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# A Lacanian perspective on bias in language: How women can(not) ever *make it* in academia

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## Abstract

In this paper, we contribute to the study of gender bias in organizations by showing how adopting a Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective helps us study bias in language while not separating language from the speaker. We use career narratives from female professors to exemplify our argument. We argue that coming into being as a performing subject means satisfying the desire of an organizational, academic other, and argue that this other's desire rests upon a masculine ideal. To support our arguments, we present and analyze narrative excerpts and show how *making it* for women in academia is constrained by the continued experience of bias—manifested in language—leading to an unresolvable split between striving to be a successful woman in academia and meeting the masculine-centered standards for the *ideal worker*. The Lacanian approach thus allows us to show how gender bias is simultaneously contested and reproduced in the career narratives of women with successful careers in neoliberal academia. We conclude the paper by addressing the broader implications and limits of a Lacanian perspective for studying and tackling (gender) bias in organizations.

**KEYWORDS:** unconscious bias, gender bias, language, Lacan, psychoanalysis, female professors, academia

## Introduction

Bias can be defined as opinions and views that are triggered when we encounter differences and diversity in everyday situations (Bargh and Chartrand 1999; Fine 2013; Muhr 2011, 2019). Bias helps us categorize our experiences of the world so we can function in it without being overwhelmed by information (Risberg and Pilhofer 2018). Bias is thus a psychic, cognitive operation that makes us see and interpret reality in a distorted way (Hassin et al. 2005; Rippon 2019; Saini 2018). Hence, bias is hardwired into human cognition and social behavior, and we all take part in the production and reproduction of categories and the biases attached to them. Sizable literature (Carlsson and Rooth 2006; Gaustad and Raknes 2015; Muhr 2011; Moss-Racusin et al. 2012) specifically considers the effect of bias on the workplace experience of those who do not *fit* into the ideal worker picture: people who are not male, white, heterosexual, or able-bodied. This has led to the formation of the term *gender bias*, that is, the collected forms of bias that constrain women's access to and participation in the workplace (Acker 1990; Heilman 1995, 2001; van den Brink, Benschop and Jansen 2010). Moreover, social psychology research shows that people prefer to associate with successful in-groups and may thus uphold prejudice toward the out-group they are a part of (Phills et al. 2019). This means that women may also hold and reproduce negative biases about themselves when the ideal worker tends to be a masculine one.

Bias manifests itself in our everyday behavior, including how we speak and convey information. This is what is usually discussed as being *biased language*. As part of efforts to address bias, objectivist or realist approaches suggest that we can intervene in language to *remove* bias (Holroyd 2012, 2015). Today, software is even being developed along that line of thought to, for example, rewrite job ads to attract more diverse candidates. While we agree that de-biased, inclusive language is an important dimension to support efforts for equality, diversity, and inclusion, such interventions relieve a symptom rather than cure the *illness*

of bias. Also, from such a perspective, language is somehow considered to be independent of the speaker, something that you can change *for* them and that may even change people in return. In line with previous Lacanian work in organization studies on women in academia (Fotaki 2013; Harding 2007), we approach bias as expressed through and inherent to language. We contribute to the study of bias in organizations by showing how adopting a Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective on bias helps us to study bias and its complexities in language in a way that does not separate language from the speaker.

We use the case of women in academia to illustrate our theoretical arguments. Academia is both a gendered profession and workplace, increasingly infused by neoliberal values (Archer 2008; Fotaki 2013). Of global concern, women are underrepresented in university faculties (UNESCO 2019) in general and in senior ranks in particular (Fotaki 2013). In academia, women suffer from gender bias (Harding 2007; van den Brink et al. 2010). Extant work investigates how bias plays out in affecting women's career advancement (Acker 1990; Heilman 1995, 2001). The causes for bias in academia are complex, manifold, and often interrelated with the dominance of stereotypically masculine norms (Fotaki 2013), discriminatory practices (van den Brink and Benschop 2012), and lead to various gender inequality outcomes (Munar and Villesèche 2016). For example, bias affects hiring and promotion (Husu 2000), publications (Lund 2012), grant funding (Salinas and Bagni 2017), and university league tables (League of European Research Universities (LERU) 2018, 2019). Gender(ed) inequalities and bias in academia are (re)produced through everyday practices such as assigning less prestigious tasks to women (Guarino and Borden 2017), perpetuating the masculine ideal of working long hours (Fotaki 2013), and prioritizing work above all other obligations (Toffoletti and Starr 2016). Moreover, mothers and young women tend to be treated as a liability, which affects female early-career researchers (Huopainen and Satama 2019). Also, extant work illustrates how gender-based wage differences (Koskinen Sandberg et al. 2018) and

gendered hurdles to women's career advancements (Cohen and Duberley 2017; Munar 2018) impact how long women stay in higher education.

In sum, we can say that gender bias constitutes a significant source of inequality in academia. Yet, women are also organizational participants in the academic workplace and thus inevitably participate in the reproduction of bias, which testifies to the complexity of changing the workplace. By this, however, we do not mean to assign responsibility to individual women for the reproduction and maintenance of bias, but rather seek to show how bias manifests through the language that women are subjected to and use to signify what it means to *make it* in academia. Our empirical illustrations come from career narratives reconstructed from interviews with twenty-two female professors. In this paper, we argue that the organizational Other's desire rests upon a masculine ideal, and we show how, for women in academia, *making it* is constrained by the continued experience of bias—manifested in language—which ultimately leads to an unresolvable split to meet the masculine-centered standards for the *ideal worker* while sustaining an identity as successful women academics. In other words, the Lacanian approach lets us show how gender bias is simultaneously contested and reproduced in the career narratives of women with successful careers in neoliberal academia.

## Lacan, Language, and Bias

In management and organization studies, a growing body of work draws upon Lacan's work (Arnaud 2002; Arnaud and Vidaillet 2018). Notably, Lacan's theories have opened up interesting perspectives on subjectivity at work (Bicknell and Liefoghe 2010; Cremin 2010; Hoedemaekers and Keegan 2010). For Lacan, subjectivity is fragmented, decentered, and subordinated to the unsurpassable realm of the signifiers. Lacan defines the subject as a *function* of the signifier (Lacan 2006, 798); hence, language has a structuring role for the subject and is an inescapable part of subjectivity. Language forces subjects to constantly articulate themselves through a symbolic structure

that disconnects them from themselves and the world (Žižek 2006). Thus, Lacan's position can be understood as suggesting that language, in providing signifiers with which to identify, exists at the frontier between the psychic and the social, and that it structures and mediates both (Hook 2006). Lacan was influenced by linguistics and especially by Ferdinand de Saussure (Fink 2004). However, rather than viewing signs as coherent entities in which the signifier and the signified are linked to each other (e.g., the word table and the physical object), Lacan argued that they are radically separated from each other. In short, this means that the signifier is barred from the signified; thus, the signifier is the most important entity in language.

This supremacy of the signifier means that when examining Lacan's work, one must devote attention to *the organization of the signifiers* (Parker 2005). For Lacan, signifiers are the primary material of the unconscious and the Symbolic order (Žižek 2006). The Lacanian subject comes into being as a result of entering the Symbolic order, a network of signifiers determining how the subject identifies itself (Hoedemaekers 2007). The subject is born into the language others use to express their desires and that we are obliged to use to express ours. Lacan's point is that language is the basic structure of society, and different discourses, therefore, make us who we are, or at least how we see ourselves. As formulated by Lacan: "Man [*sic*] thus speaks, but it is because the symbol has made him man" (Lacan 2006, 277). The Symbolic order is something that we are all literally subjected to and thus cannot escape. In contrast to the prevalent cognitive and behavioral psychology approach to bias, for Lacan, the unconscious is thus not grounded in ineffable psychodynamic processes or instinctual forces but, instead, in language (Lacan 2006). The unconscious is thus integral to language and the afferent shared (although unstable) horizon of meaning (Kapoor 2014). Human subjects are caught in a network of discourses that *speak* through them and where they unconsciously situate themselves (Arnaud 2002). For Lacan, our perception of *reality* stems from the linguistic nature of the unconscious; thus, the stimulus we receive and the process,

by means of a *judgment process*, actually comes from outside the psyche; it stems from language. What we perceive as *reality* is, thus, a discourse and not reality itself (Žižek 2006). Put differently, in Lacanian terms, we relate to *reality* through the Symbolic order, that is, the linguistic field in which our unconscious thoughts perform their *judgment operation*.

Integrating the Lacanian conceptualization of the unconscious with discussions of gender and bias in organizations, it follows that gender bias is thus a linguistic reality, a discourse. We ascribe meaning to gender, yet the meaning that we experience comes from the unconscious structure of language. Gender bias resides in the Symbolic order in the sense that language brings a symbolic representation of what men and women are like or should be like, that is, descriptive and prescriptive gender stereotypes<sup>1</sup> (Heilman 2001). It follows that the Symbolic order cannot exist for the individual subject, for the realm of language preexists the individual subject's entry into it (Lacan 1977). Thus, bias is already—and always has been—part of our language that structures women and men collectively. It follows that our subjectivity is already shared socially, and bias can be understood as an underlying system of categorization that allows the (gendered) subject to come into being.

Furthermore, the Lacanian subject is characterized by an original and radical lack of identity or a *lack of being* (in French, *manque à être* (Lacan 2006)). This means that a non-identifiable and ungraspable (in Lacanian terms *Real*) lack of identity disturbs all experiences people have of themselves. This empty space—that is, *lack of being*—is filled up by the Other, which serves as a host for social expectations, norms, rules, and prohibitions (Naulleau 2013). In other words, we compensate for our lack by appealing to the Other (Arnaud and Vanheule 2012). Lacan often repeats the phrase “Man's desire is the Other's desire” (Lacan 2006, 222, 525, 690). With this, Lacan implies that our desire is not controlled by what we want, but rather what Others want from us: The subject desires to receive the Other's recognition. Specifically, Lacan suggests that subjects are shaped by an unconscious structure characterized by the

subject's relationship to the Other (Fink 1997). In sum, subjects respond to the desire of the Other but always in ways that overstep the level of consciousness. We do not seek our own satisfaction per se; rather, we get satisfaction from receiving the Other's recognition (Bicknell and Liefoghe 2010). Given this, the subject is constantly trying to sort out what the Other wants from it, so as to realize the Other's desire (Žižek 2006). The way we see ourselves or the constant desire to do more is thus already and always controlled by how we think the Other wants to see us, and our self-concept is controlled by the Other's desire (Cederström and Hoedemaekers 2010).

In sum, the Lacanian subject can best be understood as *being spoken by* the Symbolic order, and the Other as *that place* from which the subject seeks recognition. Importantly, an organization can come to take the place of the Other (Arnaud 2002). When we look at the organization from a Lacanian perspective, we can conceive it as a signifier that binds a field of signification to it. This desire for recognition can be traced in language by analyzing the organization of signifiers used to describe lived experiences. Furthermore, the field of significations will delineate conditions of possibility and impossibility for the performing subject. For women, this would mean delineating how they can come into being as performing subjects, that is, how they can *make it* in a given organization and role despite—or thanks to—particular stereotypes that are already given to them in language. Following Lacan, the women will imagine that this organizational Other looks upon them, and they will try to fulfill the Other's desire.

In this article, we focus on academia as an example of an organizational context where the Other's desire is gendered in a way that disadvantages women. Institutionally, we can see how the structure of academia is organized, reproducing masculinity (Kimmel 2016, 16). To choose the life of an academic is to enter an institutional *game* that, historically, has been structured to value masculine *ways of doing* (Cole and Hassel 2017). Following this, we argue that academia structures a specific organizational Other that implicitly shapes, in masculine ways, the expectations about

an ideal worker's nature, capacities, and needs. In other words, a masculine academic Other. The idea of *making it* thus means satisfying the masculine academic Other's desire of how to be and how to act as a professor (representing the pinnacle of an academic career). In this way, academia is structured around an ideal of masculine performance, which places women further away from becoming the *ideal* worker. In this context, women are thus split between their efforts to fulfill the Other's desire while constantly facing the fact that they cannot fulfill it as women. More specifically, if subjectivity is conceptualized as an effect of language—even though women who *make it* to professorship can find signifiers to account for their experiences and to make sense of their world—the structure of their speech is provided by the Symbolic order (Lacan 2006), and the signifiers they deploy belong to the organizational Other, that is, the organization's expectation of performance inhabiting a masculine ideal. Following Lacan, we become castrated by language and *trapped* by (bias in) language. This biased, gendered structure can, in turn, be traced in language via the Lacanian analytical approach that invites us to identify *the organization of the signifiers* (Parker 2005) here in neoliberal, gendered academia. This framing thus lets us ask the question: How does bias manifest in career narratives of women who have *made it* in academia?

## Empirical Material and Methods

To collect career narratives, we conducted interviews with twenty-two female professors at higher education (HE) institutions in the Nordic countries (i.e., about two-thirds of the women were at this employment level) as part of a broader project about gender inequality in academia. The interviewees were informed that the purpose of the data collection was to investigate gender (in)equalities and bias in HE and that the aim was to represent and give voice to the research subjects and their lived experiences of justice. Other outputs use parts of this dataset, including a case study. At the HE institution under scrutiny, the proportion of female professors has changed little over time

(increasing by about only 2% in the last decade) and was approximately 18% at the time of writing. For this research, the interviewed women are considered to form a group sharing a gender identity and hierarchical position. At the same time, we acknowledge that their identities/subjectivities also differ in terms of age, disciplinary background, national origin, and other categories. While the complex intersections of gender, age, scholarly background, nationality, and ethnicity are not the focus of this particular article, we expect that these intersections will be considered more closely in future work with this dataset or by other researchers with different data.

Following other studies that adopt a psychoanalytic approach (Hoedemaekers and Keegan 2010; Kenny, Haugh and Fotaki 2019), we collected empirical materials with semi-structured and open-ended interviews. Lasting between one and two hours, these working life interviews (Fotaki 2013) aimed to elicit narratives on how the women make sense of their career paths within academia. Questions were aimed to elicit accounts of how experiences and perceptions influence the interviewees' sense of what they believe has been significant for them reaching the highest ranks in academia, that is, to *make it*. Questions were asked about a range of experiences concerning career, departmental culture, and academic work more generally. All interviews were transcribed in full, including pauses and slips. Indeed, for Lacan, our everyday lives are replete with unconscious acts, which, because they are unconscious, are inaccessible to us; nonetheless, they manifest themselves in the form of slips, miscommunications, confusion, mistakes, and blind spots (Kapoor 2014).

A psychoanalytical approach requires researchers to work on "the line of the Symbolic" as a means to locate the Other (Parker 2005, 3). By doing so, we underline the particular weight and insight that language and articulation of signifiers have for Lacan, as they are significant aspects of his approach. Following this, we propose a re-quilting of unconscious bias by asking the Lacanian question *Che vuoi?* and begin a process of identifying the *privileged* (i.e., most commonly expressed) signifiers related to *making it* in academia.

We now outline what these tools are and how we employ them to analyze our data. First, *Che vuoi?* In *Seminar V*, Lacan introduces his famous Graph of Desire, an attempt to model human desire, which is described in *Écrits* (Lacan 2006, 681-700). A key component of this graph is the Italian phrase *Che vuoi?*—that is, how the subject asks the Other, “What do you *really* want of me? What is it that you desire of me?”—and encapsulates how human desire is always an attempt to fulfill the Other’s desire. As mentioned, the Other is to be understood as *that place* we seek recognition from (Arnaud 2002, 702), in our case, academia. Second, Lacanian researchers concentrate on identifying the *privileged* signifiers that circulate in an organization to identify the hold the organizational Other has on its members (Naulleau 2013). For Lacan, the subject’s desires come to be projected onto certain influential aspects of the Symbolic and onto signifiers that dominate a given social context (Lacan 2006). By drawing out the privileged signifiers, we gain insight into the Other that provides women with the infrastructure, so to speak, of how to perform in order to *make it*. As mentioned, Lacan argues how representations are taken up by the unconscious such that, by a process of judgment, we give signifiers substance. Biases emerge in language and take their point of departure from these privileged signifiers with which our interviewees relate to a *reality* wherein they must perform in certain ways in order to *make it*.

In this paper, we limit our inquiry to locating the Other and the privileged signifiers in responses to a central interview question we asked respondents about career advice: “What advice would you give to younger women in academia?” By asking this question, we asked them to reflect on what they believe has been significant for them *making it*. Answers to this question can inform how language structures what *making it* means for women. With this question, following Lacan, we are actually asking *Che vuoi?* In much the same way that the subject turns to the Other and asks, “What do you *really* want of me? What is it that you desire of me?” we are asking the women what *they* want from younger female academics as a means to locate the Other. Specific signifiers are more

commonly used than others, which indicates that these are *shared beliefs* among the women; hence, this is where we locate the Other in language that determines the women collectively.

The interpretation of interview transcripts commenced with repeated readings of the answers to our central question about career advice. These accounts were considered through the Graph of Desire that supposes asking the Lacanian question *Che vuoi?* on behalf of the respondent. This allowed us to identify privileged signifiers (i.e., repeated signifiers that occur across interviews) that help to delineate the structure of the language used by our respondents to make sense of their career and in turn develop accounts of the Other. The findings were discussed and refined among the authorial team. In the findings, we present illustrative excerpts of this work. While we are not portraying this analysis work as *psychoanalysis*, we reckon our interpretation of the interviewees’ language is approached as *if* they were subjects in an analysis. We acknowledge that applying a Lacanian framework raises the challenge of claiming to know anything because, for Lacan, there is no absolute truth. Importantly, this paper is not meant to produce truth as such, but rather to offer valuable explanations and illuminate bias in language. The psychoanalytical approach is not designed to support theory testing, and the Lacanian perspective cannot offer closure or generalizable findings (Parker 2005). Put differently, a Lacanian lens enables us to *encircle* the problem being studied, providing traces of how the academic selves and bias are (re)produced through language rather than attempting to explain them (Hook 2006).

## Findings

By identifying the privileged signifiers in response to the Lacanian question *Che vuoi?* we start to understand how the Other informs women how to perform and, thus, how they come into being as performing subjects. Some signifiers are more commonly used and appear across interviews, indicating the set of shared beliefs within the organization. To illustrate how signifiers help reveal

bias in language, we present and discuss three excerpts from replies to our central interview question on career advice for younger scholars.

Excerpt 1

*Interviewee: Okay, advice to give to women: Focus on research. Copy the men!*

*Interviewer: Do you mean focus on networking?*

*Interviewee: Yeah, network! But [laughs] network with the right people. Yeah. Don't ... don't network with people who do second-rate research. Network with people who do top research and work with them. Uh-huh, yeah. And be strategic about that. Yeah. I think women have it: "Oh yeah. Nice person to collaborate with." No! Collaborate with someone who's good. Always go for collaborating with the best people. Yeah. Yeah. Don't spend time doing organizational stuff. No!*

In this excerpt, we hear "Copy the men," which refers to a specific behavior that women need to adopt. The interviewee, who discussed networking earlier in the interview, hears the call of the Other who tells her to mime masculinity, and she responds to this call by acquiring the signifier "copy." The signifier "copy" implies that this particular type of behavior is not something that comes *naturally* to women; it structures a call for women to go against the way they naturally are. We hear how the Symbolic order structures a differential logic: *Woman* is positioned as the opposite to *man*, that is, women as communal (nice, warm) and men as strategic. Put differently, the linguistic code is made for the masculine subject meaning, so that women are defined negatively in relation to men (Irigaray 1993). To "copy the men" and to be "strategic" with her networking practices is a way for this interviewee to become what she perceives the Other desires from her.

Thus, the interviewee's response to the Other's call is simultaneously an attempt to contest bias. The interviewee seeks to demonstrate

how *she* has what it takes and does not do what women *naturally* do. Yet, she is already trapped by bias in language, accepting the bias-infused dichotomy as a supporting argument for her advice. In other words, by giving such advice based on her own career, the interviewee attempts to maintain the ideal of *making it* by structuring a difference between her and other women (who network with people just because they are nice). However, this is, following Lacan, just an imaginary cover-up for what really drives and determines the subject, and that is the unconscious force of language. The interviewee becomes trapped by language and, thus, by bias, even though she attempts to distance herself from other women because she is still a function of the signifier. Following Lacan, the system of language still operates above and beyond her (and us all); thus, bias remains inescapable in language. In this way, we see how "Copy the men" bears the promise of being able to *make it*, which is a contestation of bias. Meanwhile, the Symbolic order still structures women further away from becoming the *ideal worker*; thus, bias is reproduced as the interviewee is unable to escape the signifying effect of language.

Excerpt 2

*A second [piece of] advice: Lean in! If it is something for you, you need to recognize exactly what it is that you want. If management create something you are interested in: Lean in! But be prepared, because it's tough out there. You have to be prepared! You're not going for a managerial career for glory, right? So, it is ... you need to be ready for tough conversations.*

In this excerpt, we hear "Lean in," which, similar to the above, seems to refer to a specific behavior that women need to adopt, and which echoes neoliberal imperatives for women found in Sandberg's book with the same title (Chrobot-Mason, Hoobler and Burno 2019; Sandberg, 2013). In effect, bias in language informs women that they must transform their subjectivity in a certain way; they must perform a split in subjectivity: a *performing* self



versus a *real* self. Women's *real* self is already inscribed in the Symbolic order as the way women naturally are, while this *performing* self is rather an attempt to answer to and fulfill the Other's desire. The signifier "Lean in" thus calls on women to work on themselves, to transform their selves, to split their subjectivity. They must make themselves into more confident or resilient subjects in the workplace. Here, the signifier "Lean in" is thus not merely about copying a masculine practice (such as instrumental networking); it is about becoming a different kind of woman who realizes that she needs to do something more (than the men) to get what she wants.

Thus, our interviewee becomes trapped by bias in language as bias informs the split she imagines the Other desires from her. The Other says that, in order to *make it*, women must change themselves. The Symbolic order provides the necessary material for the interviewee to relate to herself and to the Other from whom she seeks recognition, but language is not freely at the interviewee's disposal. The signifier "Lean in" thus arguably belongs to the Other. In sum, the signifier "Lean in" is, on the one hand, a contestation of bias, as this advice envisages a way out of bias, a way for women to come into being as performing subjects. On the other hand, the Symbolic order still structures women away from becoming the *ideal worker*, as the woman who leans in is still not the equal of a man who literally does not have to do so. Thus, bias is reproduced and the female academic is unable to escape the signifying effect of language.

### Excerpt 3

*Yeah, actually, there are many women who talk to me about different things. I always, well I still tell everyone that if you are a female, then you have to be strong, meaning don't ever show weakness. It's important not to show weakness! You might be a soft person, but when you're out there you cannot let them boss you around. That's one thing. And another thing: Here in academia, your knowledge is the most important thing! So,*

*when you publish, or when you show, I mean in our world it is publications that very much matter! That counts a lot! So, publish, publish, publish! Even if they don't stay. Let's say they go elsewhere. Elsewhere, they also look at your publications first. So, make time to publish. Yeah. And you need to be strong.*

In this excerpt, we hear, "If you are a female, then you have to be strong." Again, we hear advice revolving around a specific type of behavior that women need to acquire: The women must "not show weakness." The respondent goes on to say, "You might be a soft person, but when you're out there you cannot let them boss you around," which further indicates that this behavior is something women need to develop/learn, even if this is not their *real self*. Thus, bias in language again structures a splitting—a *performing I* versus a *real I*—indicating a (partial) loss of subjectivity. Our interviewee also utters "cannot let them boss you around," where the signifier "them" seems to implicate that she is speaking of someone, perhaps (an)Other? For Lacan, our very existence is "responsive to the Other" (Žižek 2006, 69). Following this, the interviewee emerges as a subject performing in response to the Other's call.

Moreover, we hear that "it is publications that very much matter." The signifiers "publication" and "publications" appear often across the interviews, which echoes the existing literature on neoliberal academia where the focus is on research productivity as a way to display superiority (Fotaki 2013; Toffoletti and Starr 2016) and a way for women to avoid having someone else boss them around. Also, gender differences in publication productivity are just one explanation for the persistent gender inequality in academia, because research is often better rewarded than teaching (Long, Scott, Paul and McGinnis 1993). Here, the way bias emerges in language again structures a symbolic distance to the masculine ideal of performance, which makes the Other call on women to transform themselves, to split their subjectivity. Because language is seen as something that speaks above and beyond the rational intentions of the subject (Fink 1997, 3), bias becomes an

inescapable *reality* for the interviewee who seeks to overcome it.

## Discussion and Conclusion

In this article, we investigate what *making it* means for women in academia and show how bias is sustained in language and prevents closure for women in academia. Using a Lacanian framework, specifically the analytical tool *Che vuoi?* and the notion of privileged signifiers, we analyze interview replies to the question: “What advice would you give to younger women in academia?” These privileged signifiers, together, help us understand how, in their advice to future generations, the interviewees are trying to make sense of what the Other’s desire is (*Che vuoi?* or What do you want?), and how the privileged signifiers reveal a gendered understanding of how these signifiers are manifested in women’s academic careers. In other words, our study provides insights into the effects of language in constituting gender bias in organizations in general and, in our case, how this affects women’s subjectivity and careers in academia in particular.

Overall, our analysis suggests a split in women’s subjectivity to fulfill the Other’s desire: a *performing* self vs. a supposedly *real* or *natural* feminine self. This split appears necessary for a successful career, for *making it*, yet sets women professors apart from other women who have not (successfully) satisfied the masculine academic Other. In our analysis, we hear not only how bias about ways of being and acting are (re)produced in the collected narratives, but also how women are trapped in language through the use of signifiers that carry masculine understandings of performance adopted by women to respond to the Other’s (perceived) desire. Our study thus contributes to work about gender and bias in organizations by showing that *making it* in academia (or in other male-dominated organizations) is, for women, conditioned on much more than being granted a title, thus providing original insights into the pervasiveness and resilience of bias even for social groups that can appear to have overcome

and defeated it. Put differently, even though our interviewees have reached the level of professorship, they have not overcome bias, as bias sustains itself in the Symbolic order and thus in language. Moreover, we show how the academic performance discourse binds women in a set of relations that symbolically and repeatedly structures them away from becoming the *ideal worker*. We also contribute to the literature by taking a Lacanian psychoanalytical approach to study bias as expressed in the language of persons who are themselves the *object* of the bias, thus not separating the language from the subject.

In this article, we focus on specific Lacanian concepts and tools, and our study is thus by no means an extensive scholarly account of what can be achieved with Lacanian analysis. Rather, it is intended as an architecture for introducing the Lacanian approach to studying the complexities of bias in language, here applied to the particular case of female professors’ career narratives. This architecture can be applied to any other context and profession. Future work could extend our study by using other Lacanian tool to understand not only what we think the Other desires—and through which signifiers this is expressed—but also how women attempt to fill the lack created by this desire. Such inquiry would for example be relevant to better understand how signifiers feed into a *fantasy* and how such a continuous attempt to satisfy the Other possibly provides women with *jouissance*, that is to say a form of satisfaction going beyond pleasure (Harding 2007). This aligns with an understanding of Lacanian psychoanalysis as a cultural and linguistic practice trying to uncover the unconscious desires that *speak* to us (Kapor 2014). In line with this, future studies may also aim to go beyond the diagnostic and seek to identify *ways out* or interstices for change/action to further the possibilities for resistance, for example, by combining the works of Lacan with the works of Žižek (1989, 1997) and Irigaray (1985, 1993). Irigaray famously contends that women fundamentally lack their own language, which means that women’s use of the masculine Symbolic order creates an idiosyncratic impossibility for women to *make it* in academia and elsewhere. According

to Irigaray, this designation of the woman as the lacking Other has not only affected what the male world from its position of knowledge/power says about women but also what women themselves come to consider their own and the direction of their searches (Irigaray 1985, 1993). She thus points to the need for women to develop their own language, although she does not provide us with a way to achieve this. In a similar vein, Kristeva theorized the *writing subject*, that is, the idea that any authorial gesture means constant changes in position across the conscious and unconscious (1980). For Kristeva, it follows that there are always interstices where both the Symbolic and the semiotic are at play, which can destabilize and create new meanings. Recent feminist attempts to *get out of the trap* include Carusi's (2021) book *Lacan and Critical Feminism*, in which she revisits the Graph of Desire and argues that the original emptiness (*manque à être*) may also be seen as a space (to be) filled with opportunities by a *writing subject*, as theorized by Kristeva.

Besides the fact that in this paper we focus on replies to a single interview question, we acknowledge other, broader limitations of our research design. We conducted interviews in a single institution and cultural setting and focused on women's narratives only. Future research could investigate men's experience of the lacanian *lack of being* in their careers and contrast the findings with ours - with a view to de-bias academia, not least what constitutes professional success in that context. Also, female professors are not a homogeneous category, and experience can vary significantly along intersections with other social identities. Intersectional approaches would be beneficial in that regard and help to further disentangle the different facets of bias in academia. Finally, in terms of our theoretical framework, we acknowledge the critiques of (Lacanian) psychoanalytical

approaches in relation to feminist standpoints (Moi 2004; Segal 1996). Overall, the feminist critique of Lacan is concerned with phallocentrism in his work and how he perpetuates a masculine language that supports patriarchal metanarratives that put the male at the center of the Symbolic (Fotaki and Harding 2012, 6). At the same time, others see the potential in his thoughts and believe that his work has much to offer feminism and gender studies (Fotaki and Harding 2012; Grosz 1990). What Lacan offers is a consideration of how the Other can inform behaviors and ideas. Many influential contributions have been made by French feminists such as Irigaray, Cixous, and Kristeva—often labeled *Post-Lacanian-Feminists* (Fotaki and Harding 2012; Kapoor 2014)—rethinking Lacan's work. We thus see our work as contributing to this body of scholarship, in particular to the stream initiated by organizational scholars and women in academia (Fotaki 2013).

In this article, we take a Lacanian approach to show how gender bias is simultaneously contested and reproduced in the career narratives of women with successful careers in neoliberal academia. Bias is contested because women's narratives of *making it* envisage ways out of bias by explicitly pointing to a need for a split in subjectivity. However, this splitting occurs because the women are already *trapped* by bias in language; bias is thus still reproduced in these narratives, which ultimately structures women further away from coming into being the *ideal worker* in academia. We want to stress again that this does not place responsibility on women for both addressing and reproducing bias. Rather, we see our article as providing further evidence for the need to change organizational structures, norms, and work practices collectively so that women are not left to cope with (gender) bias in organizations on their own.

## Notes

- 1 While descriptive gender stereotypes designate what women and men *are* like, prescriptive gender stereotypes designate what women and men *should* be like.

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