'Personas' as a method for applying gender theory in Triple Helix constellations – experiences from two research projects

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Abstract

In focus in this paper is the use of the Persona method for applying gender theory in Triple Helix systems. Whereas such systems often are considered gender neutral, we in contrast emphasize the need for understanding the process of 'doing gender' within those constellations. The aim of this paper is to describe our experiences of developing Persona as a method for gender equality interventions within two Triple Helix constellations. The personas are fictional characters addressing issues and situations identified during initial mappings of the researched contexts. The method is used for communicating concerns, issues, needs and preferences with our participants. In our experience Persona is a useful method for visualizing identified situations and for a reframing of actors' gender awareness. The Persona method contributes to talk beyond that of the "problematic women issue" and shows a way to unsettle gender constructions.

Keywords: personas, applied gender research, critical reflective interactive research, gender equality interventions, Triple Helix

Introduction

In focus in this paper is our use of the Persona method for applying gender theory in Triple Helix systems (university-industry-government collaborations). The idea of knowledge-based infrastructures for innovation, so-called 'entrepreneurial universities' (Jacob, Lundqvist & Hellsmark, 2003; Etzkowitz, Webster, Gebhardt & Terra, 2000), is quite strong in Sweden, exemplified in extensive funding for Triple Helix systems. Although recognizing the effects such systems may have on socio-economical growth, we are addressing the need of gender awareness within those constellations. Whereas Triple Helix-based approaches are said to provide a framework for developing valuable research- and practice contributions, we in addition emphasize the importance of integrating a variety of perspectives and understandings to provide for more sustainable change processes. The reason for this is a tendency for Swedish Triple Helix support systems to preserve and reproduce unequal gender structures in organizations (Ahl, 2004; 2006). For example, gender mainstreaming efforts or by pointing out women as 'in need of remedial efforts' may contribute to a preserving of, rather than challenging of, gender constructions (Lorber, 2000; Ahl, 2006; Fältholm, Abrahamsson & Källhammer, 2010). Even if this insight is not new, it calls for new, theoretically as well as methodologically, approaches. Gender research needs to move forward, not by merely establishing and describing gender inequality, but also by actually challenging gendered structures. There is a need to develop gender equality interventions that are promoting women without reproducing gender stereotypes. For this reason, we stress an awareness of the way we think about gender as important to how we design gender equality interventions.

In parallel with the increasing development of Triple Helix systems, in Sweden gender researchers are currently trying to develop methods in order to move beyond 'armchair feminism' in innovation systems and Triple Helix constellations (see e.g. Gunnarsson & Westberg, 2007; Amundsdotter, 2009; Källhammer & Wikberg Nilsson, 2010). In this paper, based on experiences from two ongoing research projects; *The Future Factory* and *Daring gender, academic entrepreneurship*, the aim is to present and reflect upon one of the methods used in our research, *Persona.* A persona is a fictive character who illustrates issues identified during initial inquiry. The method is useful for reflecting on typical situations, for a reframing of norms and values, and for sharing various understandings among actors in Triple Helix constellations (Wikberg Nilsson, Fältholm & Abrahamsson, 2010).

In this paper, we first present the research projects, the research focus and the methodology used in the projects. Thereafter, preliminary findings and our experiences from using the method within the two research projects are explored. In this section we present our experiences of using personas, and illustrate the method with the help of two personas, one from each project. An additional persona is presented to illustrate our development of the method into 'switching gender', as a way to reframe participants' understandings of gender constructions. In the final section, we elaborate on how Personas may be a way to, not only illustrate and discuss gender inequality, but to actually challenge and – in the long run – fundamentally and sustainably contribute to a change of gender constructions.

Research projects

'The Future Factory' project is a development-oriented interactive research project in close collaboration with and between actors from industrial organizations, trade unions and young people. A short-term focus in the Future Factory project is to explore new useable collaborative approaches to organizational development and production design and a more long-term research focus is to develop theory on organizational design in an industrial context.   In the project, our research group initially explored practices within Swedish manufacturing industry with interest groups such as industry, trade unions and young people and currently are working on design solution in collaboration with and between a design team of women production engineers, systems designers, human resource managers, CEO's, industrial designers, architects, students and researchers. The project is aiming at developing a conceptual model of a future factory that promotes gender equality within the production system, at the workplace and for the workers. In this project personas are used for communicating and visualizing various perspectives between actors during activities such as seminars, focus groups and workshops.

'Daring gender-academic entrepreneurship' is an integrated gender mainstreaming and interactive research project at two Swedish universities; Luleå University of Technology and Umeå University. The project could be defined as 'a Knowledge Space' (Etzkowitz & Ranga, 2010), in which participants in a

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Triple Helix constellation are exploring how gender is constructed in their respective environments. The main purpose of the Daring Gender project is analyzing, highlighting, challenging and, in the long run, contributing to a change of participants' understandings of gender constructions. The aim of the project is to address questions of how gender equality interventions should be designed within the arena of academic entrepreneurship. Further, the aim is also to address how support systems for the commercialization of research and collaboration with industry should be designed to attract and include both women and men. In the project, in addition to exploring how discourses of academic entrepreneurship are constructed and gendered, our research aims at designing gender equality interventions. Rather than developing interventions that tend to restrict targeted women into 'entrepreneurial ghettos' (Fältholm, Abrahamsson & Källhammer, 2010), our aim is to challenge stereotypical ideas and taken-for-granted assumptions of gender and conceptions of entrepreneurship within the research context.

Research focus
In both projects the research approaches have drawn inspiration from reflective interactive research, inspired by inter alia Freire (2000). According to Freire, change is only possible through critical reflections that allows actors to become aware of alternative understandings of their situation/s and are given the opportunity to critically reflect on the situation and the structures they are in. Freire assumes from the perspective that humans are able to act upon and transform the dynamic and changeable structure that is their world.

Similar lines of reasoning are put forward within the social constructionist perspective. Within this perspective the process of 'doing gender' is seen as undertaken in social interactions that pursuits as feminine and masculine 'natures' (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Acker, 1999). Furthermore, gender inequality is said to be a result of stereotyping of women and men and taken-for-granted assumptions, values and practices that result in certain men gaining power and privilege at the expense of women and other men (see e.g. Meyerson & Kolb, 2000; Fältholm & Källhammer, forthcoming 2010). According to Acker (1999), the doing of gender within organizations may be identified and analyzed through four frames;

1) The first frame is *structures,* consisting of identifying work structures divisions of women and men, people's locations in physical space, "allowed" behaviours and power structures. Segregation in terms of gender may be physical, functional and/or hierarchical, i.e. women and men in organizations having different roles and/or doing different tasks (Baude, 1992).
2) Secondly, gender is said to be constructed and reproduced in form of *symbols, myths, beliefs and discourses*, e.g. the organizations' symbols that explain, express, reinforce, or sometimes oppose the gender structure, represented in forms of e.g. language and ideologies (Acker, 1999).
3) The third frame focuses on *interactions, relations and behaviours* that construct or reproduce gender perspectives. Gender imbalance within an organization is said to give rise to certain patterns of behaviours, strategies and beliefs, due to different conditions for women and men to act (Kanter, 1977).
4) Finally, the fourth process is a mapping of *individual identity and norms*, involving consciousness of other perspectives; e.g. what personal approaches exists, what individual understandings are there of suitable language, what cloths to wear etc.

These four frames have been used to map and contextualize our research contexts, as a starting point for our persona development and as a framework for our participants to reflect on their own understandings of gender constructions within their structures. In interactive research actors from the research contexts additionally act as co-inquirers, who reflect on their own practice, ideally reframe their understandings and participate in possible courses of action (Rasmussen, 2004). Our interpretation of reframing is for this purpose to think of other ways of doing or understanding things, to 'put on another pair of glasses' and reflect on practices through them. Our use of the method could be described as to put on bifocal lenses, and, with the help of them, critically reflect on structures and situations.

Methodology

The research presented in this paper is qualitative; drawing on interviews, observations, focus groups and workshop activities. With basis in initial inquiry we developed a number of personas. A persona is a fictional description of a person, whose characteristics are of importance for the project it is designed for (Nielsen, 2007). It is a frequently used method to focus a design process on users' needs and preferences (Cooper, 1999). Based on one of the author's previous experiences of the method in the design field, our objective have been to test, further develop and evaluate the Persona method for applied gender research. The process of developing a persona is described as iterative, consisting of mapping, contextualizing, pattern-making, persona and scenario creation and validation (Cooper, 1999; Grudin & Pruitt, 2002; 2003; Pruitt & Adlin, 2006; Nielsen, 2004; 2007). A persona consist of a body; a fictive name and an image to illustrate the character, a psyche (such as an overall attitude towards life and work), a background (g. social background, education, upbringing which influence abilities, attitudes and understanding of the world) and personal traits which brings the persona to life and makes it an engaging character rather than a flat stereotype (Nielsen, 2004). The fictional details in a persona are included in order to increase communication and commitment to the character.

Procedure

In the Future Factory project, personas are used to focus participants on identified issues and situations in the context of Swedish manufacturing industry. In this project we initially performed interviews, observations and literature studies. Based on this mapping, 3 personas were developed and scrutinized in activities with interest groups such as young people, trade unions and industrial employees and employers. In the subsequent development work with a design team, the method is used to focus the outcomes on these personas. In collaboration with this group, we have further developed the method by making a future 'ideal' persona; a character that works in the future factory. The project is ongoing and has so far involved 145 people (see Wikberg Nilsson, Fältholm & Abrahamsson, 2010).

In the Daring Gender project, personas are used to challenge gender perspectives at two Swedish universities, with the aim to raise gender awareness, initiate change in order to include both women and men, and thus contribute to equality, innovative environments and sustainable growth (see Fältholm, Abrahamsson & Källhammer, 2010). In this project, the initial mapping consisted of a statistical review of Swedish universities structures, followed by 72 interviews as well as workshop activities including 75 participants to learn and understand the current practice of doing gender within so-called 'entrepreneurial universities' (Etzkowitz et al., 2000).

Initially the research contexts were mapped and analysed with the help of Acker's (1999) model, i.e. mapping of structures; gender divisions of work, men and women's location in physical space in terms of research areas (Daring gender) or workplace tasks (the Future Factory). Our further inquiry concerned symbols and images used to explain the respective organizations, as suggested by e.g. Korvajärvi (2003). Working with personas is to focus on a group of people in a certain context and it is therefore stressed to understand the context and the people within (Nielsen, 2007). The next step was to analyze the material, since it is said that the analysis reveals patterns that consequently provide the base for a persona (Cooper, 1999). As aforementioned, our research focus on facilitating gender awareness, consequently our analysis focused on issues and situations that dealt with structures, symbols, interactions and individual's identities and norms. Subsequently, we developed a number of personas for each project, characters representing 'issues' from a gender perspective.

Until this phase in the process, based on our understanding, a persona is in itself basically a different way of presenting an empirical material, and one way for the researcher to understand the context. The next phase, however, is interacting with actors from our respective contexts; university, industry and, to some extent, society. During this phase, we present the personas to people within the contexts and discuss the characters with them. It is said that a persona development process ideally should include 'all concerned' to ensure its validity (Nielsen, 2007). There are further arguments for validation of research results by including actors from outside the research community to produce more socially robust knowledge (Novotny, Scott & Gibbons, 2001; Gunnarsson, 2007). For this reason, we discuss the personas in collaborative activities to ensure them as credible characters within the projects' contexts. This results in a continuous development of our personas as participants provide us with new insights and knowledge. A

usual procedure is that the personas are presented during a workshop and the participants are asked to reflect on the scenario. In addition to this, we have had participants developing personas, as a way to stimulate critical reflection of the researched context.

In the next section we present two of the personas used in our research and our experiences of using the method in our research. Subsequently, our development of the method into 'switching gender' is presented.

Findings

In this section we present our findings as two personas, one from each project, and describe our experiences of using the method for applying gender theory in Triple Helix constellations. After the presentation and elaboration of persona Anna and Sven, we present our experiences of using 'switching gender' to further reframe participants' awareness of gender constructions in research contexts.

Experiences from the Future Factory project - persona Anna

Persona Anna's scenario, as presented below in table 1, is based on our initial mapping of Swedish manufacturing industry. Some details are fictive, such as her name, age, and the photograph. Other details have its origin in the empiric material, for example are the quotes taken directly from our interviews.

Table 1. Presents persona Anna from the Future Factory project

"Anna"
Photo: Nicke Johansson

This is Anna, a 27-year-old woman working within the Swedish manufacturing industry. She works at an assembly line in a team of 13 people; all male apart from her. Anna thinks this is okay as she claims to always have been somewhat of a 'tomboy' as she also grew up with three older brothers. For example she learned to repair motorbikes before she started school.

At the production line, each work operation is time-constrained; during a given time Anna and her team are supposed to perform the tasks her station is assigned to. If she, or someone else, does something wrong or does not finish in time, a bell signals and the line stops. This happened to a woman working at the plant before Anna, people are still talking about '*women not being fit for the job'*. The mistake of one woman symbolizes all women's mistakes, thus Anna is determined to do well, although her short length causes her some trouble. There is also the problem with clothing. Her male sized work wear does not fit very well since Anna is small and there are no women work wears. She folds up trousers legs and sleeves, but it is difficult to work effectively.

Anna has worked at the company for 1.5 years, and she is really determined to do a good job. The job is quite simple, '*it is not like it is brain surgery'*, says Anna, and '*one learns the tasks in just a few weeks'*. Anna's manager has noted her efforts and would like Anna to get further training and thus new work tasks. However, at this company it is the members of the work team who decide who will get the training, and they have turned down Anna's application, based on the argument that no woman have done that job before.

'I have thought a lot about this, why didn't they want me for that job, when they knew I could do it? I think they felt challenged by a woman being able to do the

	same thing they do. I am so naïve, thinking they would consider it good to get a person committed to do a good job! [Laugh]' This incident has left Anna a bit puzzled, why didn't her team members suggest her for the job, and does this mean she will she stay at the factory or not? Her manager is good though, for example, he always makes sure Anna is included when there are company presentations, photograph shoots and such things, though this is not that popular among her colleagues. *'I just want to do a good job and get some appreciation for that, that's all!'*, says Anna.

As aforementioned, the story reflects some contemporary experiences of women working within male dominated structures[1] and with work tasks coded as male (see e.g. Faulkner, 2001) and sometimes additionally gender segregated (see e.g. Abrahamsson, 2002). Thus, this story addresses some of the gender issues identified in our preliminary mappings. Our experience of using persona Anna is that the participants have been troubled by the presented situation and have discussed what kind of actions to take in order to change the presented situation. Within the different interest groups where Anna has been presented, as far as we understand it, both 'she' and the scenario have been identified as credible and several participants have told of similar incidents and issues. We consider the method useful for applied gender research since we work in collaboration with actors from industry and therefore people that have the possibility to take actions for change.

In addition to discussing issues and situations presented by our personas, the participants in one workshop developed a persona that the project outcome supposedly shall 'satisfy'. Persona Svea, as she is called, illustrates a somewhat idealistic situation where gender no longer is an issue, a situation similar to ideas of a 'feministic de-gendering movement' (Lorber, 2000). The future scenario of persona Svea also reflects contemporary ideas on university-industry-government (Triple Helix) collaborations for economic and social benefits for both the region (Northern part of Sweden) and for Sweden as a whole.

In our experience, the method has shown prospects of being a tool to communicate and challenge gender constructions within the research context. For example, persona Anna has been presented and discussed with academics, industrial actors, government and students. In all of these various contexts and actors, the method has proven to be a useful tool to talk about gender without addressing the subject as 'the problematic women issue'.

Experiences from the Daring Gender project - persona Sven

Persona Sven, as presented below in table 2, is based on issues and situations identified during our preliminary mapping, as was the case for Persona Anna. Sven's story is of a somewhat stereotypical academic entrepreneur, who is active within a field dominated by men. In our mapping, we identified the structure as male dominated and Sven's behaviour and identity illustrates what we found as indicative of male academic entrepreneurs; i.e. being promoted by both sponsors and peers and with access to funding.

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[1] *16.5 percent of the labour force within Swedish manufacturing industry are women, according to Statistics Sweden (2010)*

Table 2. Presents persona Sven used in the Daring Gender project.

"Sven"
Photo: Istock

This is Sven, a thirty-nine-year old associate professor within engineering faculty at the University. He comes from a family of entrepreneurs; his father is CEO at a middle-sized company and his brother is working in UK with high-tech development.

Entrepreneurship and commercialization is hence not new for Sven, and within his research team, of fourteen men and one woman, almost everyone has a business on the side or has sold a product. Sven has a large network of companies and board members he meets on regular basis. According to him;*' To be entrepreneurial means to build bridges between academia and society, to find solution in collaboration with industry that meets market needs'.* Even though the university is promoting entrepreneurship, sometimes Sven experiences entrepreneurship as not being accepted as a university activity. Though Sven persists: "*Commercialization of research is important because of its benefits for society. Research is the raw material that needs to be processed and packed by industry. You have to highlight what is valuable and frame it in marketable words- a success can lead to regional development and job creation".*

His research team is doing very well; they obtain a lot funding and have been able to recruit many doctorate students. '*It is like its dirty to make money on research, but I think it is ok as long as it does not compete with the universities activities'*, says Sven. He thinks of academic entrepreneurship as being about doing something of value for society, such as developing businesses and new products and considers the social field a bit 'soft', not doing 'real valuable research'.

He has a family, his wife Annika works as a part-time pre-school teacher and they have two children, Johan and William. Sven considers them being quite equal, for example his ambition is to help Annika with e.g. the vacuuming, though Annika usually has finished by the time he gets home. He does not mind, after all it is he who earns most of the money and who does something valuable for society, his wife understands this. Usually Sven spends at least 60 hours at work and in addition works from his home office or is away on business trips. Still, Sven would like to have a bit more 'quality time' with his children, he used to play football himself and now his oldest son has started to play as well. Nevertheless, he did actually take parental leave when his youngest son was born, he is quite proud of having worked from home for ten whole days. This is not something the other men in his research team have done, and they often make fun of him being so 'soft'.

Our experience of using persona Sven is that 'his' scenario has raised a discussion about the paradox of being a successful academic entrepreneur, which makes it difficult to produce research articles, i.e. the measuring instrument that is presently used in Sweden for career promotion and university ranking. The so-called *third mission* for Swedish universities to collaborate with society, inform about their activities and promote useful research results (Högskolelag, 2009:45) is not valued within this system. Czarniawska and Genell (2002) recognize the paradox of company-like competitive universities that are measured and ranked through research contributions. This issue is a discussion we are able to have with our participants with the help of persona Sven.

Sven furthermore illustrates the entrepreneurial concept of inter alia doing something valuable for society, for regional growth and job creation. The entrepreneurial university discourse is quite powerful in Sweden, as Czarniawska and Genell (2002 p. 464) define; "*People speak of markets, competitions, networks and strategies, as though these concepts can be taken for granted*". In contrast to the so-called entrepreneurial discourse we in our mapping identified a considerable amount of scepticism among university employees regarding how to combine the idea of an entrepreneurial university with education and research with a critical perspective, exemplified by e.g. Jacob et al. (2003).

In our mapping of the Swedish academic entrepreneurial context, we also identified what could be called an entrepreneurial identity and behaviour, articulated as e.g. dedication to work, which is partially explained for, or excused by, the higher aim of doing something valuable for society etc. However, when considering for example dedication to work from a gender perspective, the question is if the conditions for women and men are the same. For example, in the scenario of persona Sven, he is said to have an understanding wife, who works part-time, and who is responsible for their children and their home. Our experience is that with the help of persona Sven, we can address if the conditions would be the same if the gender were reversed, e.g. the different conditions the idea of the 'entrepreneurial university' holds for women and men. Consequently, in our further development of the method and for the reason of being able to address different conditions for women and men, the next step taken in the projects has been to switch gender of the persona, illustrated in the next section.

Svens' scenario also addresses whether he is happy with the situation, articulated in his' desire for quality time with the children. The story of Sven, although illustrating a structure of male alliances, also deals with interaction aspects such as parental leave not being considered as a 'correct behaviour' for a man, illustrated in his colleagues making fun of him for being 'soft'. We believe this demonstrates arguments for some contemporary men having to deal with dual loyalties, in which the loyalty towards work usually outweighs the loyalty for home and family responsibilities (Mellström, 2006). In the initial inquiry we understood most men in our research contexts to be thinking of gender equality as something obvious, although our participants themselves say they do not always practice what they preach. Our respondents claimed to prefer to be present in their children's life, in contrast to being the absent fathers many of them says to have experienced their own fathers to have been. We believe it is important within these contexts to discuss masculinities as well as femininities, and in our experience persona Sven has been a valuable tool for such dialogues.

Experiences of 'switching gender'

An implication of using the Persona method is that images and representations, such as for example persona Sven, risk presenting gender as unitary categories (Kvande, 2003) and thereby risk reproducing gender stereotypes rather than challenging gender inequality. Therefore, during workshop activities our participants are asked to address the situations presented by the personas and discuss consequences for women and men. Whereas one single persona might add to stereotyping of gender, we present a variety of female and male identities and thus consider to be contributing to diversification of gender.

Furthermore, with inspiration drawn from the qualitative method of Memory Work (Widerberg, 1999), we have challenged the stereotypical representations by switching gender of the personas. For example, participants are presented with e.g. persona Sven, and a discussion is initiated based on his story. Subsequently, the participants are presented with persona Sara, see table 3, who is a 'female representation' of persona Sven, and asked to reflect on whether the scenario becomes different due to the switching of gender.

Table 3. Presenting a 'switched' gender persona

"Sara"
Photo: Istock

This is Sara, a thirty-nine-year old associate professor within engineering faculty at the University. She comes from a family of entrepreneurs; her father is CEO at a middle-sized company and his brother is working in UK with high-tech development.

Entrepreneurship and commercialization is hence not new for Sara, and within her research team, of fourteen men and one woman, almost everyone has a business on the side or has sold a product. Sara has a large network of companies and board members she meets on regular basis. According to her,

' To be entrepreneurial means to build bridges between academia and society, to find solution in collaboration with industry that meets market needs'.

Even though the university is promoting entrepreneurship, sometimes Sara experiences entrepreneurship as not being accepted within academia, not all accept businesses on the side and funding from industry. Though Sara persists:

"*Commercialization of research is important because of its benefits for society. Research is the raw material that needs to be processed and packed by industry. You have to highlight what is valuable and frame it in marketable words- a success can lead to regional development and job creation*".

Her research team is doing very well; they obtain a lot funding and have been able to recruit many doctorate students. '*It is like its dirty to make money on research, but I think it is ok as long as it does not compete with the universities activities*', says Sara. She thinks of academic entrepreneurship as being about doing something of value for society, such as developing businesses and new products and considers the social field a bit 'soft', not doing 'real valuable research'.

She has a family, her husband Anders works as a part-time pre-school teacher and they have two children, Johan and William. Sara considers them being quite equal, for example her ambition is to help Anders with e.g. the vacuuming, though Anders usually has finished by the time she gets home. She does not mind, after all it is she who earns most of the money and who does something valuable for society, Her husband understands this. Usually Sara spends at least 60 hours

	at work and in addition works from her home office or is away on business trips. Still, Sara would like to have a bit more 'quality time' with her children, she used to play football herself and now her oldest son has started to play as well. Nevertheless, she did actually take parental leave when her youngest son was born, she is quite proud of having worked from home for ten whole days. This is not something the men in her research team have done, and they often make fun of her being so 'soft'.

An experience of using 'switching gender' activities is that participants do not initially recognize the story. It usually takes a while before they see that the story is the same, but the gender is different. When presented with persona Sara, the participants have commented that 'she' becomes the only woman working at the department, which differentiates the story from Sven's. Thus, our experience of using Sara is the addressing of issues such as for example 'tokenism', being one or one of few in a structure dominated by the other gender, which according to Kanter (1977) may result in increased visibility; such as e.g. one woman act as a stand-in for all women and subsequently performance pressure. Another issue that can be addressed is arguments for the very symbol of an entrepreneur being a man (Ahl, 2004; 2006). An indicative example of this is the resulting identity, expressed by one of our participants as; '*Women at the university often try to defuse differences between women and men and women adapt to men's behaviour in order to be accepted'*. During our mapping, we identified what could be called a result of this; women do not want to be presented as 'female entrepreneurs' or 'female' whatever the suffix may be, in line with claims of a 'stigmatizing identity' (Ahl, 2004; Lewis, 2006; Fältholm, Abrahamsson & Källhammer, 2010). Consequently, based on our understanding the strategy for some women becomes to adopt an identity that suppresses female identifiers and to work harder to prove worthy. However, a positive effect of being a woman in a male dominated structure may be increased positive attention by people higher up in the hierarchy (Fältholm & Källhammer, forthcoming 2010).

An additional experience of using persona Sara is our participants' comments of 'Sara's' family situation, for example the question of why she has children at all if she does not take care of them, an issue that in our experience have not been discussed at all with persona Sven. Our participants consider the scenario unrealistic because of Sara's husband; who is said to work part-time and take care of the home and the children. Apparently this is an issue where gender division is obvious, amongst our participants it is not considered common that men work part-time and take on main responsibility for home and children. Another thoroughly debated issue is that 'she' has chosen to take only ten days of parental leave. Although Sweden have a very favourable parental leave that both fathers and mothers can use, it is still more common for women to take major part of it. The fact that persona Sara's 'home-service' and her short parental leave often becomes a subject for harsh discussion, which is not the case for persona Sven, reveals a lot of gendered values and norms, both for us and for our participants themselves.

For this reason, we argue that the critical reflections promoted by the switched gender of a persona contribute to a reframing of gender awareness, because our participants recognize their own – often-stereotypical norms. In our activities, we use 'switched gender personas' to highlight and discuss strategies and consequences within the research contexts. Persona Sara is a character whose story is not based on empirical data. Our experience is however that 'she' becomes a useful tool for challenging gender perspectives amongst our participants and therefore we consider the method to be one contribution to a critical reflection of current gender perspectives.

Contributions and implications

In this paper we present our experiences of Persona as a method for applying gender theory in two Triple Helix projects. The contribution is our development, experience, and continuous refinement of, the Persona method and its use. It is emphasized that awareness only is possible if actors are given the opportunity to distance themselves from the situation and the structures they are in (Freire, 2000). In our experience the Persona method is one way to critically reflect on situations and structures, and subsequently a tool to develop awareness.

An implication by using the Persona method is the risk of reproducing gender stereotypes by using them as stand-alone-objects. The personas are presented as *either* women *or* men, thus risk reproducing the dichotomy between women and men. However, in the projects we discuss various *masculinities and femininities*, which work in *a variety of disciplines* doing *a variety of tasks*, and therefore we see the Persona method as a contribution to *diversification of gender*.

In both projects we work in Triple Helix (university-industry-government) contexts, meaning that participants in the activities have different aims. For example is long-term theoretical knowledge vs. more short-term usability sometimes an issue within those contexts. In such constellations, we have experienced the Persona method to be a useful tool for dissemination of theoretical knowledge in a communicative and attractive way, or put differently; a tool that helps all participants to take on 'gender glasses'.
Our preliminary results indicate that as negative attitudes towards gender equality projects still exist, Personas seems to be a way of "tricking away" conceptions of gender discussions as threatening, useless and "feministic", in a negative sense. It is in our experience also a method that facilitates the analysis of the dynamics of practices and constructions of masculinities and femininities in organizations. However, the challenge has been to find a method that allows us to, in collaboration with the participants, move away from both individualistic and structural explanations and solutions. In this paper, therefore, drawing on Acker's model for the study of gendered processes in organizations, we have elaborated on our experiences of the Persona method as *one* way to, not only illustrate and discuss gender inequality, but to actually challenge and – in the long run –contribute to promoting change of gender awareness. Consequently, we argue that the Persona method contributes to talk beyond that of the "problematic women issue" and shows a way to unsettle gender constructions.

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