“Feminizing” Middle Management? An Inquiry Into the Gendered Subtexts in University Department Headship

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Abstract

This article summarizes a number of issues emerging in a research in progress that is concerned with the analysis of university department headship from a gender perspective. The article interprets the narratives produced by 20 women as they talk about their experience as heads of departments at three different universities in the city of Barcelona (Spain). The three universities, which are all publicly funded, are going through a similar process of change in many different aspects concerning teaching, research, and management. Overall, what these and other changes mean to middle management is an intensification of administrative workload, an increased capacity required to manage and implement external changes, and a displacement of formerly held prerogatives in the hiring and promotion of the staff. All these issues have emerged in some or other way in the narratives of the 20 heads of department that took part in this study as involving multiple tensions and contradictions that have to be sorted out at the department level. They all carry with them, too, a gender subtext that is not always discernible at first sight.

Keywords

University management, gender, feminization

Setting the Context: The Performative University

This article summarizes a number of issues emerging in a research in progress that is concerned with the analysis of university department headship from a gender perspective. As I explain in more detail when dealing with the research methodology, the article interprets the narratives produced by 20 women as they talk about their experience as heads of departments at three different universities in the city of Barcelona (Spain). The three universities, which are all publicly funded, are going through a similar process of change in many different aspects concerning teaching, research, and management. Indeed, the study is undertaken in a moment of substantive restructuring in the Spanish university system. Although this is a multisided process involving changes of diverse nature and scope, the issues of most interest for the present study can be described as follows:

- As relates to the teaching systems and the plans of study, all the first cycles and master’s degrees are now involved in a process of adaptation to European standards as defined in Bologna reforms. From the point of view of department headship, this reform demands a huge amount of effort to be invested in understanding “the rules of the game,” which are not always clear; informing staff of these changes and promoting their training in the new skills that are required; and most importantly, negotiating the department’s involvement in the degree structure, as some studies may risk their survival or simply may be lessened as a result of the implementation of the Bologna reforms.
- As relates to the teaching career, a radical change has been operated in relation to the former system of selection, recruitment, and promotion, which granted a much more active and autonomous role for departments. The current system involves the implementation of external appraisal systems, which place a hard emphasis on the research trajectory and on publication in impact journals.

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Overall, what these and other changes mean to middle management is an intensification of administrative workload, an increased capacity required to manage and implement external changes, and a displacement of formerly held prerogatives in the hiring and promotion of the staff. These various aspects and others that are not mentioned for brevity purposes amount to a ubiquitous conception of market and managerial performativity that has been adopted in most nations. This “performative university,” as Blackmore and Sachs (2000) describe it, implies a shift toward hierarchal cultures concerned with immediate products, the adoption of a narrow framework according to which academic performance is measured, and a greater emphasis on “men” and “women” as fixed categories/independent variables (Alvesson & Billing, 2002) nor is it on trying to demonstrate that a certain set of attributes or a given style is exhibited by an individual depending on his or her biological sex (as it has been the case with most research on women in management). Rather, my interest lies in making the gender subtexts in the cultural meanings underpinning life at university departments explicit.

I borrow the notion of “gender subtext” from Benschop and Doorewaard (1998), who define it as “a set of often concealed, power-based processes or arrangements systematically (re)producing distinctions” (p. 802). As it applies to organizational research, the concept is appealing for a number of reasons. First, the textual reference underlines the symbolic and discursive character of the social production of meaning in organizations. Second, the concept implies a distinction between an apparent organizational reality, which is normally taken for granted and assumed to be neutral (the dominant texts), and a number of processes and arrangements that often remain tacit or unacknowledged (the underlying subtexts); the dominance of the former serves to conceal the workings of the latter, thus reinforcing an appearance of normality and neutrality in organizational practices. Finally, the analysis of the gender subtext focuses attention on the power base of the gendering processes in organizations; that is, how gender is not a given attribute that is imported into the organization, but it concerns both meanings and practices that involve the mobilization of power resources.

This conceptualization of gender subtext calls for a special interest in the symbolic and cultural aspects of organizational life. Although a focus on organizational culture does not “as such” lead toward a gendered understanding of organizations, the lens of organizational culture provides a useful way of studying gender at work. It is not that gender is a culturally constructed phenomenon. Organizations are sets of social arrangements and thus important cultural sites in the construction of gendered identities and in the (re)production and/or transgression of culturally specific patterns and meanings of masculinities and femininities (Aaltio & Mills, 2002).

A cultural approach to gender and organizations implies that the focus of attention is no longer on gender in organizations (that is, on women and men as carriers of sex or gender attributes in organizations) but on organizations themselves as “gendered” (Alvesson, 2002). Gender is thus viewed not as a personal possession but as an organizational accomplishment, which is culturally (re)created at a local level. This approach examines “how organizational actors—men and women—produce interpretations and attribute meanings to gender relationships in organizations and how, in turn, meanings and interpretations give rise to interactions among organizational actors.” (Gherardi & Poggio, 2001, p. 247). Therefore, it attempts to overcome essentialist conceptions of gender by engaging in a constructionist view that posits gender as a situated social practice. In an attempt to overcome the depiction of a subjectivity of women and men in oppositional terms, gender is framed in accordance with an idea of positionality, which posits gender meanings as progressively and dynamically achieved, transformed, and institutionalized (Gherardi, 1995). This “practice turn” in gender research involves a focus on gender as an accomplishment that is open ended and always negotiated through the gendering processes of doing, performing, and positioning (Poggio, 2006). My interest here focuses more specifically on analyzing the gender subtext that underlies the social construction of department headship in the three universities that took part in this study and the gender symbolism that is implicit in those constructions and that impinge on organizational practices that in turn help sustain a certain gender order.

The “Feminization” of Middle Management?

As Alvesson and Billing (2002) argue, the masculinization and feminization of activities are at the heart of the social construction of gender. The idea of feminization has been cast a form of critique toward allegedly gender-neutral organizational structures and forms. Ferguson (1984), for example, depicts bureaucracy as a form of male domination that “feminizes” managers, workers, and clients by binding them in relationships of subordination and dependence. However,
labeling an occupation or a practice as “feminized” or “gendered” is theoretically and empirically unclear, and its meaning is subject to different understandings (Britton, 2000). As I use the term here, feminization refers to the dissemination of feminine traits and characteristics that are traditionally associated with females to things or people not usually described that way (Fondas, 1997). Feminization, then, is not used here in a nominal way to indicate that department headship is becoming female dominated. In light of the statistics at the three universities of the study, this is clearly not the case (overall, only 20% of the heads of departments are women, and these figures vary notably depending on the area of knowledge we refer to). Rather feminization is taken to mean that, in certain contexts, the “job” of headship is being constructed as requiring feminine-stereotyped traits. When applied to the teaching profession, for example, the idea of feminization does refer to a change not only in demographic figures but also in functional terms (i.e., a change in the nature of teaching; Blount, 1999). This might mean, in some departments, that a new gender-based division of work is legitimized. But, mostly, I am concerned here with binaries and the hierarchical appraisal they are predicated on, rather than with the distribution of sexes among the university management scale. It is the hierarchical relationship between an undervalued, soft approach to management or service ethic and a hard stance toward management that is at issue here. Or, to put it another way, I am mostly concerned with the gender script associated with a given position and the consequential valuing of this, independent of the sex of the person who is in charge.

This apparent feminization of management is riddled with paradox: Although changing discourses about women in management call into question the gender neutrality of organization theories and this can set the ground for change in thought and practice, it seems that this greater legitimacy of women in management positions is also accompanied by a downgrading of (middle) management itself (Bartram, 2005; Calás & Smircich, 1993). However, the “ethic of service” that seems to orientate the work of most women in department headship is in sharp contrast with scholarly descriptions of masculine discourses and subjectivities, which tend to emphasize performativity (in the postmodern sense) and instrumental rationalities and the subsequent disvaluing or eradication of what cannot be ranked or be held accountable against the same “objective” standards (Knights & Kerfoot, 2004).

Although I am not wholly at ease with this talk of what is “masculine” and “feminine,” as it risks reifying and essentializing a dichotomist approach to gender (a binary structure of thought), the gendering of a certain trait as masculine or feminine can also be seen as discourse practices with actual material effects on the organizational life. Furthermore, I am not arguing that this process of feminization is a widespread feature of university middle management at large. Rather, I am interested in the process by which some department cultures may facilitate that this is the case. Thus, I am arguing for the importance of context in the gendering process. As Britton (2000) argues,

The gendering process is clearly affected by the context of the organization itself. ( . . . ) Without attention to the settings in which this [gendering] occurs, we run the risk of reifying gender in an organizational and occupational context. (p. 428)

For the purposes of this research, this means that gender is always a practice that is built within a given context and that in every department there is an active reshaping of the meaning of headship. As the empirical material I discuss later suggests, this feminization of headship seems markedly more intense in contexts in which the “old boys’ network” play an important role in the department’s micropolitics or in which the department is going through a period in its history riddled with instability and uncertainty.

**A Brief Note on the Research Methodology**

As I have already noted, the analyses presented in this article are based on a number of interviews that were carried out with a sample of 20 women who were heads of department at the three participating universities. In total, 20 in-depth semistructured interviews were carried out, recorded, and then transcribed. Using the transcription, a narrative synthesis was created for each of them highlighting the subjects touched on, identifying salient issues, and noting response patterns for the questions that guided my inquiry.

My interest while analyzing the written material has focused on identifying the gender subtexts that spring from the narratives of the participants as they reflect on their experience as women, academics, and managers. In this sense, I admit these discourses as partially being a product of a temporary engagement in a gender script implicitly required by the interview situation. Overall, these narratives underscore the tacit character of most of these gender subtexts, which undoubtedly contributes to explaining the various levels of awareness these women exhibit in relation to gender symbolism and its effects on the practice and framing of department headship. In some accounts, in fact, gender is conspicuously absent. As Aaltio (2002) explains, the researcher, then, has to read gendering processes from material in which gender has apparently disappeared. However, this culturally situated understanding of department dynamics in relation to gender suggests the importance of transcending reductionist, static dichotomies with which the issue of gender and organizations has been sometimes constructed.

Therefore, what follows is the result of having climbed the discursive ladder from reading each account as a text to sorting these accounts into a number of organizational-level discourses (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000). Here I acknowledge an inevitable tension and the imposition of some kind
of violence onto the social texts created in the interview situation, as long as variation and nuance are suppressed to match participants’ texts to a coherent account. Similarly, although the analysis I provide below inevitably shows some degree of inattentiveness to local context and variation, these diverse narratives are intended to depict organizational reality in terms of a dialogue rather than a monologue—and, as such, involving dialogical accounts and multiple discourses resulting in contestation, paradox, and indeterminacy (Keenoy et al., 1997). Indeed, the most remarkable issue that these narratives point out is to do with the importance of attentiveness to the contexts, both the management contexts and the local contexts in which the discursive material is produced. As Aaltio (2002) notices, “[t]he management contexts differ from each other, and the female manager’s identity building and presentation of the self are dependent on those frontal contexts” (p. 213).

Gender Dynamics in Academic Life: Are Women “the Others” in University?

University has been described by several feminist analyses as a hostile context for the professional development of women, who tend to generate a feeling of belonging to the collective of “other professionals” (Acker, 1994). Although gender is shaped as a nuclear dimension in some of the narratives developed by the female department heads who participate in this study, these women support different perceptions of the incidence, which gender may have exerted during their professional career in university. Although some of them are convinced that their condition as women has noticeably complicated the consolidation of their academic career, some others understand that, as women, they have received an egalitarian treatment. For the latter, gender constitutes an anecdote without any kind of importance for their professional career. For the first, on the contrary, being a woman has implied a reduction or dilation of their promotion possibilities—“university contests usually arrive in the time in which women decide to have children” (Interview 7), ironically said one of the wardens—as well as the perception of being subject to different standards in what regards to the evaluation of their professional value. One of the female heads expressed it this way while she stood by this argument:

Usually, confidence margin is less for women. Firstly, she is measured as a woman, and then depending on what she does. While a man always has certain yield, a confidence margin. (Interview 11)

Finally, some other participants even understand that being a woman in university has given them some kinds of facilities—as making use of certain flexibility to make academic life compatible with family life—or are simply ambiguous regarding to the role their condition as women has played in their particular professional career in university. In these cases, outstandingly, gender is usually shown as something whose effects fundamentally depend on the intentional use that everyone wants to make of it, so that “in an atmosphere like university’s (. . .) if you do not personally use the fact of being a man or a woman, it does not have any importance.” (Interview 16)

It is evident that—in the base of these perception divergences—participants seem to support different conceptions on what is gender and its effects on social life and, particularly, on their professional development. However, after this polyphony of interpretations, it is also possible to identify a calling for caution when facing any attempt of using gender as a total (i.e., sufficient in itself) and totalizing explanation (i.e., valid for any context) for inequality in university academic work. In agreement with the testimonies of these female heads to explain these differences, it is important to attend power configurations, which are distinctively articulated within the institutional context of each department. These distinctive configurations are defined not just by those circumstances related to their own institutional history but also by factors and traditions, which exceed department boundaries and have their origin in social constructions around the different academic disciplines. Similarly, several testimonies emphasize the importance of not understanding gender as an absolute analysis category. Gender acquires sense when it is studied in relation to the other categories that define difference dynamics within the heart of each department. In this sense, social and academic status constitute two relevant analysis elements for the understanding of power and difference micropolitics, which are generated in the heart of university departments.

Of the many questions that emerge in the narratives of these women on gender as a constitutive dimension of their work in the academy, there are two of them that are related to the feeling of “being another” to which I referred before and that demand special attention here due to its particular effect in department management. I refer to the dissociation that some of them experience regarding to what they describe as a distinctive masculine way of understanding work in university, on one hand, and the perception of exclusion or marginality, which some of them maintain with respect to informal power networks, on the other hand.

In some of the interviews held, participants have made continuous references to what other works identify as a masculine style of working in university, characterized by competitiveness, search of personal success, hierarchy maintenance, and individualism (Knights & Richards, 2003). This almost obsessive interest toward “pursuing a career” in the university—which some female heads have identified with a typically masculine behavior—contrasts with the constant effort, which some of them have to do to keep a certain balance between the different sides of their lives, and preserve
personal aspects as a privileged field not limited or subject to professional success—as a field that should be defended fighting tooth and nail (Interview 15):

Many [masculine] heads here spend their time competing with other gentlemen which have exclusive lives and mentalities of 48 working hours out of 24. And, on the other hand, you want to have private life and children, have fun and friends, and live freely. Since men are one-dimensional and women are multidimensional, competence is strong and unfair. (Interview 18)

This effort to “control my professional life in order to preserve my private life in a categorical way” (Interview 18)—to try to fit in structures and cultures, which, in certain ways, turn out to be hostile to them—is sometimes described in terms of continuous strain and strife:

You always have the internal fight of thinking if you are doing it well or if you should work more; you already work the hours you must, but sometimes you see your masculine partners can do more, and you say: “the point is that I cannot arrive to it, I cannot do anything more, it is impossible to me”. You always have the fight ( . . . ) They have become professors first, for example. I will not become [a professor], it is clear, but it also does not bother me ( . . . ) That they want to be Nobel Prices!!! OK, they can be whatever they want. It is certain that many times they stand ahead because of their merits, but if there had not been people who had given their lessons, if there had not been people who had done other tasks, they would not be there (Interview 15).

In this sense, some of these female heads experience the endemic disconnection, which Acker and Webber (2006) identify among cultures and practices dominant in universities, and experiences and perspectives of academic women. In many of them, a strong vocational sense of their “being” in university prevails, even though it sometimes implies dedication to tasks (like teaching or management) that are not recognized in the performance criteria now in force. In fact, this vocational nature sometimes locates women as “second-class citizens” within university, as an interviewed woman regrets:

[The existing perception is that] those who must consolidate their posts are men, not women ( . . . ) We women are here by vocation, not due to any professional or economic question. (Interview 07)

Another question that is reiterated in the narratives of some of these female heads has to do with the informal power plots, which are shaped in many departments and have traditionally constituted the “way we do things here.” These department configurations, which are a reminiscence of the university’s hierarchical and feudal structure (Interview 06), correspond to similar cultural formations to those described by Maddock (1999) as the gentlemen’s club. One of the female heads described it in the following terms:

Gender here acts in a sophisticated way; we are a very polite department, all of us are close friends, but then you arrive to a meeting at 11.00 in the morning and, suddenly, you realize that some decisions are already made. ( . . . ) It is not that they exclude you openly, it is that they follow their mental course and you are in another mental course. (Interview 18)

For some participants, these parallel power configurations—which govern decision making and act in an informal and hidden way—constitute a subject of the past, whereas new generations would be introducing new ways of acting within departments. “We now work more like a team, we listen more to everyone” (Interview 15), assured a participant. However, as I analyze further on, many of these women—when referring to their beginnings at the head of department management—recall the problems they had to face when they found out that these parallel networks attempted to determine their actions as heads.

Curiously, some of these old boys’ networks are not always constituted by male colleagues. In one of the studied departments, this masculine model is supported by two female professors who “absolutely dominate department’s dynamic” and find the incomprehension of many of their colleagues. The female head of this department related the disagreement between both working models in the following way:

[For these women] work is essential; your career is first than anything else. We, who have come after, have been set at odds with them, because we have affirmed: “We agree; our academic career is very important, but there are things I do not want to sacrifice.” (Interview 3)

Globally, these two questions—which pervade the discourse of many female heads as worries about gender dynamics in academic life—contribute to feminize department management in the aforementioned sense. As far as they are concerned, the hegemony, which masculine and performance models of understanding work in academy seem to flaunt, serves to make department management a residual occupation, a distraction from the “true” academic work, which should be assumed by those who show a greater service will or a so-called less interest toward pursuing a career. Regarding the intervention of parallel power sources—more decisive than headship—in department dynamics, the expected results in these occasions are that competences of
the latter (department head) are reduced to departmental bureaucratic management and the development of “relational practices” (Fletcher, 1999), which fit well into the female “script” of care and concern about social cohesion. Let’s explore in further detail some of these gender dynamics, which are present in the accounts of participants.

Gender Dynamics in Department Headship: Is Middle Management Being Feminized?

The reflections these women build around their experience as heads of department offer interesting elements to carry out an analysis from a gender perspective. For the purpose of clarity, I have organized the exposition in three different sections, which explore, respectively, gender dynamics present in the circumstances and reasons that explain the access of these women to headship, the administrative nature of the post, and the function of “social mediators” that many of them must fulfill from headship. Although analysis is raised in generic terms, it would be useful to remember here that headship is a socially built phenomenon that is built not only through university policies but also through local processes, which can only be understood in relation to each department. It is for this reason that stories, which are accounted next, do not attempt to be representative of a reality generalizable to every university department. They are rather particular stories that illuminate in a way or another how gender meanings affecting department management are intertwined and reproduced in particular contexts.

Becoming a Head of Department

The access to department headship in Spanish public universities follows some common guidelines. The head is elected among department colleagues and holds the post for a fixed time period, normally 3 years. However, the way in which this selection process is carried out strongly depends on informal dynamics and policies generated in the heart of every department. In the case of the women who participate in this work, the circumstances that explain their access to headship are varied and different in each case, but—on the whole—there is a series of questions of recurrent nature, which are interesting from a gender perspective.

First, in the majority of the cases, it is not their own initiative or personal desire that explains the access of these women to headship but rather all kind of circumstances beyond their control. Of the 20 women interviewed, just 2 of them explicitly admit having applied for the post voluntarily and as a part of a personal project to “influence the university context in order to make it more favorable to what seems to me that university work should be” (Interview 7), in one case, and to “get the department to achieve a series of appropriate objectives” (Interview 4), in the other. However, the rest of the participants occupy headship not as a result of a personal choice but due to the circumstances in the context of their departments. In several cases, access to headship simply obeys informal agreements, which are part of the department policy. In this sense, many departments shape headship as a position of rotary nature, to which one can accede for such criteria as seniority, attachment to a particular knowledge area, and so on. In other cases, the proposal of any or some relevant members in the department dynamics are decisive for making the candidate consider the possibility of applying to the post.

This last pattern is significant because it is present in most of the analyzed departments. In these departments, headship does not constitute an objective, not even a possible project for the interviewed women, until the moment in which a colleague—generally the previous head of department or any other member outstanding in the informal or academic hierarchy—suggests the convenience of applying to the post. The testimony of one of these female heads assures that “I had not even ever thought about applying to headship until I was proposed to do so” (Interview 10); it turns out to be a paradigmatic example of this situation. After that proposal, the applicant qualities were decisive, which should have been demonstrated in previous developments of other coordination and/or managerial functions and which are understood as a contingency of the current situation that the department goes through. These qualities are related to behavior patterns traditionally considered as feminine, such as the reconciling spirit or the capacity of integration of the different sectors of the department. Thus, in some of these cases, participants are urged to apply to the post by her colleagues (generally males), precisely because they value her capacity of keeping balance in a moment of the department history characterized by micropolitical conflict or transition toward stability moments. For example, one of these female heads—who occupied the post at the very moment in which her department changed its location and a space redistribution was undertaken—recalled ironically the words of a professor when admitting that “this removal could only be done by you, because you have such a character that you try that no one gets angry” (Interview 15). In a similar vein, another head recounted how her proposal of access to headship took place when the resignation of the previous head opened a conflictive stage, which threatened the return of past moments of instability and micropolitical rivalries:

Before this situation, which started to sway the department a bit, that intermediate way was chosen, that is, searching a person which in principle contributes with balance and tranquillity, which pacifies all lines. (Interview 05)

Second, independently from the access circumstances in each case, the main motivation that justifies the acceptance of the post by these women is their sense of responsibility
toward the department and the institution in general. In fact, as I suggest further on, the images of department headship that these women offer are lacking in every status connotation and, however, are full of references to its residual nature in academic career. In many of these departments, headship constitutes a little wanted responsibility for which it is difficult to find candidates, as—a participant said—“no one wants the post of head of department” (Interview 9). Beyond the scarce appreciation that the post may have, opposite to other tasks related to teaching and/or research, it is neither attractive nor funny.

Indeed, one of the recurrent topics in those conversations held with these female teachers is that when they talk about their links with managerial tasks, they show less enthusiasm than when referring to the teaching and research dimensions of their profession. In spite of the scarce interest they feel, in general, toward managerial tasks, behind their choice of involvement in department headship resides a common element, which has to do with sense of duty and the obligation that these women experience with respect to their departments and university in general. This dilemma between preference and commitment emerges in all participants in a way or another: “It is not about if you want or you can, but about if you should do it,” explained a head for whom headship was raising many problems “as a woman and academic” (Interview 11). In some cases, access to headship is even mentioned as a “debt which was owned to this or that department” (Interview 13).

In all interviews, with no exception, participants have specifically stated a similar conception of department headship, understood as a service rather than as a part of a choice to set out a career in university management or to use it to consolidate their own academic career. The most spread idea among participants is that assuming headship is part of the obligation that all members of the university community have to “contribute to common well-being” (Interview 11). This recurrent idea of headship as a service is usually accompanied by the perception that the own capacity to occupy the post is admitted and supported by the rest of the department members. In short, then, the main reason that is present when accepting headship is not evaluating the benefits, which it will bring in their own professional career, but valuing the own capacity to carry out a service in accordance with the relied expectations:

I consider it a bit like: well, life has taken me here. I do it and understand that, in the department, there is always someone who must do this kind of things; if my colleagues consider that I can do it well, then it is all right. But I do not think about anything else. (Interview 15)

For me, [headship] is rather a service which I do to the department than a personal choice. I am not specially interested in following in the field of, let’s say, university politics. ( . . . ) It is clear to me that management is not my future. I mean, I do not want to, I do not aspire to another post after this. I think that, in that moment, I was the only person who had a bit of the interests of everybody and that everybody trusted in me, and I thought I was going to do it for 3 years, but as a service to help people and make things go well, but not as a thing of future. (Interview 13)

Third, and in close relation to the aforementioned aspects, headship tends to be defined as a commitment of episodic nature and separated from every will of continuity in university management. Curiously, several participants have raised an analogy between department headship and (compulsory) military service. This military reference recalls the image of obligation and sense of duty, which these female heads associate to the post, so that occupying department head constitutes “a period of rendering services in exchange for nothing” (Interview 7). But it also makes reference to the temporality sense with which they assume their involvement in it. This idea of temporality of the post results from the secondary nature, which it has in the professional identity of the participants. When stressing department headship as a transitory episode in their professional career, these women emphasize the marginal nature headship has in respect to the true core of importance of their identities as university teachers. Therefore, no strong fond-sense toward the post can be found in them: “I will not consider what I have lost giving up headship” (Interview 7). Similarly and in an anecdotic way, another department head explained that she had managed to hung up a poster with elements allusive to her research topics on a wall of her own office, providing her with the following remainder: “You are here temporarily ( . . . ) Do not become too attached to it because this is not your work” (Interview 3).

Indeed, the unanimous feeling among these women is that headship is moving them away from their true interest—related to teaching and research—as academics. In their interventions, in fact, they have expressed the continuous strain to which they are subdued while they hold the post, due to the attempt to reconcile their own obligations and their own teaching and research responsibilities. Their language shows the temporal resignations that they have had to do assuming the post—“I have left many things,” confessed a head (Interview 9)—and that are related to those aspects of their profession to which they are linked more in depth. The testimony of a head shows this feeling of temporal resignation, which many participants share:

I like teaching and I like research very much. I do not like headship or management that much. I mean, if you say to me that I have to give up teaching or researching to become a department head, then I am not a head. And I admit that it takes me a lot of time of research and lessons. (Interview 7)
In a similar way, another head specified her temporal link with the post claiming her main interest in carrying on with her research task and in keeping the balance between her professional and personal life:

I think I have reached my ceiling. I do not want to be rector, do not want to be vice-rector. ( . . . ) The thing that moves me forward is studying, reading, researching, and directing research groups. I have carried on doing this and I have done it all the best way I could. (Interview 18)

**Dealing With Paperwork and Administrative Overload**

When thinking about the nature and functions of department headship, these women offer extremely similar stories about what being a head means in the current university situation. In sum, their stories draw headship as a managerial post with a fundamentally administrative and bureaucratic content. “We see to make the machinery of the system,” synthesized a head, “the machine maintenance is what we do” (Interview 7).

Looking after the paperwork and attending to the daily problems of department management constitutes, therefore, the fundamental nucleus of tasks that require greater dedication to these heads. Frequently, these tasks of administrative nature are related to the continuous changes that are affecting universities regarding syllabus, teaching staff contracting policies, and accreditation systems. A large part of the heads, for example, complained about having to devote almost all their time to face a “huge activity from rectorate, which is continuously asking departments for things” (Interview 18) and to “try to understand which the new rules are and how they do affect us; understand how the ever-changing system works” (Interview 9).

As well as attending external administrative requests, headship time is fundamentally occupied by the management of internal affairs, such as “signing papers” and “solving my colleagues’ problems” (Interview 15). In general terms, headship is then presented as a necessary post but of administrative nature. As a head explained, “Headship becomes into a very, very bureaucratic task, very administrative ( . . . ) and it has very few real academic-university content” (Interview 5). In fact, the experience of many of these women says that shortage of candidates to headship post is related to their scarce capacity of making relevant decisions and its little importance in terms of academic university career. In our conversations, some of them expressed frustration over the scant maneuver margin they have: “More and more, university world allows less managerial capacity to departments” (Interview 7). Others complained about the degree of responsibility, which the post entails opposite to its scarce appreciation: “The fact of being head does not mean any big deal; just that you are always the one to blame for everything” (Interview 9). Moreover, more globally, they reflected on the residual nature, which middle management currently has in university.

Actually, what these discourses communicate, sometimes even in a quite elaborated way, is the conviction that dealing with department headship constitutes a basic exercise of “domestic” management, in the classical sense of the term. A head even referred to her role as manager like “a good housewife” and affirmed that “I organize the department as I would do with my house” (Interview 5). In some cases, this idea—which compares department headship to the feminine image of house care—is considered a certain advantage of women in terms of skills:

Being department head may be easier for a woman, because it is about touching many keys, many of them are of no interest, but they should be touched to make things go well. And that is what a woman always do: touching many keys. In this sense, we may be better in these posts because we have a habit of touching many things which are of no interest, which are not attractive, but are things that need to be done to make the department work, the faculty go ahead, etc. (Interview 12)

However, in other cases, the simile is raised to legitimize a certain work division. This turns out to be more often the case in those departments in which headship is built on more bureaucratic terms and where an important academic or informal network—which deals with “really important” affairs—persists:

You solve the problems which they do not want to deal with, and end up playing the role of a housewife in the faculty, making things be ordered, work and be made completely. . . You end up doing what you did not want to do, but as you see that no one else does it, you do it yourself. (Interview 18)

We women deal more with managerial subjects and all that kind of stuff, and they men hasten in research. Of course, the way things are going, they are in first line. They do not like management because they believe that it is time wasting. (Interview 15)

Paradoxically, this talk on “domestic management” is enacted in some cases with important doses of gender blindness by participants. Even when their discourses on management are riddled of the images of house care and housewife, some of them tend to downplay the importance of gender in explaining their role as heads of department. In these discourses, domestic management becomes both naturalized and unproblematized: it is a gender-neutral issue. Moreover, when some gender influence is acknowledged, it mostly refers to the better position women are placed to cope with managerial demands of this sort.
Playing Human Relations and Leading from the Margins

In relation to this image of the post as “domestic management,” it can be found the idea—reiterated in most of the conversations—of department headship as a post that does not either imply power or work out to be decisive in decision making affecting department’s life. These decisions are made either by authorities external to the department or in its informal nucleuses (those I previously referred to as old boys’ networks). In fact, many of these heads show in their discourses ambivalent feelings toward the power they could experience in the post in certain occasions. Part of that ambivalence results from realizing that there is no real action margin or that it is restricted by third persons, making head a “scarecrow” (Interview 10) or a “puppet” (Interview 1). But this ambivalence toward power also has to do with the inconvenience of coexisting with informal power networks; that is, “an academic hierarchy which dominates over the post hierarchy” (Interview 3) or even “a social hierarchy which intervenes over and through the academic hierarchy” (Interview 11). In a broad sense, this rejection is related to the perception of university as an institution with a “very hierarchic structure, where professors are very like feudal lords, and sometimes they go too far” (Interview 6). Some comments are quite eloquent in this sense:

I am already fed up ( . . . ) with this operation of the system, which is based on the fact that the mister who’s on the top is the one who decides why he is smart and you are ignorant. (Interview 7)

Some conversations, in fact, narrate strains, which some of these women have experienced when trying to face this “history of privileges” acquired by these individuals:

( . . . ) these old teachers—almost all of them men, besides—now have met with this kind of pressure, with a younger woman; a younger woman, which is not a professor, which gives orders to him. Then, I understand it is something difficult to accept, due to the context in which they have been trained. (Interview 11)

The way in which some of these informal power networks operate strengthen the marginality position, which some of these heads experiment. This experience is sometimes related to the difficulty to accede to those informal networks through which relevant information about headship fulfillment go round. Some of them, besides, have narrated similar episodes in which the access to the post was accompanied, in its first moments, by a conflict with other relevant figures in department micropolitics. In several occasions, participants refer explicitly to the “formal” approval, which they had to receive from these people to be able to occupy the post normally. As well, some heads have referred to initial difficulties to occupy the post when realizing that these people tried to keep de facto power and deny in this way the recognition of the authority, which these women represent according to their post. In two different occasions, curiously, this conflict has broken out as an attempt of the old boy’s network members to preserve their territoriality as a symbol of power and status. One of the episodes, narrated by a head, illustrates well this necessity of counting on the acknowledgment of informal power networks:

The first time I wanted to talk with one of these people, he said to me: “You are going up, aren’t you?” ( . . . ) And then I thought, I do not mind about going up or down, I go wherever. But as I have noticed this, I then thought, no, no, I am going to make everything clear from the beginning, and I said to him: “No, no, the thing is that I’m the department head and it’s me who asks to talk to the area director.” (Interview 10)

In its whole, the prominence of micropolitical plots, the collective construction of headship as an administrative post devoid of any real power, and the necessity of showing a collaborative attitude toward informal pressure groups make headship work to be centered on the care for the relational atmosphere and calm of strains but not the exercising of leadership properly. A head explained it in the following terms:

You do not exercise leadership. You solve subjects, solve problems, solve strains; sometimes, when a colleague who has argued with another comes to you, you take him to have a coffee. ( . . . ) But you do not exercise leadership. Anyway, you can exercise a certain influence through the knowing of the rest. You have to try not to spoil what [already] operates well, and if there are quarrels, [you have to try to] tone them down and make them have no effect, make them see that is good we all are happy. (Interview 18)

Unsurprisingly, when asked to describe themselves as heads of department, none of these women evoked leadership images. In their talk, they draw a clear distinction between being a leader and being a manager. The former is partly the result not only of being able to participate in informal power networks but also of having a real say in relevant decisions—both conditions being conspicuously absent in their experience of headship. At best, they can exert what I would label a “marginal leadership”—working from the margins to negotiate, conciliate, and mitigate dissonance and rivalries. Besides paperwork, this might be the best definition of their role as heads of department: playing human relationships from the margins.

Many of these heads, in fact, establish a distinction between everyday management, centered on problem solving, and the planning of a medium, long-term strategy. Although all of them contemplate the first of these two
questions as the closest to their headship experience, just a reduced group of them also raises the second as a part of their work as heads. The rest live headship as a continuous effort to solve problems as they emerge, which are “basically problems of human relationships” (Interview 15). Department headship, again, appears impregnated with a strong feminine meaning related to the care of relationship dynamics rather than to the planning of change politics because—as one of them affirmed—“university politics is decided from the top” (Interview 12). It is not hard to notice a gender script in this construal of headship, although this was not always made explicit in the discourses of participants.

For these women, therefore, department headship implies considerable amounts of emotional work, which sometimes is lived with certain anxiety. “What sometimes distress you most are human relationships” (Interview 02), confessed a head who was about to leave the post after several years as the head of her department. Adopting this conception of headship as a task of “public relations” is the result of the real working possibilities, which department headship has in the current academic context. In this sense, as a participant explained, “more can be done within the department than to situate the department in university” (Interview 03). But this construction is also frequently part of a personal choice, which has to do with a particular “headship project” or model (Interview 7). Thus, when these women talk about their priorities and worries as heads of their departments, references to atmosphere care and internal cohesion, attention to personal relationships, and encouragement of collaborative work always emerge. Stimulating a “union policy” (Interview 1), “dynamizing relationships and smoothing things over” (Interview 3), caring for “human aspects” (Interview 7), or “playing human relations” (Interview 12) are some of the expressions these women use to refer to what they consider the true core of their mission as heads.

**Discussion**

These women’s narratives offer an interesting insight into their work as heads of department with several implications for a gender analysis. At the most fundamental level, they can be interpreted as sustaining a multisided but not always apparent contention: that how management is conceived and how it is played out on a daily basis are both gender issues. Overall, their narratives pinpoint a number of salient aspects where gender subtexts become more apparent. The reasons and circumstances underlying access to headship, the lack of appeal or real power associated to it, and its construal in terms of personal and social care, they all invite us to consider the case that might be termed as a feminization in university department headship.

As I have already noted, the conception of management as a service is related to the nonplanned nature of the assuming of the post and to personal rejection to a planning of management as “reserve” for academic promotion, which is sometimes identified as typically masculine. Some of the interviewed women have, in fact, admitted explicitly a gender difference in this behavior pattern, in the sense that, in some of their masculine colleagues, it is easier to detect an explicit intentionality of “pursuing a career” in university management and of understanding, therefore, the exercise of the post as an improvement of professional status or as a significant milestone in the construction of an ascending career.

Significantly, in some interviews, the idea has been stressed that this sense of responsibility—as underlying to department headship acceptance—can be understood as part of a gender cultural script, in accordance to which women have interiorized a stronger sense of duty than men. However, this cultural script—which can be understood in a first reading as an exemplary attribute in the behavior of some women (and men)—may require a second approach that demands certain caution. I am referring to the fact that working capacity and sense of duty that are generally attributed to women may be operating in some departments as a gender stereotype, which strengthens or legitimizes certain work division. Accordingly, managerial posts that require greater dedication but affords less appreciation or visibility may be falling on those members who are seen as being less concerned in projecting the development of their academic career. The fact that many participants do not conceive management as a part of a planned project aimed to career development serves to strengthen this idea. At the very least, it highlights that these women’s construal of their headship role is conspicuously devoid of any status symbol—and markedly provided with an ethic of care and service symbolism.

Besides pointing to the importance of attentiveness to the local contexts of management and of an approach to gender symbolism as variously enacted as a result of local contingencies and dynamics, these women’s narratives also suggest that department headship may be more generally subjected to broader patterns that affect the meanings and purposes of middle management at their universities. In this respect, although these women’s talk is commonly riddled with a concern for “softer,” more “humanistic,” “people-oriented” organizational cultures, I would suggest that the feminine substrate of middle management at these universities may be taking place not through a substantive redefinition of leadership-related meanings and practices, for instance, but in the form of a subtle devaluation in the way management-related images are enacted. This being the case, gender analyses that focus on reporting or celebrating statistics of women’s access to management positions might seem rather short sighted and misplaced.

Thus, women’s socially constructed abilities might place them in a better position to cope with the multiple demands of hardly wanted and scarcely rewarding middle-management positions. According to this interpretation, middle management would be depicted as a feminine activity because holding these positions is increasingly constructed
as devoid of its former “real” power and status symbolism, making no difference or even hindering progress in academic career and being underpinned by a “service and domestic management” ethic, which suits well with female stereotypes. When asked to reflect on their experiences as heads of department, most of these women depict headship in terms of housecare and describe their role as managers by falling back on the image of a housewife. This gender script implies a devaluation of middle management that stands in sharp contrast with images of empowerment and feminine leadership that the literature on women in management normally portrays. In fact, most of these women hardly see themselves as leaders—at best, they exercise what might be called a “marginal leadership.” Similarly, the “context of opportunity” for some of these women in department headship is dependent on both a department milieu requiring soft, conciliatory managing, and a seemingly instrumentalization of middle management for implementation purposes.

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