

**Exclusionary Practices as a Strategy for
Inclusion in the “Professional Club” –
Business Consultants in Germany**

Hedwig RUDOLPH
Rudolph@wz-berlin.de
Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung (WZB)
Reichpietschufer 50
10785 Berlin
GERMANY

Paper prepared for the ESA Conference
Research Network Professions:
Professionalism in New and Existing Fields –
Beyond Exclusion and Inequalities?
Torun, September 9-12, 2005

Abstract

Although theirs is a knowledge-intensive branch, business consultants—unlike their main competitors, accountants and business lawyers—have not attained the status of a profession. Based on the concept of isomorphism (DiMaggio/Powell 1991), we contend that consultants try to imitate the characteristics of professions. Following this line of argumentation, we analysed structures and processes in three business policy areas: customer selection, human resources management and knowledge management. Our basic hypothesis is that business consultancies use extremely selective procedures and criteria to compensate for status deficits due, for example, to the lack of a codified professional knowledge stock. Creating an elitist image can be expected to serve both external and internal aims. From an external perspective, the development of high-profile trust relationships with top clients is essential for image-building. Internally, the aim is to provide a framework for more powerful policies in order to secure the commitment and identification of highly qualified personnel. These elitist practices may be part of the exclusionary mechanisms against women in the consultancy branch. This paper is based on an empirical study of national and international business consultancies in Germany.

1 Introduction*

Business consultancies present themselves as attractive employers: they offer varied and interesting work, above-average salaries and well-developed career structures. During the last decade, the consulting branch in Germany (as in most European countries) has experienced major structural changes in the context of the implementation of the European internal market and of globalisation processes. The most prominent developments of the branch have been and still are a trend towards market concentration due to mergers and acquisitions, tougher international competition and increasing transnational business. Historical evidence indicates that marked shifts in context conditions are bound to be paralleled by reorganisation processes at company level. As a rule, times of change open new windows of opportunity for at least some groups of the workforce. It might be anticipated that women in Germany would take advantage of these developments, given the fact that their level of education and career expectations are now similar to those of men. In addition, the proportion of women who choose a university degree in economics—the main field from which business consultancies now recruit new candidates—has risen to over 40% over the last few years (BMBF 2002:168-170). Are these changes reflected by an increase in the number of qualified females in business consultancies and, if so, do these women compete on an equal footing with their male peers concerning areas of specialisation, position, career perspectives and income?

My central argument is that the working conditions and career perspectives of female consultants are decisively influenced by professionalisation strategies at the company level. Although theirs is a knowledge-intensive branch, business consultants have not attained the status of a profession. As they are competing with lawyers and accountants, two well established professions, we contend that consultants try to imitate the characteristics of professions. The core of this conceptual base of the paper is formed by Abbott's (1988) dynamic approach of "system of professions" together with the concept of isomorphism developed by DiMaggio and Powell (1991).

* This essay is the outcome of the research project "Market-based and association-based professionalisation strategies. Restructuring and feminisation in business consulting", funded by the DFG in the context of the research area "Professionalisation, Organisation and Gender". Thanks go to Katja Rothe for analysing the microcensus data and particularly to Jana Okech for the analysis of the web survey as well as for her collaboration in the fieldwork. Ariane Berthoin Antal and Sigrid Quack provided very helpful comments on an earlier draft of the paper. Thanks also go to Suzyon O'Neal Wandrey for proofreading the English version of the manuscript and, equally, to Brigitte Freihoff for formatting the manuscript.

In addition, structural and actor-oriented approaches are used with the aim of elucidating interactions between the structural characteristics of the branch and the specific logics of personnel policy at the firm level. Following this line of argumentation, structures and processes in two business policy areas are analysed: customer selection and personnel policies. Our basic hypothesis is that business consultancies use extremely selective procedures and criteria to compensate for formal status deficits due, for example, to the lack of a codified set of qualifications for access to the field.

The paper is divided into five sections. After outlining the conceptual basis for the study (section 2), I will document key features of female employment structures in the German consulting sector, with a special focus on the New States (of the former German Democratic Republic), which had special employment policies to promote women during the socialist regime (section 3). This heritage has left its mark on the New States, which have consistently higher female employment rates and a stronger representation of women in non-traditional branches and jobs (Hildebrandt 1999) than in the West. The fourth section documents and discusses the professionalisation strategies of consulting companies from a gender perspective. In the fifth section, I will discuss structural and cultural factors working against equal employment and career chances for women in business consulting. In the concluding discussion, conceptual findings are linked to some gender politics issues.

2 Theoretical perspectives on the gendering of labour markets

As the level of education and the career expectations of women in Germany have increased greatly during the last decades, the differences between men and women in this respect have decreased. Nevertheless, most sectors of the German labour market and employment organisations are still characterised by more or less sharp patterns of gender-specific segregation. Theories offering an explanation for this form of social inequality may be divided into two categories: structurally-oriented and actor-oriented approaches. Among the latter, concepts of professionalisation are of particular relevance:

- Structural theories such as the statistical discrimination (Reskin 1994) and dual labour markets concepts (Sengenberger 1978) emphasize how formal and positional characteristics of organisations act as filtering mechanisms for certain careers and/or areas of work and employment positions. Where women are concerned, this tends to mean that jobs and careers are categorised both within organisations and between organisations according to gender (Achatz et al. 2002: 208). Thus, gender stereotyping in society has

important restrictive consequences for both the recruitment and the career development of women.

The concept of gendered organisations (Acker 1990, 1998; Witz/Savage 1992) starts from the premise that the binary division of gender (male vs. female) is a constitutive element of every organisation. The argument is that a gendered substructure – at a level that tends to be hidden behind the supposedly gender-neutral official structures – functions according to norms and rules based on male life patterns. However, more recent studies concerning the relation between organisations and gender highlight the need for a differentiated, context-sensitive and contingent approach (Heintz/Nadai 1998, Rudolph/Theobald/Quack 2001).

- Actor-oriented theories comprise a wide range of concepts, including the human capital approach (Becker 1985), the socialisation approach (Friedel-Howe 1990), and the theory of feminine work capacity (Beck-Gernsheim 1981). These concepts have in common a tendency to ascribe the segregation of women's jobs to female characteristics or behaviour: women have too little or the wrong kind of human capital, their socialisation makes them unsuited to the demands of the labour market and/or their capacity for caring work "predestines" them to do domestic tasks, thus limiting their availability for other types of work.

A second group of action-oriented theories sees employing organisations as systems of social relations and focuses on actors, groups and interactions (cf. Achatz/Fuchs/van Stebut/Wimbauer 2002). Assignment according to gender has particular significance in processes of categorisation and may be used as a basis for stereotypical evaluations. In the course of such processes and evaluations, it is usually women who end up in social categories perceived as being of lower status than those in which men are placed.

- The gendering of career positioning may occur as a characteristic feature of professionalisation processes. Abbott's (1988) work on the system of professions seems to be a particularly relevant theoretical basis because of its dynamic approach. Abbott describes these processes as competition for jurisdictions. A profession constitutes a social group privileged by its monopoly of services for a specific "market"; this monopoly is contingent, however. The members have to defend their "claim" against expansionary strategies of other professions. Moreover, they try to protect their social status against what is seen as a devaluation arising from the entry of "inferior" social groups—like women, for example. If it is not possible to prevent their entry entirely, e.g. through legal measures, they may try to marginalise "new-comers" in jobs and positions that are less attractive in terms of tasks, pay and/or influence. This is why feminist researchers argue that professionalisation processes have an androcentric core (Wetterer 1992, 1993, 1995; Witz 1992).

However, it is too far from being self-evident to discuss issues of the consulting branch in the framework of professions. Business consultants lack the status of a profession as indicated by four deficits: They do not have a jurisdiction of their own, there is neither a special stream of university education providing a codified knowledge base, nor do other clearly defined criteria for access to the branch exist and, last but not least, a binding professional code of conduct has not been established. Yet, business consultants have to compete with accountants and lawyers—two professions with strongly protected jurisdictions, particularly in Germany. Alluding to the concept of isomorphism (DiMaggio/Powell 1991), one could argue that consultants have largely adopted functional equivalents for professional structures, behaviours and logics.

Business consultancies—particularly the big firms—might try to copy these practices, e.g. by using extremely selective recruitment processes, intensive training activities (also implying company-specific socialisation) and elaborate systems of knowledge management. As a complement to these personnel policies aimed to create an elitist image, the selection of target groups among (potential) clients is of major relevance. Clients at the leading edge of their respective sector are most attractive for at least two reasons: Their names on the consultants' reference list look impressive and they are promising added value in terms of knowledge (because consulting services are rendered as a kind of co-production).

3 Female consultants, a minority in motion

This chapter is focused on two topics: In the first part, the methodological foundations of our study conducted in the period 2001-2003 in Germany are described. The second part presents the main empirical results while focusing on personnel policies in business consultancies from a gender perspective. Empirical studies in other fields document that extremely selective recruitment policies as an instrument of professionalisation tend to marginalise women (Wetterer 1992; Witz 1992). The main questions addressed therefore are:

What characterises women who have a qualified job in the consulting sector? Does the allocation of women to specific consulting fields and/or positions point to patterns of gender-based segregation? If so, which forces are structuring these processes? Are segregation factors mostly working at the level of the branch or are they company-specific?

A combination of three methods was used to collect empirical data to elucidate these questions¹:

- We analysed the 1995-1997 German microcensus data² for the consulting branch. The objective was to provide a representative reference base for the following empirical steps of the project applying qualitative methods.
- While the microcensus is an aggregate of data from individuals (in this case: consultants), we conducted a survey to collect details about business activities, and personnel policies at the firm level. The structure of the sample had to meet three criteria (1) companies of all sizes (small, medium-sized, large and global player), (2) companies from the old and the new Bundesländer, and last but not least (3) high representation of companies owned or managed by women. These criteria reflect the arguments that company size, location and gender of management make a difference in employment and career chances for female consultants. 550 questionnaires were sent out in summer 2001 (Pannewitz 2002) mostly via electronic mail, and some via postal mail. The response rate of about 20 percent, while somewhat low, is typical for social science surveys.
- The third empirical step—interviews with owners or upper management in consulting companies—aimed to enlarge and deepen the knowledge base previously accumulated through the survey. A similar range of aspects was investigated, but more questions of the “why” type were included. A total of 40 interviews (in 39 companies) were conducted in winter 2002/3. The companies sampled were only partially drawn from the survey pool,³ but the additional firms had to meet the same criteria. With only very few exceptions, all interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed and encoded.⁴

Structural patterns on the basis of microcensus data

The analysis of the microcensus data for 1995-1997 showed the following pattern of demographic and employment characteristics of female consultants:

¹ Actually, we also conducted preliminary interviews with the representatives of six professional and business associations in the consulting sector (Theobald 2001) with the primary aim of gaining inside knowledge and facilitating our access to consulting firms.

² The German microcensus is a representative annual survey based on a one percent sample; it is not a panel survey. Although a wide range of personal and work-related data are collected, the use of a branch-specific sub-sample (such as the one created for the project) limits the extent of differentiated analyses, because the sample size is rather small.

³ Some companies had already indicated on the questionnaire that they were not prepared to give an interview, and others no longer existed at the time we looked for interview partners. Surprisingly, leading managers of big companies and particularly the global players were more often willing to give an interview than to respond to a survey.

⁴ AskSam software was used to encrypt the data.

- While the proportion of women fell significantly in former East German states (from 42% to 27%), it rose slightly in the former West (from 20% to 22%), so East and West were closer together by the end of the period surveyed.
- When divided into three age groups (20-34, 35-49 and 50 or over), the middle group was the biggest by far in 1997 for both men and women, regardless of whether from the East or West. In the oldest group, there was a larger proportion of women in the former West than in the East (the difference was even more apparent for men). This age structure might (still) reflect the transformation process in the former East.
- The majority of consultants – 55% of the women and 70% of the men – were married.
- The level of education was much higher than the national average for both women and men. In total, 70% of the women and 72% of the men had finished secondary school.
- The proportion of female consultants with a university degree increased greatly (by 15 percentage points) between 1995 and 1997, but was still lower than that of men (54 vs. 63%). A degree in economics or business was predominant, with 50% of both men and women holding a degree in these subjects.
- The proportion of self-employed female consultants (63.9%) was almost identical to that of males (62.8%) in 1997.⁵
- One in five female consultants was employed on a part-time basis in 1997; however, in the former East German states the proportion was only one in seven. As might be expected, the proportion of men working part-time was much lower (one in 20). In total, the proportion of part-time consultants (i.e. those working less than 39 hours a week) fell in the three-year period, while the proportion of those working 60 or more hours a week rose—for both men and women. The “24/7” image which the consulting branch is eager to present would seem to be confirmed by these data.
- Women showed a shorter length of employment than men. However, this does not necessarily imply higher fluctuation rates for women. It may also be a result of the significantly larger proportion of young women in the sector: In 1997, 39% of women and 24% of men were in the 20-34 age group.
- In 1997, 14% of women and 17% of men had changed firms during the last year; therefore, the gender differences were small in regard to job mobility. A similar number of women (12%) and men (11%) stated that they had changed from a job in a different branch during the last year.
- The difference in working conditions for men and women in the consulting branch was most obvious concerning the distribution of net income.⁶ In 1997,

5 We were unable to find a plausible explanation for such a high rate of self-employment (and 20% growth rate in the three year period).

72% of women earned less than €2,500 a month as compared to 80% in 1995. Obviously, women were beginning to enter the higher income groups. Women in the former East earned less than in the former West, but they were catching up. Male consultants were in a much better position; only one in two men belonged to the income group earning less than €2,500 in both 1995 and 1997. Both self-employed and employed female consultants earned less than their male peers.

On the whole, these patterns show both differences and parallels for male and female consultants concerning their personal characteristics and working conditions in the second half of the 1990s. The similarities can be found in the dominating age group (35-45), the above-average education level, the high percentage of university education, the very high rate of self-employment, and in the rate of career changes in the last twelve months. Given this range of homogenous elements, the dimensions of inequality seem quite remarkable: the significantly higher proportion of unmarried women, the three times higher percentage of part-time workers, the (somewhat) shorter length of employment and, last but not least, the conspicuous over-representation of (full-time) female consultants in the below €2,500 income segment. The microcensus data thus contains the following messages:

- Women accept compromises on working hours far more frequently than men, although the part-time ratio in this sector is less than the national average.
- High investment in education leads to a lower pay-off in terms of additional income for female consultants compared to their male colleagues.
- The choice not to marry and/or to have children would seem to be a price frequently paid by women in Germany for their career in the consulting branch (as is also seen in other similarly demanding sectors).

The employment situation of female consultants

In their empirical research, my team uncovered markers concerning the gender distribution of consultants according to location (old versus new states), company size and women's positions at various career stages and in various consulting fields. I will first present the data of the survey, then the results of the interviews with managers in consultancies.

In the survey sample, 27% of consultants are women (30% in the new states, 26% in the old). As might be expected, the proportion of women varied according to company size. In small consultancies (1-5 consultants) women

6 In order to control effects related to working-time, we only included men and women in full-time employment in this calculation.

make up one-third of the qualified staff.⁷ In medium-sized (6-50 consultants) and large companies (more than 50 consultants), only one in five consultants is female. In absolute numbers, however, the overwhelming majority of consultants, both male and female, are employed by large companies.

Women are not distributed evenly between all consultancy companies. As many as forty percent of the companies surveyed did not have any women on their payroll. A quarter of the consultancies had a proportion of women ranging between 20% and 50%; in at least one in five companies, women even made up over half of the consultant staff. Due to this “clustering” of female consultants in around half of the companies, it would be inappropriate to view women as having a ‘token’ status in this branch. Kanter’s (1977) concept would imply that they are an extreme minority in most organisations.

As remarked above, minority groups are at risk of being marginalised, i.e. excluded from attractive tasks and important positions. The concepts used to analyse fragmented labour markets include horizontal and vertical segregation. In the case of vertical segregation, the data on the distribution of female consultants in the hierarchy of positions is relevant.⁸ A study carried out by the working group “International Business Consultants” of the German Association of Consultants (BDU 1998) showed a sharp fall in the percentage of women beyond entry level⁹: junior consultants 35%, project managers 10%, and business managers 10%. This apparent “melting away” of female consultants on their way up the career ladder may be due to women’s (possibly) shorter employment term and/or lack of experience. The alternative notion that it may indicate gender-based vertical segregation is debatable.

According to the findings of the survey, segmentation tendencies in Germany would seem to be more common in the old states than in the new. In over half of the companies in the former West, all management positions are filled by men; in the former East, this is the case for only a quarter of the companies. The situation that managerial positions are filled exclusively by men is far more common in medium-sized companies than in small or large companies. In other words, medium-sized consultancies are rather male dominated. As might be expected, there are few companies where women fill all management positions. In the former East, however, this is actually true of one

7 However, 40% of the small consultancies sampled did not have any employees. There is no difference in this respect between companies owned by women or by men.

8 An example of how vertical segmentation is produced was documented by the activities of one association in the branch: it offered two training programmes exclusively targeting women, but only training them to be assistants at consulting firms (Rudolph/Padmanabhan 2001).

9 The empirical basis (responses of 163 female and male consultants from 11 consultancies) was rather small.

in ten small companies compared to one in twenty small companies in Germany as a whole. The higher proportion of women in the new states is probably (at least in part) due to the fact that the consulting branch in the former East is dominated by small companies.

Partner status is one of the greatest incentives the sector has to offer (Greenwood/Empson 2003:918). According to the survey, the proportion of female partners was 15%, which is much lower than the proportion of female consultants as a whole (27%). Women and men with partner status are very unevenly distributed between differently sized companies. Eighty percent of male partners are concentrated in large companies compared to only 55% of female partners. A third of all female partners are found in small companies. The fact that the percentage of women with partner status in the new states is more than twice as high as in the old (38% to 14%) is probably due to the predominance of small consultancies in the former East Germany, as was already mentioned.

The results of the interviews with managers at consultancies – our third approach – point in the same direction. The higher you go up the hierarchy, the fewer women are to be found except in the case of small companies where it is difficult to differentiate between career stages¹⁰ (see Table 1).

Table 1: Proportion of women in business consultancies differentiated according to status groups and company size

	Small firms (former East)	Small firms (former West)	Medium-sized firms	Large firms	Global players
Manager/ partner	39%	30%	17.5% (0-66.7%)	8.5% (0-25%)	5% (0-7%)
Consultant	44% (0-100%)	70% (0-100%)	22% (0-63%)	30% (12.9-67%)	26% (16-35%)

Numbers in brackets indicate the range of answers from the companies.

Source: Our own interviews with managers in consultancy firms.

The fragmented pattern of employment of female consultants can be described as segregated integration. Our data tend to support the argument that major segregation factors are located not at the branch level but at the company level. We therefore investigated whether it is possible to positively relate characteristics of consultancy companies to professional chances of female consultants.

10 In the group of small companies, we deliberately oversampled companies owned or managed by women.

The most obvious aspect is that the probability of finding female consultants among the employees tends to increase if women are represented among the upper management or at the partner level. This holds true for all company sizes except for the small ones (where no impact is visible). It is unclear whether there is a causal relationship and if so, in what direction (more female partners contributing to women-friendly policies or higher percentages of female consultants providing larger cohorts for career advancement) because the data concerning the personnel structure on the company level only apply to one-year periods.

One form of segregated integration of women might also be their assignment to areas of work that are less prestigious and/or profitable. Strategic consulting and IT consulting are positioned at the high end of the scale, and personnel consulting is at the low end. These three fields are the most important in creating revenue for consultancies in Germany. While strategic and IT consulting have masculine connotations, women would seem to make acceptable consultants when it comes to personnel issues. In Hördt's sample (2002:57f.), women in management/strategy consulting were just as underrepresented as those in IT systems consulting. The latter finding is not surprising considering that the percentage of female students in engineering departments of German universities is extremely low.

Our interviews in small companies revealed no clear pattern of representation of women in different consulting fields: Three companies in personnel/organisational development consulting had high percentages of female consultants or managers. IT systems, e-business, logistics, finance are also represented as female-owned consultancies or as consultancies with female employees. In medium-sized companies offering personnel consulting, there is a high percentage of females at the consultant and management levels, whereas strategy consulting companies of this size seem to be all-male territories. Conversely, big companies in strategy consulting offer some chances for women, both as consultants and managers.

To summarize, company size, location (former East/West Germany), hierarchy level and consulting field apparently function as filters in regard to the employment and career perspectives of qualified women in the consulting branch in Germany. The predominance of small companies in the new states may offer only limited career perspectives for women, yet within these limits companies in the former East are more open to female employment. Medium-sized companies, on the other hand, seem to have characteristics which favour men. Obviously, some positive quantitative changes in employment of female consultants go hand in hand with persisting qualitative gender differences in this job market.

4 Professionalisation strategies with a gender bias

Because their services represent a high-risk purchase, the lack of a professional status is a considerable handicap for consultants. Potential clients therefore need to see clear indications of a consultancy's competence and reliability before contracting their services (Kaas/Schade 1995:1075). In terms of substitutes for professionalisation, selective recruitment procedures are widely used in the consulting branch, and the degree of selectivity increases with company size, with some variations of the criteria and their relative weight (see Table 2).

Table 2: Selection criteria for young consultants

	Small firms	Medium-sized firms	Large firms	Global players
University diploma	55 %	85%	100%	100%
Above-average grades	15%	50%	65%	85%
Practical experience	60%	85%	35%	20%
Expert knowledge	80%	70%	65%	75%
Additional qualifications	Social skills, sales competence	Social skills, sales competence, foreign languages	Foreign languages	2 academic degrees, foreign languages

* Many HRM consultants in the sample.

Source: Own interviews.

Table 2 indicates the inverse relevance of university diplomas and practical experience in relation to company size. The demanding recruitment criteria are interpreted even more strictly in periods of "smooth" labour markets such as the last two years. The extremely selective procedures practiced particularly by the global players highlight the intention of creating an image of elitism and exclusivity. This image is supposed to increase the company's attractiveness in the eyes of potential clients and potential future consultants to be selected from the pool of top university students.

How does gender bias enter into the picture? Two arguments are often used to accomplish and justify the segregation of women: the first is that women have the wrong kind of human capital, and the second is that female socialisation has inherent deficiencies (cf. Hördt 2002). The first argument alleges that the women have made an unsuitable choice of degree subject and/or vocational direction. Some opinions hold that their level of education is too low. During our interviews, several managers cited the lack of female affinity to IT and controlling as influential factors. They also mentioned that women fulfil the requirement of having two academic degrees less often than their male counterparts. Still, it remains unclear whether this latter requirement is really due to the demands of the job or whether it is used purely for selection purposes. The claim of higher qualification needs is inconsistent with the results of a consultant profile produced by the professional association (BDU 1998), which showed that the level of formal education of consultants decreases with rising seniority.

The second argument plays on stereotypes of female emotional reactions. In Hördt's (2002) study, a number of male managers of consultancies of all sizes pretended that women are too emotional, too aggressive and yet also too soft to make a career in the consulting branch. Apart from implying that women lack basic professional skills, i.e. the ability to react appropriately to situations, it also inflicts a double bind of contradictory behavioural requirements on women: first, the standard used to judge whether a reaction is "appropriate" or "out of order" is gender-based, and second, women risk being labelled "unfeminine" if they act professionally (Heintz/Nadai/Fischer/Ummel 1997:238). Examples of this in our interviews with managers include their criticism that women lack confidence and the ability to maintain professional distance when it is necessary to "take a hard line", e.g. during reengineering projects, etc.

Very much in contrast to the dominant culture in most consultancies, some authors tend to emphasize loyalty, co-operative behaviour and flexibility as being characteristic of "female" practice (Fletcher 1999). During the interviews conducted by my research team, only three managers – all of them women – denied that there was a specific "female" type of consulting. However, some male consultants saw specific opportunities for women in the branch, arguing that they can deal better with emotional issues and that they have an integrating effect. The qualities characterised as feminine—better communication, lateral thinking, and empathy—were all evaluated as positive. This is in line with a study cited by Covin/Harris (1996:8) in which women were seen as having better qualifications than men in nine out of ten areas. During our interviews with managers, we repeatedly heard that mixed teams were good for the company. This corresponds to Hördt's findings (2002) that female consultants contribute to a positive change in the work environment.

Career development is only loosely linked to tested knowledge, skills and experience. Instead, it largely involves impression management. This is especially relevant for higher levels of the hierarchy, where formal criteria become less important in judging achievements (Autenrith/ Chemnitzer/Domsch 1993:45f.). Men know how to “sell” themselves better—a view confirmed by the managers interviewed by my research team. They are aware that social interactions are never just a question of objective issues, but that negotiations of position and power are always involved (Edding 2000). Not all contributions relevant to the success of a project team can be documented. Whether an action is seen from above and from the outside as an achievement, and whether this will contribute towards career advancement depends on how it is performed. Far more men than women are aware of this and behave accordingly. Still, the managers interviewed never questioned the credo that the professional profile for consultants should be exclusively efficiency-oriented, as if this were objectively the best criterion.

In summary, the potential reasons for the consistently low proportion of women in the sector, as proposed by leading members of the consulting companies interviewed by us, mainly pointed back to the women: it was held that they either do not fit the ambitious profile of a consultant or that they can't or won't adapt (far enough).

5 Structures and culture in consultancies as gendered substructure

On the whole, the above-mentioned arguments reflecting the common perceptions of women's capabilities in the consulting branch would seem to create substantial problems for women who want to pursue a career on an equal footing with their male peers. Apart from the recruitment procedures discussed above, the “segregated integration” of women in consulting seems to be due to structural and cultural filtering mechanisms within the organisations. By filtering mechanisms, I mean arrangements that are either clearly based on male life models or which men have created to support their professional habitus and/or informal infrastructures. In other words, there is a discrepancy between official statements and actual practice. Two types of barriers seem to be associated with strategies of professionalisation: the ideologies of availability and acceptance by clients (see also Hördt 2002).

- (1) The ideology of availability means that consultants are expected to be 100% available to their firm—or more. This sign of an extremely hard-working group is part of the consultants' social construction of elitism. The fact that the standard for “normal” working hours of consultants has taken

on critical dimensions was recently noted within the consulting branch.¹¹ However, Hördt (2002) found decidedly gender-specific views concerning availability requirements in her empirical data: Men felt that practically unlimited availability (allegedly in the interest of the client) was absolutely necessary for their job, whereas women were convinced that it would be possible to achieve “family-friendly” working hours if the consultancies were willing to invest in the corresponding changes in work organisation.

The managers interviewed in our study named the time problems arising from the project-based organisation of work and the intensive travelling requirements most frequently as the hardest obstacle limiting women’s career development. Almost all thought it was absolutely out of the question that things might be organised differently.¹²

The blurring of the divisions between work and leisure time and the organisation of “private” activities together with colleagues is widely practised in the consulting branch, where the teams often spend weeks working and living together in foreign cities. Such a working life may be hard, but it also welds people together. Moreover, it contributes to a feeling of distinction—especially as the financial rewards often provide lavish compensation. Kipping/Armbrüster (2000:73) sum it up as follows:

The organisational culture in management consultancies is strongly influenced by these values. It is dominated by male individuals with a background in positivist academic disciplines who are prepared to subject some years of their lives to the career promising work in a consultancy.

The demands made by companies on their employees are increased by the “up or out” principle, which is an integral part of the corporate culture of many large consultancies. This means that there is little or no room for an individual career plan. Employees are confronted with a career structure with more or less compulsory time-scales for promotions. This principle may have a mainly symbolic function, i.e., it may be used to give outsiders the impression that the personnel policy is extremely selective (Kipping/Armbrüster 2000:63). Even if this is true, it still has internal effects since it could be implemented if necessary.

Such intensive time demands that significantly impinge upon one’s private life are probably an important barrier preventing women from entering the consulting branch or, at the least, limiting their stay there. The drastic fall in the percentage of women after the first career stage, as was shown by the BDU survey cited above and by the field work of my research team, is a

11 One nod in this direction was the workshop “Work and Leisure in Harmony”, which took place during the world congress of business consultants in Berlin in 2000. The gender-neutral title of the workshop reflects its concentration on the general risk of burnout in extremely demanding jobs.

12 In the meantime, some global players are experimenting with part-time work in the form of a three to four-day week.

typical indicator of this phenomenon. The microcensus data also document that a significantly higher percentage of female consultants than male is unmarried. Young female consultants may have difficulty finding positive role models among their established female colleagues.¹³

Many of the managers interviewed at large companies agree that: "It's no real problem recruiting women for consultancies—the challenge is to keep them there." But even during the recent boom period when consultancies were searching intensively for qualified personnel, no serious steps were taken to eliminate the time obstacles. It would seem that an extremely intensive demand for high potentials still is not a sufficient motivation to restructure working patterns in order to achieve balanced working hours.

- (2) The ideology of acceptance by clients is a second type of barrier obstructing women's access to and careers in consulting. The alleged scepticism of clients concerning the professional competence of women would have to be taken seriously considering the central roles of clients, who act as providers of revenue, as co-producers of services, and as promoters of business (as references). The relevance of these contributions of clients is emphasized by the lack of professional status of the consultants. There is a long tradition of arguing that women are less acceptable to clients in male-dominated professional service sectors (Janshen/Rudolph 1987: 239-241). However, the argument has seldom been empirically tested. Gealy/Larwood/Palitz (1979) refer to a study carried out in the 1970s in consultancies in Southern California. There, both male and female consultants thought it would be more difficult for women than men to get male clients to accept their advice, but the clients themselves were not asked. Similarly, in Hördt's study (2002), male consultants at all levels of the hierarchy questioned whether women could ever expect to be seen as experts by clients, yet they could not name any concrete examples of such problems. Some female consultants, however, saw the problem of "proving" oneself to clients as something only liable to be a risk for beginners.

During our interviews with managers at consultancies, the hesitant or lacking acceptance of female consultants by (mostly male) clients was one of the most frequent reasons offered as an explanation for the low proportion of women in the branch. It was not always clear whether this applied to the low number of female applicants or to the marginal recruitment of female consultants. These opinions also were not usually based on any concrete experience. It is, of course, quite possible that some clients might have difficulty accepting a female expert. However, the team of consultants, or at least the CVs of its members, are usually introduced to the client before the

13 Bailyn (2003) documents the enormous importance of positive female role models for the recruitment and retention of qualified female personnel in a study of university careers in the US.

beginning of a project. Therefore, one might expect that a record of previous successful projects would be more important than the sex of the consultant. So why does this argument continue to be so popular? Some of our female interviewees said that they judged the consulting branch, despite its modernist image, to be more conservative than the industrial or manufacturing industry. This raises the question of whether male consultants were perhaps projecting their own attitudes onto clients.

In the consulting branch in Germany, there are hardly any special efforts to recruit and keep women for consulting work—with rare exceptions. One might expect the contrary to be true, given the fact that again and again, both in research findings and in our interviews, the specific qualities of female consulting were emphasized as positive. In view of this positive attitude, it is not surprising that a third of all companies interviewed by us stated that they intended to increase the number of female consultants. Occasionally, it was even mentioned that the American headquarters see the low proportion of female consultants in the German offices as a performance deficit. If there are so many good arguments for employing women, then why haven't more women been employed? One could assume that the apparently positive view of specifically feminine qualities serves to conceal the unwillingness or inability of the dominant group to stop women in the branch from being marginalised. In other words: praise instead of action, with the aim of protecting one's own status, of limiting competition or resisting change.

6 Conceptual and gender-political results

My analysis of the situation and development of employment patterns in the consulting branch in Germany from a gender-sensitive perspective has highlighted the minority status of women, who make up around a quarter of the qualified personnel. Findings linked to segregation include the inverse relation between company size and the proportion of women and between the hierarchy level and the proportion of women, the underrepresentation of women in the most prestigious consulting fields and the high concentration of female consultants in the lower income groups as a result of all these different factors.

To what extent could my theoretical-conceptual approaches be useful? Abbott's (1988) concept of dynamic professionalisation offers a plausible framework for gender-specific segregation. In this light, filtering mechanisms at the company level appear as defensive mechanisms with the aim of warding off the danger that men's own status in terms of exclusivity and reputation could be damaged in the eyes of potential clients and high-potential male colleagues. The complementary concept of a gendered substructure makes it possible to

articulate the filter effects of structural and cultural components of typical working practices within the branch (especially at large companies): the performance of achievement, the significance of informal networks, the perceived problem of client acceptance and, above all, the ideology of availability. These substructures have particularly strong male connotations in the consulting branch as part of professionalisation strategies.

However, the segregated integration of female consultants in day-to-day practice, i.e. at the micro-political level, could not be documented and analysed here due to the limited scope and the specific methodology of the study. I was therefore unable to examine the criteria and processes by which consulting teams (a typical form of work organisation) are put together or to study how applications for leadership of or decisions on participation in specific projects are handled. Even basic data on the gender differences in employment structures within the firm were not available from all companies. On the whole, the topic of gender relations within consultancies proved to be a difficult one, as was already shown in the survey. In the section of the questionnaire relating to personnel, questions about gender differences were often left unanswered and, in the final section where comments could be made, the responders repeatedly expressed annoyance at the perceived bias towards women. A similar reaction could be observed during the interviews (with 31 men and 11 women), where the atmosphere tended to become less friendly as soon as the issue of gender differences was brought up. Especially in the larger companies, it was the exception rather than the rule that the members of my research team were given the detailed information and data concerning gender differences that they had requested.

On the level of gender politics, my study confirms and expands three insights particularly associated with the lack of professional status of the consultants: (1) Although now more important than ever, a high level of education is becoming less and less of a guarantee of attractive employment and career advancement, especially where women are concerned. The concept of qualifications is a social construct following the logics of elitism. (2) The filters working against female employment vary according to market segment and hierarchy level. The segregated integration of women (in marginal fields and/or in bottom positions) protects the core areas of activity against "devaluation". (3) As the image of extremely hard worker is one of the basic instruments in the social construction of elitism, a career in a knowledge-intensive service sector such as business consulting implies a traditional male life model. In social terms, the price for adopting this strategy is so high that women apparently are only willing to pay it for a limited period of time. Consequently, the proportion of female consultants has hardly increased, although women are continuously being recruited.

In view of the minority status of women in the consulting branch, *exit* would seem to be the most obvious individual solution to the unbalanced work-leisure ratio. In order to resolve the problem through active coping strategies, i.e. to exert the option of *voice*, female consultants would need strong allies. Who might these be? To hope that the state might step in is unrealistic given the fact that all of the numerous and exhaustive initiatives launched in Germany in recent years to obtain equal opportunities laws that actually work ended disappointingly. Consultancies themselves might be interested in forming coalitions, especially if a foreign parent company has set out corresponding performance targets and placed sanctions on deficits. Bottlenecks in the personnel pool might also provide opportunities for initiating changes in structural and cultural conditions with the aim of recruiting and retaining more women. In the last few years, both of these options were possible at several consultancies, but there is no record of any actual initiatives to promote women in the consulting sector. In fairness, it must also be said that there is no indication that women have been making demands to this effect. Male colleagues could perhaps be recruited as allies if they perceive that they are also suffering from the “men’s club” structure and culture (e.g. burnout syndrome). However, business consultancies provide a good jump-off point for attractive career alternatives, particularly in management positions at clients’ firms and as self-employed consultants. I anticipate that men—like women—are more likely to choose such an exit option than to join their female colleagues in implementing strategies for change.

Bibliography

- Abbott, Andrew (1988): *The System of Professions*. Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Achatz, Juliane/Fuchs, Stefan/van Stebut, Janina/Wimbauer, Christine (2002): Geschlechterungleichheit in Organisationen. Zur Beschäftigungslage hochqualifizierter Frauen, in: Allmendinger, Jutta/Hinz, Thomas (eds.): *Organisationssoziologie*. Special issue of *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, 284-318.
- Acker, Joan (1990): Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations, *Gender & Society*, Vol. 4, 139-158.
- Acker, Joan (1998): The Future of “Gender and Organizations”: Connections and Boundaries, *Gender, Work and Organization*, Vol. 5, 195-206.
- Autenrieth, Christine/Chemnitzer, Karin/Domsch, Michel (1993): *Personalauswahl und -entwicklung von weiblichen Führungskräften*. Frankfurt a.M./New York: Campus.
- Bailyn, Lotte (2003): Academic Careers and Gender Equity: Lessons learned from MIT, *Gender, Work and Organization*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (March), 137-153.
- Becker, Gerry S. (1985): Human Capital, Effort and the Sexual Division of Labor, *Journal of Labor Economics*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (supplement), 33-58.

- Beck-Gernsheim, Elisabeth (1981): *Der geschlechtsspezifische Arbeitsmarkt: Zur Ideologie und Realität von Frauenberufen*. Frankfurt a.M./New York: Campus.
- Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung (BMBF) (ed.) (2002): *Grund- und Strukturdaten 2001/2002*, Bonn.
- Bundesverband Deutscher Unternehmensberater (BDU) e.V. (1998): *Erhebung zum Beraterprofil*. Bonn.
- Covin, Teresa Joyce/Harris, Marilyn E. (1996): Viewpoint: Perspectives on Women in Consulting, *Journal of Organizational Management*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 7-11.
- DiMaggio, Paul/Powell, Walter W. (1991): The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organization Fields, in: Powell, Walter W./DiMaggio, Paul, J. (eds.): *The New Institutionalism in Organization Analysis*. Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 63-82.
- Edding, Cornelia (2000): *Agentin des Wandels. Der Kampf um Veränderung im Unternehmen*, München: Gerling Akademie Verlag.
- Fletcher, Joyce K. (1999): *Disappearing Acts. Gender, Power and Relational Practices at Work*, Cambridge, MA/London: The MIT Press.
- Friedel-Howe, Heidrun (1990): Zusammenarbeit von weiblichen und männlichen Fach- und Führungskräften, in: Domsch, Michel/Regnet, Erika (eds.): *Weibliche Fach- und Führungskräfte. Wege zur Chancengleichheit*. Stuttgart: Schäffer, 16-34.
- Gealy, Jennifer/Larwood, Laurie/Palitz, Marsha Elliott (1979): Where Sex Counts: Effects of Consultant and Client Gender in Management Consulting, *Group and Organization Study*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 201-211.
- Greenwood, Royston/Empson, Laura (2003): The Professional Partnership: Relic of Exemplary Form of Governance? *Organization Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 6, 909-933.
- Heintz, Bettina/Nadai, Eva (1998): Geschlecht und Kontext. De-Institutionalisierungsprozesse und geschlechtliche Differenzierung, *Zeitschrift für Soziologie*, Vol. 27, 75-93.
- Heintz, Bettina/Nadai, Eva/Fischer, Regula/Ummel, Hannes (1997): Ungleich unter Gleichen. Studien zur geschlechtsspezifischen Segregation des Arbeitsmarktes. Frankfurt a.M./New York: Campus.
- Hildebrandt, Karin (1999): Professionelle Arbeits- und Berufsfelder – Entwicklungschancen für Frauen in den neuen Bundesländern. Selbständigkeit in Freien Berufen als erfolgversprechende Alternative, *Impulse*, Vol. 6, 3-12.
- Hördt, Olga (2002): *Frauen in der Unternehmensberatung: Empirische Analyse zur geschlechtsspezifischen Segregation*. Wiesbaden: Deutscher Universitäts-Verlag.
- Janshen, Doris/Rudolph, Hedwig (1987): *Ingenieurinnen. Frauen für die Zukunft*, Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- Kaas, Klaus-Peter/Schade, Christian (1995): Unternehmensberater im Wettbewerb. Eine empirische Untersuchung aus der Perspektive der Neuen Institutionenlehre. *Zeitschrift für Betriebswirtschaft*, Vol. 65, No. 10, 1067-1089.
- Kanter, Rosabeth Moth (1977): *Men and Women of the Corporation*, New York: Basic Books.

- Kipping, Matthias/Armbrüster, Thomas (2000): *The Content of Consultancy Work: Knowledge Generation, Codification and Dissemination*, CEMP Report, No. 13, University of Reading, UK and Universität Mannheim.
- Pannewitz, Jana (2002): *World Wide Web-gestützte Befragungen in der empirischen Sozialforschung: Ein Erfahrungsbericht*, Discussion Paper FS I 02-105, Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung.
- Reskin, Barbara F. (1994): *Sex Segregation: Explaining Stability and Change in the Sex Composition of Work*, in: Beck, Petra/Engelbrech, Gerhard (eds.): *Arbeitsmarkt für Frauen 2000 – ein Schritt vor oder ein Schritt zurück?*, *Beiträge zur Arbeitsmarkt- und Berufsforschung der Bundesanstalt für Arbeit*, 179, Nuremberg, 97-115.
- Rudolph, Hedwig/Padmanabhan, Martina (2001): *Der soziale Ort für Frauen in der Branche Unternehmensberatung aus Sicht der Berufsverbände*, *Zeitschrift für Frauenforschung und Geschlechterstudien*, No. 1+2, 201-216.
- Rudolph, Hedwig/Theobald, Hildegard/Quack, Sigrid (2001): *Internationalisierung: Ausgangspunkt einer Neuformierung der Geschlechterverhältnisse in der Unternehmensberatung?*, Discussion Paper FS I 01-102, Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung, Berlin.
- Sengenberger, Werner (1978): *Der gespaltene Arbeitsmarkt: Probleme der Arbeitsmarktsegmentation*, Frankfurt a.M./New York, Campus.
- Staute, J. (1996): *Der Consulting-Report. Vom Versagen der Manager zum Reibach der Berater*, Frankfurt a.M./New York, Campus.
- Theobald, Hildegard (2001): *Professionalisierungspolitiken im Kontext von Internationalisierung und Feminisierung – Das Beispiel der Verbände in der Unternehmensberatungsbranche*, Discussion Paper FS I 01-101, Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung, Berlin.
- Wetterer, Angelika (ed.) (1993): *Professionalisierung und Geschlechterhierarchie. Vom kollektiven Frauenausschluß zur Integration mit beschränkten Möglichkeiten*, Kassel: Jenior & Pressler.
- Wetterer, Angelika (ed.) (1995): *Die soziale Konstruktion von Geschlecht in Professionalisierungsprozessen*, Frankfurt a. M./New York: Campus.
- Wetterer, Angelika (ed.) 1992: *Profession und Geschlecht. Über die Marginalität von Frauen in hochqualifizierten Berufen*, Frankfurt a.M./New York: Campus.
- Witz, Anne (1992): *Professions and Patriarchy*, London/New York: Routledge.
- Witz, Anne/Savage, M. (1992): *The Gender of Organisation*, in: Savage, M./Witz, A. (Eds.): *Gender and Bureaucracy*, Oxford: Blackwell, 3-61.