perceptions of discrimination through ignorance and trivialization. As an assimilated token she aspires to the highest career levels. Only when her difference is being pinpointed (e.g., when she is used as a female 'showpiece' in professional settings), does she show resentment and feel a dissonance. This is because these are instances which signal to Stefanie that she is (still) perceived as being different. Hence Stefanie's career development and her coping strategies concur with Laws' (1975) propositions of a token.

In contrast, Irene presents a competitive attitude, comparing her outstanding publications and networking skills to those of her colleagues. She regards her career predominantly based on her own effort and merit. However, she also wishes for acceptance by the sponsor, as he is a decisive component in her career advancement. Irene's self-conceptualization of being different has developed with experiences and is subject to changes throughout her life course and different (institutional) contexts. Already during childhood, she is aware of her privileged position, and aims to distance herself from her family and peers by choosing an 'exceptional' subject in a male-dominated field. When entering academia, 'being different' becomes increasingly associated with her gender. She learns how to see her gender difference as an asset. Up until the conflict situation, she has not yet taken a critical stance towards majority norms. The conflict with her sponsor and the lack of support from the authorities at the university make her question fairness, meritocracy and gender-neutrality in academia. While she had been constructing her professional identity around being different before, this significant experience fostered her self-perception as a *female* outsider. Upon experiencing gender discrimination, Irene applies a collective enhancing strategy and demands organizational change in favour of women (see Derks *et al.*, 2011). Irene experiences, at least from the critical incident onwards, the tension of sustaining identification with professional norms while upholding her gender difference. We do not see her giving in cynically as has been proposed by Laws. However, she keeps relying solely on her own extraordinary performance and seemingly refuses her token role. We conclude that the structural barriers for career advancement are still in place and impede her 'breaking patterns': her career path shows, just like Stefanie's, that advancement in science is contingent upon assimilative behaviour and sponsoring.

Conclusion

If we had to assign the two story patterns to Aristotle's story typology, we would choose the *Epos* for the *My Life is Unexceptional* story. The plot of an *Epos* focuses on victory and the achievements of a noble and modest hero on her mission. For the *I am Different* story, we would choose the *Tragedy*, with a plot about an undeserved misfortune, portraying the (undeserved) victim with emotions of fear and anger. Both the *Epos* and the *Tragedy* are testimonies of the female scientists' struggle for a reconciliation of personal experiences and ideologies within their professional context. The stories represent the two different sides of the same coin. Stefanie and Irene both struggle for equality but do so by using the sameness and difference strategies, respectively. Neither strategy is successful in breaking patterns within the deeply gendered scientific profession; instead, the belief in meritocracy, informal networks as well as recruiting and promotion processes remain unchallenged. How then, we could ask, would a life story have to be presented in order to show 'breaking patterns'? A *Comedy* could have represented an alternative story pattern in which the protagonist resolves the predicament of an undeserved misfortune with scorn and aggression, eventually leading to the punishment of the (deserved) victim. Or what about a *Romance*, in which the protagonist confesses her absolute love to her subject (in SET) and in which this love triumphs over everything else?

Formulating ideas for further research, it is interesting to note that women at the peak of their career — like Stefanie — more often tell a story of sameness whereas the younger women on lower career levels — like Irene — more often present a story of difference (see Appendix Table A1). An explanation for this observation could lie in the higher awareness of gender discrimination of younger scientists (e.g., Ecklund *et al.*, 2012). An alternative explanation, however, could be based on biographical foundations: being different is an important part of self-conception in early phases of a professional biography (Erikson, 2003) and can be explained with the shorter exposure to socialization processes (Dryburgh, 1999). A better understanding of changes in coping behaviours over time requires a longitudinal approach which compares story patterns of the same women at different points in time. Particularly insightful would be the biography analysis of women in higher (academic) ranks who explicitly challenge meritocracy and/or pursue a collective enhancing strategy. Furthermore, it would be interesting to compare the story patterns of this study with story patterns of biographies of women and men in alternative professions which are less gendered or more sex-integrated to see whether or not *Gestalt* and *Leitmotifs* significantly differ between professions and between genders.

In biography research, the interactive process between the researchers and subjects receives special attention. It needs to be considered that in this study the women may have assumed that we were interested in gender issues and therefore presented allegedly 'relevant' content in their narrations (see, e.g., the work of Gherardi [1996] and Gherardi and Poggio [2001] who argue that people claim identities by taking positions in the gender discourse). However, as we learned, it was not predominantly the content but the *Gestalt* of their narrations that led to the reconstruction of the two contrasting cases.

Our findings have direct implications for our theoretical understanding of coping behaviours of women in token positions. This study confirms the relevance of structural conditions and the decisive influence of the token–sponsor relationships for career advancement but complements token theory with a process perspective. The common understanding of *token/coping behaviours* (Kanter, 1977; Laws 1975) implicitly carries the notion that women choose 'rationally' from a set of behaviours (i.e., decide on a strategy) as a response to marginalization. Our findings suggest that women incrementally develop their individual coping behaviours which may even change over time. Not only do 'decisive moments' request choices, but everyday interactions just as well as professional norms and arrangements contribute to the consolidation of specific coping behaviours over time. Coping behaviours are thus formed in a long-drawn professional identity process, determined by biographical background, structural conditions and individual experiences and their appraisal.

Finally, we also see practical implications of our research. In recent years, SET universities have invested substantial effort in supporting women's careers with diversity initiatives, yet these initiatives have not been crowned with success. In order to increase the effectiveness of gender mainstreaming efforts and to improve the relative status of women in science, universities would do well to learn from model institutions. These have not only focused on increasing the numbers of women in committees and particularly in higher positions, but also put effort into reflecting and deconstructing the gendered science profession as a whole. When universities ensure that women can achieve higher career levels without having to forego their gender identification, taking a position as either being the *same* or *different* will become irrelevant and dissociation from the own (female) peer group will become obsolete. This will increase the chances that women in higher positions become inspiring role models, sponsors and mentors for young female scientists.

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Notes

1. For more detailed information on biography research, see Apitzsch and Inowlocki (2000).
2. We, for example, systematically differentiated between types of textual passages, such as narrations, argumentations and descriptions. For detailed information on the analysis procedure, see Rosenthal (1993) and Schütze (1983).
3. Numbers refer to page and line numbers of transcripts of the biography.

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Biographical notes

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Appendix

Table A1: Sample description and accounts on sameness/difference

Pseudonym (Age)	Current position	Accounts on	Presentation pattern	Coping behaviours
Nicole (22)	Employee (industry)	Student level	Different	Exit
Susanne (21)	Masters student (university)	Student level	Different	Over fulfilment, trying to steadily become better and better, prove better performance
Andrea (26)	Masters student/employee (industry)	Student level	Different	Call attention to the fact that discriminative jokes are not decent at all, address it and talk about it
Katharina (24)	Masters student/employee (university)	Junior research level	Different	Stay true to oneself, call attention to unfair behaviour
Sonja (30)	Researcher (industry)	PhD phase	Different	Addressing discriminative behaviour when necessary
Sieglinde (43)	Employee (university)	Junior research level	Different	Perseverance, acceptance of administrative tasks
Anita (27)	Junior Researcher (university)	PhD phase	Unexceptional	Assimilation, 'acting like one of the boys'
Irene (26)	Junior Researcher (university)	PhD phase	Different	Excellence, high performance, contradicting and calling attention to discrimination
Marianne (29)	Senior Researcher (non-university research institute)	PhD phase	Unexceptional	Trivialization: denial of discriminating experiences
Elena (31)	Senior Researcher (university)	Post-Doc phase	Unexceptional	Keeping up, staying positive and optimistic, laughing and joining 'the game'

(Continues)

Table A1. (Continued)

Pseudonym (Age)	Current position	Accounts on	Presentation pattern	Coping behaviours
Eva (39)	Senior Researcher (non-university research institute)	Post-Doc phase	Different	Standing up for own rights, revolting, resistance to unfair behavior,
Gudrun (42)	Professor (university)	Post-Doc phase	Different	Trying to be better than the others, trying to prevail, call attention to discrimination
Maria (59)	Professor (university)	Tenure	Unexceptional	Be better than the male colleagues, protect oneself through 'thick skin'
Regina (49)	Professor (university)	Tenure	Unexceptional	Working hard to become excellent, trivialization
Stefanie (44)	Professor (university)	Tenure	Unexceptional	Excellence, high performance, assimilation, laughing about jokes

* 'I am Different' = Different; 'My Life is Unexceptional' = Unexceptional



Figure A1: Gestalt sameness/difference continuum.