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Becoming an International Man: Top Manager Masculinities in the Making of a Multinational Corporation

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Abstract

Purpose We address gender and management in contemporary globalization by focusing on the ways in which male top managers in a multinational corporation (MNC) construct their identities in interviews with researchers.

Design/methodology/approach Our qualitative analysis is based on interviews with virtually all top managers in the Nordic financial services company *Nordea* (53 men and two women).

Findings We specify how becoming international induces a particular masculine identity for the top managers. In becoming international, however, their national identification persists. The instability of the MNC as a political constellation leaves room for questioning the transnational identity offered.

Originality/value Our findings suggest that in the global world of business, national identity can also be interpreted as something positive and productive, contrary to how it has been previously treated in feminist and men's studies literature.

Key words globalization, top management, MNC, identity, men, masculinities.

Paper type Research paper / case study

Introduction

Contemporary globalization contains fundamental inequalities related to gender, race and class. It is driven by global capitalism, a system wherein financial investors and multinational corporations (MNCs) have become central actors. Feminist theorists such as Mohanty (2004) and Acker (2006) suggest that language and discourse play a crucial role in how the dominance of global capitalism is constituted and maintained. Many critical discourse analysts (Fairclough 2000) and critical management studies scholars (Alvesson & Deetz 2000), for example, have similar concerns.

A rather elitist – but nevertheless important – aspect of the inequality-enhancing workings of global capitalism relates to gender and corporate management. In their seminal feminist treatise of globalization and management, Calás and Smircich (1993) show how a discourse that emphasizes women's qualities in management is appropriated by management writers out of instrumental necessity. Calás and Smircich specify the ways in which assumptions of particular women's qualities serve to legitimate the gendered status quo where men mingle in the international arena and women 'keep the home fires burning' (see also e.g. Hearn et al 2003 & 2006). In effect, women increasingly reach top positions in domestic organizations, while men maintain their managerial dominance by disproportionately occupying key positions in multinational or global business.

How exactly is this privileging of men and exclusion of women carried out discursively? Building multinational corporations (MNCs) through cross-border mergers and acquisitions is a significant aspect of contemporary globalization. Yet, we still know relatively little about the discourse of (male) top managers engaged in these processes. How discourse relates to identities and identification is another area where more critical work is needed. To partially fill the research gap, we focus on the identity work of male top managers in interviews with researchers. We argue that masculinity and national identification provide top managers opportunities to (re)construct their managerial identity in the insecure contemporary global business environment.

In this article, we specify ways in which international mergers and acquisitions (M&As) induce a particular masculine identity, which can be conceptualized as *transnational business masculinity* (Connell 1998; 2001; Connell & Wood 2005). On the one hand, this concept offers an opportunity to make sense of heroic stories by enthusiastic managers. On the other, it provides a way to understand the contradictory and constraining elements in their identification with, and within, a masculinist elite. Dynamics of identification are complex, however. In becoming international, we argue, top managers' *national identification* persists. The instability of the multinational organization as a political constellation leaves room for questioning the transnational identity offered. Overall, we suggest that simultaneous theorization on transnational business masculinity and national identity offers a novel way to understand the identity work of top managers engaged in complex multinational organizations.

Makers of a multinational corporation

This article is based on an in-depth analysis of mergers and acquisitions that led to the creation of *Nordea*, a multinational Nordic financial services company. The Swedish *Nordbanken* and the Finnish *Merita Bank* were each created by domestic mergers after financial crises in the early 1990s. The merger between *Nordbanken* and *Merita* in October 1997 led to the making of *MeritaNordbanken* (MNB). In September 1999, *MeritaNordbanken* released its offer to buy the Norwegian *Christiania Bank og Kreditkasse* (CBK), where the State of Norway was a major shareholder. Norwegian authorities granted permission to acquire CBK in October 2000. Meanwhile, in March 2000, MNB merged with *Unidanmark*, which was, in turn, the result of a domestic Danish merger in 1999 between

Unibank and Tryg-Baltica, an insurance company. The new name *Nordea* – signifying Nordic Ideas – was introduced in the beginning of 2001. Subsequent acquisitions were carried out in the Baltic States and Poland.

This article originates from a research project that gathered scholars from four Nordic countries to study the making of Nordea¹. The first empirical step in the project was to conduct thematic interviews with top managers at Nordea². All interviews were carried out by a researcher or researchers representing the same nationality as the interviewee, using a shared native tongue. Interviews in Sweden were conducted by a female researcher, in Finland by two male researchers (separately), in Denmark by a female researcher, and in Norway by a female and a male researcher (jointly). Our empirical material came to include interviews with virtually all key decision-makers in the upper echelons of Nordea in the Autumn of 2001 and early 2002. In this paper, the concept ‘top manager’ refers to this cadre of individuals. It must be noted that 51 out of our 53 respondents were men. At the time of the interviews, this reflected the set-up of the organization where women were notably absent from positions of authority.

It is well established in the literature that international M&As necessitate a significant amount of cross-national social interaction and socio-cultural integration work, especially for managers and experts (Haspeslagh and Jemison 1991; Olie 1994). Our interviews took place at a time when the cross-national (Nordic) Nordea brand was actively implemented. This included internal and external activities: socio-cultural integration and an identity-building

¹ The researchers involved in the project were *Ingmar Björkman* (Swedish School of Economics, Finland), *Karl-Olof Hammarkvist* (Stockholm School of Economics, Sweden), *Charlotte Holgersson* (Stockholm School of Economics, Sweden), *Tore Hundsnes* (The Norwegian School of Economics and Business Administration), *Christine B. Meyer* (The Norwegian School of Economics and Business Administration), *Annette Risberg* (Copenhagen Business School, Denmark), *Anne-Marie Söderberg* (Copenhagen Business School, Denmark), *Janne Tienari* (Lappeenranta University of Technology, Finland) and *Eero Vaara* (Swedish School of Economics, Finland, and Ecole de Management de Lyon, France).

² In this paper, we primarily analyze this interview material. We have, however, also analyzed company documents, consultancy reports and press releases in relation to the different steps in making Nordea. Our research co-operation with a top manager in the company’s human resources development unit has enabled us to discuss his participant observation at length, and use it as an additional empirical source in our research. We have also made use of studies focusing on the media coverage of the different stages of making Nordea, and linked points raised in these analyses of media texts with the top managers’ accounts produced in our interviews. This is an additional, fruitful way to place identity work of individuals (carried out in research interviews) into a broader socio-cultural framework.

campaign within the organization (Søderberg & Björkman 2003), and an ad campaign in Nordic newspapers and in the *The Economist* (Vaara et al 2007).

Our interviewees were first offered an opportunity to tell their ‘own story’ of the making of Nordea. For many, the story began with experiences of domestic mergers in the 1980s and early 1990s. The interviewer then introduced themes such as merger negotiations and implementation, integration, knowledge transfer, corporate cultures, national cultures and nationalism in the discussion. We encouraged our interviewees to reflect on their personal experiences related to the different themes. Billig’s (1995) concept of banal nationalism proved useful for understanding national identities in the context of mergers and acquisitions and MNCs (Vaara et al 2003; Tienari et al 2005). This notion, which refers to how the construct of nation is often reproduced and accepted in everyday life, rendered possible by mundane habits of language, thought and symbolism (Anderson 1983), served as one of the bases for analyzing the interview data.

Two questions on gender equality were also included in our interview guide: *“has equality between the sexes emerged as an issue in the merger negotiations or integration decision-making?”* and *“how has the cross-border dimension changed views and policies concerning equality?”* The way in which the gender-related questions were posed in the interviews varied. Some researchers in our project – especially women – said that they felt uncomfortable as the gender-related questions appeared to break the flow of the interview. Gender did not seem to fit in. Gender inequality is a potentially sensitive topic in the Nordic countries³, and when asked about male dominance at Nordea, the top managers found it necessary to justify the state of affairs (Tienari et al 2005). From the point of view of identity work, these disruptions proved to be particularly interesting. The two last questions in the interviews were *“how has your life changed?”* and *“what did you do last week?”*. These questions gave the top managers a final opportunity to reflect on their work – and their life in general.

A critical perspective: identity work in the interview context

To understand top management identities in the making of a multinational corporation, critical management studies (CMS) provides a useful frame of reference (Alvesson &

³ The Nordic countries cultivate a gender egalitarian image in societal discourses (Bergquist 1999; Borchorst et al 2002).

Willmott 1996; Alvesson & Deetz 2000; Alvesson & Willmott 2003). Management is understood here as a concept and category; a social construction, which is filled with political motives. While international M&As resulting in MNCs are often portrayed in the mainstream literature as purposeful moves by rational managers, critical analyses of management seek to represent alternative perspectives. In this way, we study managers as human beings who (talk about how they) interact with other human beings. They balance – or get caught between – self-interests and responsibilities for others. In this space, particular individual social identities open up, and others may in practice close for them. Identities and discourses are regulated in contemporary organizations, and managers are seduced – or coerced – to identify with their positions of relative power (Alvesson 2001; Alvesson & Willmott 2002).

Identities intersect to create an amalgamated individual social identity, which is constantly in flux (Nkomo & Fox 1999). Individuals draw on a range of competing social discourses to adapt to or to deny and rewrite the identities offered (Meriläinen et al 2004; Thomas & Davies 2005). They comply, but at times they also question and resist. Identity work involves identification, counter-identification and dis-identification (Holmer-Nadesan 1996; Maguire & Hardy 2005). It is an ongoing social and discursive achievement (Hardy et al 2005); an engagement in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness. Identity work can thus be metaphorically conceptualized as a struggle, which occurs in particular social and discursive contexts (Sveningsson & Alvesson 2003). Following Tienari et al (2005), we conceptualize the *research interview as the context* for Nordea top managers' constructions of coherence and distinctiveness in relation to self and others, that is, for their identity work. This identity work is gendered as it involves categorizing men and women, and (re)constructing masculinities and femininities (Kerfoot and Knights 1993).

Analyzing texts produced in the interview context calls for conscious and consistent efforts to view the subject matter from different angles (Alvesson 2003). Critical management inquiry proceeds from a non-objectivist understanding of ontology and epistemology, and it entails reflexivity from the part of the researcher/s (Alvesson & Deetz 2000; Alvesson & Willmott 2003; Alvesson 2003). In our study, we conceive that the top managers' identity work has taken place in their social interaction and negotiation of meaning with us, the researchers (Alvesson 2003). Our interpretations and analysis, in turn, are informed by our knowledge of the societal setting and the theoretical concepts we have used

as lenses. What we offer here is thus our construction of the top managers' constructions of their experience and being as actors in the gendered processes of global capitalism and globalization (Thomas & Linstead 2002; Acker 2006).

In exploring the identity work of the Nordea top managers – in interpreting and analysing our data produced in interviews – the perspective of men and masculinities holds great promise. Men and masculinities (or femininities) are not homogeneous, unified or fixed categories but diverse, differentiated and shifting (Connell 1987; Hearn 1987; Collinson & Hearn 1994; Besen 2007). Critical studies on men highlight not only male power, but also the material and symbolic differences through which that power is reproduced (Collinson and Hearn 1996: 10). It is probable that specific types of competitive people (men) thrive in globalizing business, that they articulate particular forms of masculinity, and that these articulations (re)produce material and symbolic differences (Kerfoot and Knights, 1993; Hooper 2000).

Connell (1998; 2001) argues that a specific type of masculinity has become prominent along with the reform of national and international economies, and the rise of multinational organizations. According to Connell (2001), this transnational business masculinity is flexibly calculative and egocentric. It is marked by conditional loyalties (even to the company), and a declining sense of responsibility for others. It is about coping with pressures, being competitive and making a profit. It is about surfing the 'irresistible' wave of globalization, and being prepared to constantly move on in life, symbolically and physically (Connell and Wood 2005). From the standpoint of individual men, this masculinity has to be achieved, worked at and accomplished moment by moment (cf. Kerfoot and Knights 1993).

Making Nordea: Becoming an international man

Top managers involved in international business live in a space where in exchange for handsome material rewards they are expected to offer their body and mind to the rhythm and spatial challenges of the MNC. This also seems to be the case at Nordea.

Professionals

Male top managers' gendered identity work in our interviews seemed to be to a significant extent about women. The male professional was constructed by talking about what women

lack. When asked about gender equality in top jobs in MNCs, a top manager reflected on what it takes to carry out his own work:

Top manager: ...It seems that the bigger and more demanding this thing [i.e. the MNC] becomes, the more difficult it is to get women... I'm not saying they are any worse, but now it's a question of real commitment, and I'd say that you don't carry out this work as a mother of a family, that doesn't work, one must give up something, and it is still so that it is easier for a man to take that step.

Male interviewer: Yeah, that's probably how it is... good comments, and pretty sad in a way...

Top manager: This is how it is. Take me, for example, for the past three weeks ... I've been away for four days [every week]. And it doesn't work out if you don't have total freedom, well, from all family responsibilities, and in this sense, it is total commitment, and really, if you are not even staying at home [refers to the constant overseas travelling in top jobs]... I mean you could take up a position here [in the domestic organization] and handle that, because you get home every night and you can... the kind of woman who could take this position would have to be single, or childless with a man who understands what it's all about... all men at the top, they have families and kids all of them, so they are normal people, and it's a very difficult combination, that, where you come to a point where you have to decide, so it kind of picks out the type who accepts being single or childless, so it means that they have something which, in turn, is not an asset at the next level, so to speak, this is my opinion, and I've been around for a long while and I've seen how my colleagues behave – women, too – so this is regrettable, the way this selection takes place. We have extremely competent and good managers here in our domestic organization, but that's possible within the limits of normal family life.

This experienced male top manager, talking to a male academic some 15 years his junior, seems to babble when he attempts to justify the gender composition (i.e. lack of women) in Nordea's top management. Reading the transcript, it seems that he loses the thread a number of times in his account. Yet, it is precisely the inconsistencies and contradictions that are interesting in the text. The top manager is struggling for coherence (Sveningsson & Alvesson 2003). What he presents as "*normal*" for a male top manager – i.e. having a family – is clearly not normal for women. However, "*the limits of normal family life*" remain

unexplained in terms of gender. The top manager makes allowances for equality – “*this is regrettable, the way this selection takes place*” – but presents inequality as inevitable in the multinational organization. So what is this man talking about?

In our view, the male top manager makes attempts to manage the struggle between different identities available to him and his male colleagues. His identity work implies that a woman is primarily a woman (in this case, a caring mother), and only secondarily, if at all, a professional. A man, in contrast, is first and foremost a professional, and only secondarily a man (in this case, a providing father). Male professionalism does not exclude the fact that the man is the breadwinner in the family (Höök 2001). A woman is either a woman or a professional, but she cannot simultaneously be both. In contrast, it would sound absurd for someone in the top manager’s position to propose that a man is either a man or a professional.

To take this reasoning further, it could be interpreted that a man who is not a professional is a ‘loser’, whereas a woman who is not a woman (i.e. a mother) is nothing. Correspondingly, the opportunity to be a caring father who is physically present is at least partly denied from professional men. Finally, it could even be interpreted that single and childless women become ‘non-human’ in the top managers’ talk, while no reference is made to single and childless men. In all, women can in this way be excluded from being professionals in international business (Calás & Smircich, 1993; Hearn 2004; Meriläinen et al 2004). Instead, they provide the support for the mobile transnational men⁴.

Being a male professional in international business is, however, an insecure identity position. While there are several examples of people who suffered from demands and pressures in the making of Nordea, Mr. Thorleif Krarup, the Danish CEO, became a well-known example of this due to the media coverage around his resignation in August 2002. The main reason given in the media for Mr. Krarup’s resignation was the pressure put on his personal life by the challenges in managing the cross-border Nordic organization. “*One must take care of the whole person,*” Mr. Krarup justified his decision to step down in an interview with the Swedish business newspaper *Dagens Industri*. Later, he took up a board position in another company and continues his professional career elsewhere.

⁴ See e.g. Hearn et al (2006) for a review on literature on ‘expatriates’ and their spouses.

Living a crazy life

When asked about the role of women in the merger process, a top manager at Nordea first stated that he “*does not have a qualified opinion on that*”, but went on to describe at length how he had wanted to promote one of her female subordinates, but “*she almost had to be... not forced, but... we had to spend a lot of time to persuade her to take the job.*” He then remarked that “*she is extremely sharp! But three kids and a man with a fulltime job, I don't think it gets harder than that. It's the women themselves that contribute to the fact that they lose out in this process.*” The top manager's point was that “*women have a tendency to prioritize the family higher than the men do.*” His colleague said: “*there is a lot of machismo in the whole thing, a lot of testosteron*”, and “*the girls want to have more of a package [i.e. different aspects of life; cf. Mr. Krarup's comment above]. It's not so easy for someone to live a crazy life like I do.*”

This kind of reasoning is crucial for understanding top manager identities in international business. In the interview context, it is about constructing a “*crazy life*” identity. It is about a particular kind of “*machismo*” and “*testosteron*”. The international dimension of managerial work takes the centre stage here. Women can be dismissed for not being willing to stand up to the challenge, and they continue to ‘keep the home fires burning’ when men mingle in the international arena (Calás & Smircich, 1993). Again, the assumption is that business-men do not have responsibilities in their private lives.

One example of what the “*crazy life*” means in practice is the constant mobility that was expected from top managers at Nordea. When MNB and Unidanmark (Denmark) merged in March 2000, it was announced that the new bank would not operate with one formal headquarters. Instead, a virtual headquarters model was applied⁵. Top managers would retain their offices in their home country, but travel extensively in the three countries. After the Norwegian CBK joined in October 2000, board meetings took place once a week either in Copenhagen, Helsinki, Oslo or Stockholm. Other top managers followed suit in the travelling.

⁵ From January 2002 most top management and board meetings have been held in Stockholm. The practical reason given for this choice is that Stockholm is geographically the most centrally located of the Nordic capitals.

A Norwegian top manager based in Oslo reflected on his weekly schedule: *“Usually, it’s one day in Stockholm, one day in Copenhagen, and one day in Helsinki ... and then there is Luxembourg in between.”* Many of our interviewees pointed out, however, that they have a choice in doing what they do: *“On average, I’m away abroad for two or three days a week, and the rest is attending meetings back home. But this is my own choice. I have said ‘yes’ to carrying out this job, so I can’t complain.”*

The other side of the coin is the challenge in organizing everyday management work when it is carried out in several locations. A Finnish top manager described his experience: *“It did mean working night and day because you had to give answers to the organization during the day and take care of the daily [‘regular’] work on the side. What you cannot do during the day, you do in the evening or at night.”* Another top manager remarked: *“You always have extremely little time. This is what has surprised me the most ... There is no one to do my usual work [routine management practices]. This means that I have to be prepared to start organizing, and think in a new way, all the time.”*

In the *“crazy life”*, the manager needs particular qualities that women, again, are said to lack: *“the weak point of the girls [i.e. women in managerial positions] is that they are not able to just sit down and have a beer with their colleagues when there is complete chaos... You observe that the girls just put too much stress on their employees, they are nearly too ambitious, everything must be no less than perfect.”*

In sum: Transnational business masculinity

We suggest that a particular identity is imposed on top managers in becoming international. Although the male top managers at Nordea are not, of course, a homogeneous category in all respects, their positions – and the practices they are engaged in – tease out and reward crucial similarities related to masculinity. Transnational business masculinity captures well the becoming and being in top management in international M&As (Connell 1998; 2001). In brief, it is about a sense of belonging to a particular social group, ambiguous as this may be in practice. It is not directly related to so-called organizational identity (cf. Ashforth & Mael 1989). Rather, it is likely to be transferable, and linked to the position and persona of the influential individual in the global world of business. Transnational business masculinity is, however, also insecure; it constrains as well as it enables (Martin 2003; Connell & Wood 2005).

Making Nordea: National identity as protection

Transnational business masculinity is not the only identity marker available for top managers involved in international business. Identification with a particular national collective is an example of another. We were prepared to introduce the theme of national ‘cultures’ and nationalism in our interviews at Nordea, but very often talk about national categories preceded our explicit questions on the subject.

Swedes, Finns, Danes and Norwegians

National identification was markedly present in the ways in which Nordea top managers talked about their experiences to researchers representing the same nationality. The multinational became infused with the national, and constructed a rather dilemmatic position in terms of top manager identity. Top managers are key agents in persuading others to commit themselves to the branding and identity-building efforts of the MNC (in Nordea’s case, the Nordic). They are socialized to identify with the virtues of transnational business, and they are rewarded for their efforts. At the same time, however, they remain representatives of their nationality in the eyes of others and, apparently, also in their identity work.

A Finnish top manager described his problems when he was in charge of a Swedish-Finnish unit at MNB in 1997-2000: “...*I think about those [Finns] who left, who were disappointed; many of them felt that we should not share all these things with the Swedes. But even more people left because they were disappointed in me, because I did not take a tighter grip of the Swedish organization.*” The top manager clearly felt torn between his responsibilities in building a cross-border (multinational) unit, on the one hand, and his Finnishness vis-à-vis other Finns, on the other. Some time after the interview, he left the Nordea organization, and took up a top position in a Finnish company, which mainly operates domestically.

A Danish top manager, in turn, explains why a merger with MeritaNordbanken was attractive for “*us Danes*” (or Danish men, one is tempted to argue):

On the Danish side, we wanted to have significant influence if we joined hands with someone. Hypothetically, if we merged with Deutsche Bank [Germany] or ABN-AMRO [The Netherlands], it would be naïve for us Danes to think that we would

have a lot of influence on how the organization would be set up. If we chose a Nordic merger, on the other hand, we'd have a chance to take part in setting the tone, and be there to choose future partners.

Our interviews with Nordea top managers swarm with examples of the significance of national identity in the multinational organization. Our interviewees were keen to talk about differences in what were labelled as national cultures, for example, in terms of decision-making styles. A Norwegian top manager jokingly remarked: "*Swedes are kind of communists all of them, they discuss and chat and inform and talk, and that takes a long time. But even if it takes a long time, they will do exactly as they've decided, and that's good, Swedes are thorough, capable, and that gives results. As you can see, they have done well in their way of working, so I'm not putting them down in any way, but it's just that it fits in so poorly with the Danish.*" The point here is that no matter how transnational you think you are, someone will always label you as a Swede or a Dane or a Norwegian or a Finn. And by doing so, that someone always labels him/herself (by defining what s/he is not), too. This is, again, an important form of identity work in the MNC.

Another example of national identification is how Norwegian top managers often positioned themselves outside organizational politics in our interviews, and presented such politics in the form of clashes between nations. "*It is a fight with Danes on the one side and Swedes and Finns on the other. The Danes thought that it's good that we [i.e. Norwegians] came on board to help them a little in the fight and, to an extent, we do that consciously and unconsciously because in some ways we are more like Danes than the Swedes and Finns are*", a Norwegian top manager remarked. "*It is the Danes and us on the one side and Finns and Swedes on the other in many occasions... On the other hand, it is a bit like us three against the Danes in some occasions as well.*" The point is not what is 'really' going on in the organization, but the very fact that the multinational organization gives rise to these kinds of interpretations and identifications.

A Norwegian top manager said: "*Danes are a bit like ... you know, we agree on something and then they do as they please.*" His Norwegian colleague provides an apparently different account: "*In a way, we [i.e. Norwegians] found our friends in the Danes. They are very much like us. But they are more cunning.*" Yet, "*Danes have this culture, they fight with us, but they also fight among themselves. It's like in the school playground... it's pretty*

aggressive.” Finally, *“if we talk about tensions, then the big tension is between Copenhagen and Stockholm.”* Again, whether Danes are *“like us”* or whether they are *“aggressive”* or *“do as they please”* is beside the point. The key issue is the fact that (re)constructing a particular Norwegian identity enabled Norwegian top managers to talk about tensions within the multinational organization in an apparently casual way. National identification is gendered, however, like transnational business masculinity is.

Gendered nationality

A Finnish top manager provides an example of the tension between multinational and national, and the construction of national identity. He describes his *“lucky”* career development when the Swedish-Finnish MNB was created in 1997: *“I was in a sense accidentally drawn into the executive top management when [another Finn] left the organization... It was politically important to quickly appoint one more Finn as we had agreed upon these rules of the game where [national] equality was the key principle. It was not a question of who was the best.”* The top manager constructs himself first and foremost as a Finn – who was at the right place at the right time with the right traits and nationality (and gender) for organizational politics – rather than an individual chosen merely on the basis of his professional competence.

This is interesting from the point of view of men and masculinities, and in view of the assertion that *“there is a lot of machismo in the whole thing, a lot of testosteron.”* Clashes between nations at Nordea are about men involved in organizational politics, and the ways in which national identity becomes constructed here is not neutral in relation to gender. The imagery is markedly masculine with references to games and battles. This is already evident above in a relatively mild manner, with reference to the *“rules of the game”*. A more explicit version is exemplified in the following exchange of words, which follows a discussion on ‘cultural differences’ between the Nordic nations:

Male interviewer: Can you address Swedes in a direct way then?

Top manager: You can and you must ... You’ve got to make them jump through hoops.

Male interviewer: I’m looking at this through cultural stereotypes, like, but this is really interesting how...

Top manager: ...I've worked with them a lot. I know. When I bang my fist on the table, Swedes really get scared. The Danes, in turn ... it's incredible, they're real fighters.

Male interviewer: Merchants...

Top managers: ...That's where the Vikings came from, not from Sweden. They really have this brisk fighting spirit. They are pretty tough boys.

Finns and Danes appear as 'real men' in this account, whereas Swedes are casually labelled less masculine. Gendered national identity does, however, figure in our interviews also in another way. A Danish top manager provides an example of this, when asked by a senior female Danish scholar about whether gender plays a role in recruitment and performance appraisal in his department:

To be honest, it doesn't matter at all. And that is a problem, because we have to make it play a certain role. And when it comes to this issue we have a different culture in Denmark from that in Sweden and Finland. They have made it a criterion of managerial success to get a better balance. In these countries, gender really is significant. To be quite honest, I feel that this is a rather odd way to look upon these things...

"*We*", again, constructs a particular Danish male presence in this account, while "*they*" refers to Swedes and Finns, presumably both men and women, who are said to deviate from what is constructed here as Danish "*culture*". In contrast to popular belief, then, the Nordic countries can be discursively constructed to deviate in terms of how gender relations become organized (Tienari et al 2005). The Danish top manager is shifting meanings and positioning himself in marked contrast to Nordea's official corporate policy of integrating practices and building a Nordic image (Søderberg and Björkman 2003). Gendered national identification provides him with the means to do so.

In sum: National identity as protection

For the top managers at Nordea, the merger setting meant a "*crazy life*" with extensive travelling. Judging from texts produced in our interviews, it also meant organizational politics of various kinds. Politics was presented by the top managers as clashes between nations as if

national categories had truth value and explanatory power (cf. Billig 1995). National identification became a kind of protection in the insecure contemporary business environment and, in a sense, a counterbalance for transnational business masculinity. National identification could even be conceived of as resistance, as it is in contrast to the official Nordic identity-building at Nordea. However, it is not resistance against masculine managerial identity in general. In our interviews, the top managers' identity work was all about becoming an international man, where the masculine subject became constructed using the feminine as mirror, and where national identity offered itself as protection in the 'battle'.

Conclusion

In addressing gender and management in contemporary globalization, we have focused in this article on how male top managers in a multinational corporation (MNC) work their identities in interviews with researchers. Managers live a life of intractable dilemmas, caught between contradictory demands and pressures (Jackall 1988; Alvesson & Willmott 2003), which are accentuated by dynamics between the multinational and the national in MNCs. Our analysis suggests that maleness overlaps in the MNC with a particular masculinity, a marker of masculine identity that is privileged in the top echelons of the organization (Collinson & Hearn 1994; Hooper 2000). Although men at the top of the multinational organization are not a homogeneous category, their position teases out and rewards crucial similarities related to masculine identity. The concept of *transnational business masculinity* enables us to make sense of these similarities (Connell 1998; Connell & Wood 2005).

However, the multinational organization is unstable as a political constellation. It leaves room for questioning the identities offered as individuals may struggle to shift meanings and position themselves in different ways (Thomas & Davies 2005). Identities embody contradiction and difference. In becoming international, we argue, top managers' *national identification* persists. The instability of the organization leaves room for questioning the transnational identity offered. Banal identification with a particular national collective provides the means for doing so (Anderson 1983; Billig 1995).

Our analysis suggests that national identification provides male top managers with apt opportunities for repairing their managerial identity in the insecure and fragmented contemporary global business environment. In this way, national identity can also be

interpreted differently as to how it has been previously treated in feminist and men's studies literature. Our interview data and analysis enable a more radical interpretation of masculinity and national identity. While national identification can be interpreted as a form of masculinity, where the imagery is competitive and militant, and the outcomes repressive and hegemonic, there is a more insecure and timid side to it. National identity offers transnational managers – the boys – a warm motherly bosom, a haven from the threats and fears of the big wide world. It can be interpreted as something nice and cosy – and positive and productive (cf. Nieminen 2006).

Yet, the (re)construction of national identity – like transnational identity – is gendered (Gordon et al 2002; Vehviläinen 2002)⁶. It is about “*testosteron*” and “*fighting like in the school playground*”. It is about categorizing men and women. While transnational business masculinity explicitly excludes women (apart from a few ‘abnormal’ individuals), national identification in the MNC does so more implicitly (national traits are in effect male traits). This brings to the fore an interesting contradiction: while the transnational locates women in the national, national identification provides the means for excluding women further.

Finally, the research presented in this article begs for reflection and reflexivity on the precarious relationship between managers and academics as co-constructors of talk – and identities. We have based our argumentation on the conviction that the Nordea top managers' identity work has taken place in their social interaction and negotiation of meanings with us, the researchers, in the interview (Alvesson 2003). We have taken the stance that social identities of individuals – such as transnational business masculinity and national identity – are represented and constituted in social interaction with others. Another way to frame the research would have been to conceptualize the interaction between top managers and researchers in interviews as the co-construction of discursive identities; collective identity would then be situated in the language-in-use, and it would not be relevant to consider social identities of individuals (Hardy et al 2005). One way or the other, gender and nationality are involved in top managers' identity construction processes, and should be critically studied further in the contemporary era of globalization and MNCs.

⁶ For a more fundamental feminist critique of the modern nation-state, see Alarcón et al (1999).

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