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## Article

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REGULAR ARTICLE

# A feminist poststructuralist critique of talent management: Toward a more gender sensitive body of knowledge



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**Abstract** The field of talent management (TM) has grown over the last two decades, and much theoretical and methodological progress has been made in an effort to better conceptualize the field. Despite these efforts, the construction of knowledge within TM research has ignored power and gender dynamics. In this paper, we adopt a feminist poststructuralist perspective and unveil how talent management theory is underpinned by predominant masculinist discourses that create and sustain business elites in a neoliberal world order. Based on a textual and discourse analysis of foundational texts on TM, we identify the power effects of language in shaping current TM theory. This study raises questions concerning the epistemological foundations of talent management as objective, neutral, and observable. We suggest that future researchers adopt critical methods of inquiry to ensure that gender and equity issues are interrogated within dominant talent management writings.

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## Introduction

Since the publication of McKinsey's *War for Talent* (Michaels et al., 2001), the field of talent management (TM) has been constantly growing and evolving. In that growth,

much theoretical and methodological progress has been made. The numerous special issues on talent management in leading academic journals provide evidence of its vibrant growth and reflect many attempts to better structure the field (e.g. Al Ariss et al., 2014; Collings et al., 2015; Dries, 2013; Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2017; Minbaeva and Collings, 2013). Nevertheless, while valuable work on talent management and globalization (Schuler et al., 2011; Tarique and Schuler, 2010) and comparative

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scholarship (Boussebaa and Morgan, 2008) has been published, issues of transnational significance such as gender, ethnicity/migration and equality, and critiques of capitalist developments are not considered in the scholarship (Syed and Metcalfe, 2017). The social construction of talent management has been mostly gender blind, underpinned by a masculine rhetoric. An important knowledge gap that we identified in the TM literature is a lack of critical methods of inquiry that question the epistemological foundations of talent management and the assumptions underlying TM conceptualization. We argue that a promising avenue for theoretic enquiry is the feminist poststructuralist lens. We leverage this lens to unravel the masculinist discourses that have been perpetuated in TM thinking and practice. Such an approach allows us to bring silenced voices to talent conversations in organizations (Lewis and Heckman, 2006) and could shape the direction of academic inquiry.

Through a feminist poststructuralist lens, we seek to question the normative underpinnings (Calás and Smircich, 2009) of what talent is and who is considered talented (Linstead and Thomas, 2002; Metcalfe and Rees, 2010; Metcalfe, 2008) and to deconstruct the codified TM knowledge and practices (e.g. Calas and Smircich, 1992; Fondas, 1997). We argue that an informed feminist poststructuralist critique of the discourse and assumptions which have informed the prevailing TM research agenda is necessary as TM discourse ignores gendered power dynamics by assuming the homogeneity of the workforce in its theorization. For this special issue on TM, we offer a critically reflective manuscript which questions key assumptions inherent in the TM literature to-date. This is highly important as Fardale et al.'s (2010) conceptual paper and Iles et al.'s (2010) literature review highlight the significance of political and informal processes in TM, and Minbaeva and Collings (2013) call for further research into the significance of individual factors, including gender, within the TM literature.

To meet our aim, we build arguments that seek to unravel the assumptions about what TM is and highlight the masculinist discourses that have underpinned such conceptualizations. We start by (a) fleshing out the tenets of the feminist, poststructuralist lens and demonstrating its value in challenging masculinist accounts of TM, (b) evaluating the masculinist logic of TM conceptualization through textual and discourse analysis of the foundational texts in TM, and, in light of the above, (c) highlight the need and the value of a gender-inclusive TM discourse and practices. Our research advances the theoretical foundations of contemporary TM debates and raises questions concerning the epistemological foundations of talent management as objective, neutral, and observable, and poses a task for scholars to utilize critical methods of inquiry to ensure that gender and equity issues are unveiled within dominant talent management writings.

### **A feminist poststructuralist approach to unravel TM assumptions**

In this paper, we leverage a feminist poststructuralist lens to highlight how a masculinist logic is constructed within and through language in TM foundational texts. A feminist poststructuralist lens is primarily concerned with exploring

the relationships among “discourse, gendered identities, power relations and organizing” (Ashcraft and Mumby, 2004: 108), and one of its main contributions lies in rethinking how knowledge is constructed and reproduced and to whose advantage (Calás and Smircich, 2014). The rationale of a critical gender lens is timely given current global concerns of increasing inequality (Crowley-Henry and Al Ariss, 2018), which may impact who and how talent can be acquired, developed, deployed, and retained globally. As discussed by Mumby (1996), feminist poststructuralist organization analysis has six main key tenets: (a) a critique of dominant Western forms of rationality; (b) a rejection of representational views of language in favor of a view of language and discourse as constitutive of reality and experience; (c) a questioning of any universal truths; (d) a decentering of the Western subject in favor of a subject who is fractured and discontinuous; (e) a focus on power and domination; and (f) a focus on difference and the “other” embraced in a concern for marginalized groups (Mumby, 1996, as cited in Metcalfe, 2008). In our approach, we focus on language, power, and domination to demonstrate how texts/language are not gender neutral; rather, they are underpinned by a masculinist imagery and orthodoxy that privileges men and masculinities (Butler, 1990; Irigaray, 1985).

A key focus for critical feminist scholars has been to unveil the privileging of masculinist behaviors in leadership theorizing and the dominance of cultural masculinism in studies of organization culture. Critical men’s studies have shown how “hegemonic masculinity” provides the organizing logic for patriarchy and thus privileges men in both the public and private realm (Collinson and Hearn, 1994; Connell, 1998; Hearn, 2004; Hearn and Collinson, 2018; Messner, 1997). This logic is premised on unequal power relations between men and women, and also those men who do not conform to idealized notions of hegemonic masculinity. Recent scholarship has explored the structural tendency and individualized drive for men’s transnational domination in the business and political sphere (Connell and Wood, 2005; Elias and Beasley, 2009; Hearn and Collinson, 2018). This critique is built on Connell’s earlier work which stressed that the dominance of traditional hegemonic masculinities helps legitimize men’s domination in the “neoliberal world order” (Connell, 1998) and the gendered, racialized dynamics of post-colonialism (Metcalfe and Rees, 2010).

Recent scholarly efforts have started to question the wider implications of TM by highlighting ethical concerns (Swales, 2013), organizational justice (O’Connor and Crowley-Henry, 2017), inclusivity of TM practices (Swales et al., 2014), organizational diversity (Al Ariss et al., 2014; Ng and Burke, 2005; Sheehan and Anderson, 2015), and gender and global systems (Böhmer and Schinnenburg, 2016; Festing et al., 2015; Handley, 2014; Marmenout and Lirio, 2014; Tatli et al., 2013; Van den Brink, 2011). Findings from these studies, for example, explained the prevailing “untapped female potential” in the Asia Pacific region (Tatli et al., 2013: 539) and focused on the role of networks in gendering the translation of talent management into practice (Handley, 2014). Similarly, in their review of TM, Böhmer and Schinnenburg’s (2016) developed a model that further contributes to the understanding of how global talent management (GTM) in multinational enterprises can be designed to fit lifelong career courses and to reduce talent scarcity by

increasing the deployment of female talent. Building on the work of these scholars, the feminist, poststructuralist lens that we leverage offers the possibility of questioning the current epistemic foundation of TM by addressing the role of language as a representational form for the construction of a global TM knowledge logic and offer insights into how we represent multiple signifiers of “difference” (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011; Gill et al., 2017) and “identities” (Calás and Smircich, 2009; Phillips and Hardy, 1997). This approach will help us to question the objectivity and universality of TM knowledge and to explore the possibility of other voices to demonstrate how different TM’s rhetoric might be conceptualized (Calás and Smircich, 2014).

In the method section that follows, we explain the narrative review approach that we adopted to identify the book and the articles that we chose to analyze. These works represent foundational texts in TM. We then explain the textual analysis that we performed on *War for Talent* and the discourse analysis that we conducted on selected academic articles with an aim to uncover how talent management theorizing has developed in a gender-insensitive manner and is underpinned by predominant masculinist discourses.

## Method

### Identification and selection of foundational texts in TM

We adopted a narrative literature review approach to conduct our research (Baumeister and Leary, 1997; Goodfellow, 1998). A narrative literature review “aims to develop a comprehensive understanding and critical assessment of knowledge relevant to a specific topic...potentially revealing weaknesses or problematizing approaches, theories, or claims...that warrant further research” (Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2015: 164). A narrative review is thus selective in the text that it uses, seeks to contribute toward theory development (Cronin et al., 2008; Hammersley, 2001), and is not meant to be exhaustive in nature. As such, representativeness is less crucial in compiling a sample than in some other approaches; rather, what is key is to learn as much as possible about variations in accounts (Wetherell et al., 1987; Wetherell and Potter, 1992). By conducting a narrative review, we are able to explore the different ways that TM has been conceptualized in the literature as well as gauge its theoretical underpinnings. Being a relatively young field that lacks clear conceptualization (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015; Nijs et al., 2014) and given the multiple ways in which TM has been defined, conducting a narrative review of TM rather than a meta-analysis is more adequate to help us meet our aim. A narrative review approach has been previously used in management studies to provide a critical overview of post-feminism and emerging femininities in entrepreneurship (Lewis, 2014), to examine the different ways in which work-life practices and outcomes are conceptualized and measured in the literature (Beauregard and Henry, 2009), and to understand individual-level knowledge sharing (Wang and Noe, 2010).

Starting with a focus on the foundational text of TM, we chose *War for Talent* (Michaels et al., 2001) as it is considered to be the first reference on TM and has been

identified as a foundational resource in several highly-cited articles (e.g. Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Iles et al., 2010; McDonnell, 2011; Ng and Burke, 2005; Schuler et al., 2011). Previous critical research that explores gender constructions and gendering in management have also relied on texts that are often considered management classics (e.g. Kelan, 2008; Simpson, 2012). We then moved to search for articles that have “talent” or “talent management” in their title or abstract, and we were able to identify forty articles. The articles included in this review were identified using the Web of Science and the Scopus databases as they encompass all the journals indexed in SSCI as well as all the leading journals in the management field. The identified articles were approached and screened based on three screening questions: “Does the article have a major or a minor focus on TM?”, “How is TM theorized in those articles?”, and “Is it sufficiently cited to be considered influential in shaping the TM discourse?” We operationalized these criteria by reading the title, abstract, keywords, and research purpose or research questions of each article while looking for words/concepts pertaining to TM and by considering the citation scores. We made an exception and included articles who were not highly cited if they were published in the last three years. We also included meta-reviews to trace any change in the TM discourse since the publication of *War for Talent*. Forty<sup>1</sup> key articles were selected to be included in this review and are considered to be the most influential in shaping TM theorizing.

## Data analysis

### Textual analysis

We adopted textual analysis as our analysis method in order to unravel the implicit gendering dynamics of the TM rhetoric as well as to develop a deeper understanding of which concepts *War for Talent* invoked (Kelan, 2008). The power of textual analysis lies in exploring the role of language, symbols, textual representations, and their meanings (Eagleton, 1996) and has proven useful for organizational theorists who are interested in reading practices as texts since it sees language as a central vehicle through which organizational actors construct their social realities. Furthermore, textual analysis helps unravel not only what is being said but also what is being silenced (Eagleton, 1996) while taking into account the historical context. It is very useful in identifying whose voices are presented and how these voices have shaped gendered power relations. The approach also involves examining why particular terminology is used. As the normalizing of certain phrases is embedded in everyday business language, rarely are the veiled gender implications unveiled (see also Fondas, 1997; Metcalfe and Linstead, 2003). The importance of articulating women’s voices within poststructuralist feminist employment agendas allows for a different yet valid form of understanding of their own work experiences (Calás and Smircich, 1992, 2009).

<sup>1</sup> Those articles are marked with \* in the reference list.

### Discourse analysis

Through a discourse analysis of the academic articles, we aim to question the intersections of gender, power, and masculine logics as expressed in the identified scholarly articles on TM. Potter et al. (1990) building on Foucault's notion of discourse and feminist literary theory, outline a framework for linguistic analysis which involves scrutinizing what is said in a text, in what context it is said, and how it is said. By perceiving knowledge as socially produced and contextualized, an emphasis is placed on language and discourse to show how understanding and perceptions are developed and then become accepted and reinforced in contemporary organizations (Foucault, 1971). Organization and management discourses have power implications in that they structure what one holds as true and what one acts upon. Power, therefore, is to be understood as a strategic relation of force that permeates life, and the access to and creation of power lies in its relationship to language (Foucault, 1971). Language is thus situated within societal relationships of power. Building on these "power effects" of discourse, our feminist post-structuralist position allows us to interrogate constructions of male, female, and masculinities/femininities, and how cultural masculinity is embedded in everyday organization and social practices (Collinson and Hearn, 1994).

It is important to note though that our discourse analysis offers only one possible interpretation of the readings that uncovers the underlying and often unconscious gender assumptions that shape how discourse around TM is constructed. We acknowledge that other interpretations could be possible. Such an exercise is useful in that it increases the self-reflexivity (Kelan, 2008) of TM as a discipline.

### Results

In this section, we present the main themes identified from both our textual analysis of *War for Talent* and our discourse analysis of the academic articles.

#### War for Talent

*War for Talent (WFT)*, published by Michaels et al., 2001 of McKinsey & Company in the U.S.A, is based on data from a year-long study of 77 large U.S companies and surveys from nearly 400 corporate officers and 6000 executives from the top 200 ranks in these companies. The authors further supplemented their data by conducting case studies of 20 companies that are recognized for their rich talent pool. The overarching logic throughout the text is that senior executive talent equals higher organizational performance. Michaels et al. (2001, xxiii), claim that their "research focuses on exclusively executive and managerial talent." The writing style of the text reflects "literary journalism" (Eagleton, 1996) which aims to denote the "spectacular" and "powerful" in language formation. It is this linguistic tactic used throughout *WFT* that builds urgency, excitement and momentum around TM and that helps to reinforce TM's universalizing language and logics. Building on that, we detail the (a) magic and mystique; (b) individualized, performative, and gendered language; (c) and the masculinist imagery of the TM writing as constructed and reconstructed by McKinsey in *WFT*. In our approach, we are concerned

with examining the underlying assumptions of how talent is talked about and socially constructed in the foundational text *War for Talent*.

#### The magic and mystique of TM discourse

The central trope of the book is that talent management improves organization performance. The text draws on what we call "magical"<sup>2</sup> descriptions and practices which reinforce that talent management is new and revolutionary and offers new vistas for organization leadership. The language of talent used in the text conjures a "magical" experience as it can transform lives and organizations. This is similar to the way that McKinsey alumni and clients talk about the specialist skills of consultants, the so called "McKinsey Magic" (O'Mahoney, 2016). *WFT* is successful in conjuring a "mystique" around how organizations can grow and expand and develop and retain talent through sharing "snapshots" and "soundbites" from white male leaders. Through this textual mystery/mastery, there is always a sense of urgency and the necessity of adopting TM to ensure corporate survival. The "intensification" (Hardy and Thomas, 2014) of the magic discourse is communicated globally, which is a cultural and material representation of McKinsey's consultancy practices and corporate identity.

An important aspect of the magic realism that is conjured in TM discourse is that it is a universalistic goal that all corporations will want to attain. This is important as it mirrors early theorization of HRM which also tended to have a universalistic approach (Legge, 1995). The text clearly talks about TM's importance for corporate strategy, that it is within reach, managers need and want it, and many corporate executives sometimes see or recognize it (e.g. "talent is the single gating factor for us in realizing our growth vision" (Michaels et al., 2001: 5). For example, there are several cases where the authors describe CEOs who see the "light" and then suddenly see talent, reaffirming the magic and spectacularism of the language in *WFT*. The repeating of the word "talent" in nearly every paragraph in the book help builds the urgency of organizing and managing to build talent. Using the word "talent" repetitively on every page is a key linguistic device that stresses the power and performativity of talent language and helps the "intensification" of the materiality of discourse (Hardy and Thomas, 2014).

The text, however, does not define exactly what talent is, what the characteristics of the person who embodies it are, or how talent can be embodied in the managerial role. Instead, the text builds on the assumption that the worker who has talent is abstract, disembodied, while the actuality of the concept of "talent" and the real workers are deeply gendered and embodied (Acker, 1990). Underpinning this assumption is that talent is associated with senior male executive capabilities and is reaffirmed by every case analysis. *WFT* thus represents a TM language and logic of and about elites, or what are termed the "transnational capitalist class" (Sklair, 2002). For example, McKinsey's "talent tales" only discusses senior men leading in USA

<sup>2</sup> Globally the phrase "McKinsey Magic" is used to describe the skills and impact of McKinsey organization interventions.

transnational corporations. These Davos-like Men<sup>3</sup> are primarily a white upper class elite in the global political economy who represent the aims and desires of the "Global North" (Connell, 2005; Syed and Metcalfe, 2017). The stratification and the exclusion of middle and lower level workers in the talent tales helps constitute gendered hierarchies. The focus on male leaders only reaffirm that "performing talent" and "doing talent" is doing "masculinity" work (Acker, 1990).

Further, this magic and mystery has seduced corporate America as TM has become part of the language of strategic management and HRM discourses as evidenced by subsequent academic publications on TM following the publication of *WFT*. The importance of TM is evidenced by the *American Society for Training and Development* name change to the *American Society for Talent Development*. The writers also draw on other corporate texts, notably Andy Grove who wrote *Only the Paranoid Survive*, and who coined the term "strategic inflection points." The corporate war for talent is "an inflection point," and the company's ability to attract, develop, and retain people will be a major competitive advantage in the future (Michaels et al., 2001: 2).

#### Individualized, performative and gendered TM discourse

The language of talent management in *WFT* focuses on the outcome of "doing talent management" which includes "performance improvements," "better results," "achievements," which is evident on nearly every page. The language used to support a performance ethic stresses "measurement," "control," "assertiveness," "tough," and "decisive." These descriptors are associated with male managerial behaviors and resonate with a results orientation, the measurement and transactional elements evident in Rosener's work (1990) and Schein's work on "Think Manager, Think Male a Global Phenomenon" (Schein et al., 1996, see also Collinson and Hearn, 1994). The importance of interpersonal dynamics and communication processes within corporate teams are underplayed or ignored. This is critical since when we explore constitution of human skills and their development, this nurturing is often equated with collaborative, supportive, and empathetic team behaviors which are more often associated with feminine qualities and attitudes. These feminine qualities are overlooked within logics of performance with symbolisms of war and conflict that signifies and embodies a male body. The skills needed to nurture and develop talent, and the importance of effective teamwork as a requirement in attaining corporate objectives are glossed over. Nurturing capabilities are often associated with the feminine, and in highlighting the transactional qualities associated with masculinist subjectivities, women, the feminine, are positioned as lesser. As a consequence, the conceptualization of talent management can be seen as gendered. Significantly, TM strategy and development is associated with "individual" male capacities and denounces notions of a collective or collaborative

ethic. A male-individualized ethics of leading denotes the commitment to drive organizational improvements.

Further, the McKinsey Magic discussed earlier requires from its consultant's commitment and dedication at all times with work-life balance issues glossed over, since consultants need to be visible and continuously maintain intensified work routines (see also Meriläinen et al., 2004: 550). Discussing family commitments, Michaels et al., argue the talented "...opted into these very adrenaline-packed and demanding roles...but they accept the tradeoffs" (2001: 60). The high commitment discourse illustrates the potential gendered impacts and offer few avenues to discursively resist long hours and work intensification. The performance rhetoric highlighted by stressing the "individualizing" of talent, who are the "heroic great men" of McKinsey clients, who *alone* make a difference and drive performance. This further downplays the importance of team development and collaborative environment (see Collinson and Hearn, 1994). As a consequence, the conceptualization of talent management is aligned with cultural practices that reinforce dominant prescriptions of hegemonic masculinity.

#### Masculinist imagery discourse

The fact that all the senior executives cited are men supports the idea that talking about talent and doing talent in the international political economy is a warring domain reserved for men (e.g. Mike Ruetters, EMC; Daniel Vasella, Novartis AG; Julian Kaufmann, AOL Time Warner Inc.; John Hagel, 12 Entrepreneur; Douglas Warner III, J.P. Morgan Chase and Co.; Frank Cicutto, National Australia Bank). The imagery of war and conflict is indicated in the title, and the war metaphor is a dominant theme throughout the text, particularly in Chapter 6. Phrases such as "battle," "Battle of Britain," "the war rages," and "aggressive" reaffirm that war for talent is a male domain. Enron Chairman Kenneth Lay stated, "The whole battle going forward will be for talent" (Michaels et al., 2001: 2). The implication is that organizations need to be "battle ready." They draw on the Battle of Britain Royal Air Force Squadron Leaders strategy whose performance was measured in accordance to the ranks (A, B, and C) of fighter pilots. TM is concerned with the A grade, the top talent. This battle urgency, *WFT* argued, could be adopted by corporations so that performance is always measured and controlled by senior elite, A-grade executives, and targeted in key battles (markets). The "performance judgment" lens relates to transactional dimensions of work and is associated with stereotypically masculinist behaviors previously mentioned. In their description of Lou Wexnor, they describe him as "going to war with himself" (2001: 19), as he sought out advice from senior male leaders including Jack Welch and Stephen Spielberg. Leaders need to make "tough decisions," "tough judgements," and "pump talent" into the organization and "hunt for talent" (2001: 70).

The importance of military and war metaphors has been a defining feature of critical leadership and organization studies and highlights how principles of hegemonic masculinity are embedded in organization arrangements (see Collinson and Hearn, 1994; Hearn and Collinson, 2018). This creates gendered work hierarchies and gendered power relations. TM writing thus privileges the masculine and

<sup>3</sup> The term "Davos Men" was coined by the Economist in the 1990s which relates to the annual meeting in January organized by WEF which brings together senior executives, economists and politician's who are predominantly men.

denounces and closes off feminine subjectivities. Within this frame, having talent and exercising talent judgments is aligned with “heroic” male leadership, and the “hard” and “tough” business environment is a male domain. The gender subtext of the *War for Talent*, the mystique, and the rational and impersonal reaffirm a dominant masculinist framing of organizing and executive decision making, and of writing about talent and talented masculinist organizations. A focus on control and organizing control is relevant to understanding constructions of masculine subjectivity (Collinson and Hearn, 1994).

## Uncovering prevalent discourses in academic publications

### Lack of clarity and underdeveloped TM construct

To date, eighteen years following the publication of *War for Talent*, and despite the significant interest by both academics and practitioners in the field, confusion and a lack of clarity regarding the talent management construct still prevails in the literature (Collings and Mellahi, 2009). The discourse around TM highlights the inconsistency in its definition (Ashton and Morton, 2005; Lewis and Heckman, 2006), its conceptual boundaries (Collings and Mellahi, 2009), and its overall goals (Lewis and Heckman, 2006). In addition, the lack of a theoretical perspective (Al Ariss et al., 2014) and data to support the various claims made by practitioners (Lewis and Heckman, 2006) further contributes to the lack of clarity regarding the extent to which TM benefits the organization (Swales, 2016).

Despite this lack of clarity, the majority of articles endorse Collings and Mellahi’s (2009: 304) definition of strategic talent management:

as activities and processes that involve the systematic identification of key positions which differentially contribute to the organization’s sustainable competitive advantage, the development of a talent pool of high potential and high performing incumbents to fill these roles, and the development of a differentiated human resource architecture to facilitate filling these positions with competent incumbents and to ensure their continued commitment to the organization.

From a feminist standpoint, we are concerned by this definition and will highlight in the next sections how it has led to an (a) elitist, and exclusive discourse that has reinforced a (b) masculinist and individualized logics that stress on the (c) commodification of people within a utilitarian and performative rhetoric, and has (d) glossed over gender, diversity and inclusion issues. Through our following discourse analysis, we seek to urge scholars and practitioners to account for gender, diversity and inclusion issues while further developing the TM construct and to shed away from a utilitarian, masculinist, elitist, and performative discourse that is currently prevalent in TM theorizing.

### TM’s exclusivity and the elitist discourse

The most controversial issue in the TM literature is centered around inclusive or exclusive approaches to talent management (Collings and Mellahi, 2009). An “inclusive” approach entails providing all employees with opportunities

to develop their knowledge and skills. In contrast, the “exclusive” approach to TM involves differentiating and focusing on high performing employees at executive levels and has been extensively discussed, supported, and adopted in the TM literature (e.g. Lewis and Heckman, 2006; Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Farndale et al., 2010; Tarique and Schuler, 2010), but rarely problematized. TM scholars argue that the exclusive approach is what differentiated TM from traditional HRM (Collings and Mellahi, 2009). Indeed, in their meta-review on TM, Vaiman and Collings (2013) asserted that “although there is not yet consensus on definitions of TM, we are beginning to understand that decisions around TM systems often reflect beliefs around inter alia, the level of exclusivity versus inclusivity of talent” (p. 1737). This claim has been further supported by Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen’s (2016) most recent review that highlighted that the majority of the research that they reviewed ( $n=96$ ) on TM was based on an exclusive approach. The organizing logic of TM is thus built on elitist ideology and all the benefits this ideology accrues or removes. Scholars have wholeheartedly accepted a stratifying ethic, but they have rarely considered the long-term impacts of organization development and the mantras previously followed. An inclusive HRM strategy building on the talents of all has fallen by the wayside.

For example, when we explore the underlying assumptions of Collings and Mellahi’s definition (2009), one will find that their model of TM is premised on elite performers, concerned with stratifying and organizing people, and is underpinned by a functionalist understanding of the firm with a differentiated focus on strategic rather than non-strategic positions. Their simple model identifies the components of TM as inputs into a system, and outputs are premised on organization performance. Specifically, the authors discuss the “development of the talent pool” which alludes to the design of “a differentiated HR architecture” (p. 304, 308, 309, 311), but they maintain their model is, in fact, for “organizational elites” (Collings and Mellahi: 304). This elitist discourse is also visible and normalized in many of the analyzed articles. For example, Iles et al. (2010) point out that TM’s resources are geared and leveraged toward selected elites and key employees within the organization. Similar thoughts were shared by Vaiman et al. (2012) and DeBoeck et al. (2018) who view pivotal talent as central to the efficiency of TM decisions and organizational performance, further supporting the finding made by Collings et al. (2015) that most of the articles published on TM “agree that the distinguishing feature of TM is its focus on pivotal positions and employees (i.e. high potentials and high performers), a phenomenon also referred to as ‘workforce differentiation’ (p. 274).

This workforce differentiation (Huselid and Becker, 2011) or what we can call workforce segmentation is the result of the focus on organizational elites as the targeted subjects for TM interventions. For example, in their study on TM and HRM in multinational companies in Beijing, Iles et al. (2010) note that the exclusive approach to TM is not title- or position-based, but instead, it is based on employee segmentation or differentiation of a particular segment of the workforce. This segmentation was also found in Thunnissen et al. (2013) review on TM that highlighted that the “exclusive approach to talent as a subject, is based on segmentation” (p. 1750), further supporting the finding

of [McDonnell et al. \(2017\)](#) that described the difference between HRM and TM by contrasting each of their focus, i.e. HRM is more concerned with promoting egalitarianism, whereas TM emphasizes segmentation.

Furthermore, the elitist approach that underpins TM logic has been mostly seen to benefit white male incumbents and remains homogeneous with regards to the corporate elites' nationalities ([Mellahi and Collings, 2010](#)). This is highly problematic to female talent and other minorities within the organization. For example, [Festing et al. \(2015\)](#) found that an elite approach to TM is less favorable to female talent and puts them at a disadvantage. Along the same lines, [McDonnell et al. \(2017\)](#) go further and raise key questions regarding this elitist approach: "is an elitist TM program needed and how can it be effectively communicated to the workforce? to what extent is the program free of bias (e.g. gender), and does it effectively differentiate between talent and popularity?" (p. 106). This questioning of the elitist approach to TM was also discussed by [Swales \(2016\)](#) who noted that "elite TM can be viewed as an organizational strategy that uses hierarchical classifications to create and maintain differences and distinctions between employees, talent pool members, line managers, and senior managers" (p. 351). This elitist and exclusive discourse has gendered, raced, and classed impacts and implications for TM theorization and practice. We elaborate further below.

#### TM's individualized and masculinist discourse

TM logic and organization is premised on the skills and capacities of senior male executives. [Collinson and Hearn \(1994\)](#) highlighted that male working relations reflected individualized working arrangements, in contrast to collaborative work ethics by women. The social construction of TM thus stresses an individualized conceptualization of TM as a strategic role: who is designated as talented and who can do TM. As TM is seen as a property of elite leaders, the subsequent talent identification is considered to be an individualized process. This individualization reflects marketized notions of the ideal worker who is judged on the value that they create; this value system has been reported to embody male worker characteristics which stress contractual relations. This individualism undermines collaboration and teamwork dynamics which are often associated with female and feminine characteristics ([Kerfoot and Knights, 1998](#)), and thereby downplays any notion of developmental humanism ([Hearn and Collinson, 2018; Messner, 1997](#)).

As previously discussed, [Collings and Mellahi's \(2009\)](#) model, similar to McKinsey's theorizing is exclusive. This theorizing negates any cultural sensitivities associated with gender, diversity, and cultural inclusion. To reaffirm the gender-neutral logic, the authors stress the importance of "individual contribution," "individual worth," "individual talent." They state that "central to our theoretical development is the idea in building organizational performance, organizations first have to focus on individual performance" (p. 310). The authors' organizing logic reaffirms a discourse of individualism and negates collaborative and collective endeavors in strategy deployment. The authors argue that a talent system includes "higher performers," "pivotal talent positions," and "not all employees" (2009, p. 306). Here, the differential character is defined as "strategic"

versus "non-strategic" jobs and high performing individuals in strategic roles who can add "value," implying that an organization's leadership—not its HR function—should focus on a few "individuals" who can deliver measurable financial returns (see also [Becker and Huselid, 2006](#)). This differential HRM architecture classifies and stratifies, accords value, and lesser than value—with strategic TM—as being distinct and separate from, but positioned at the highest level, over strategic HRM. As such, the development of a differentiated HRM architecture is needed to facilitate the filling of key positions with competent incumbents ([Al Ariss et al., 2014; Hartmann et al., 2010; McDonnell et al., 2010](#)). This differential HRM architecture classifies workers with respect to being valuable and less valuable and negates current discourses of inclusion and diversity.

The gendered nature of work at senior level positions reiterates the social construction of gender within the context of power arrangements and asymmetries, resulting in a gendered TM hierarchical structure. [Festing et al. \(2015\)](#) conceptualize gender-biased TM practices, according to [Maier \(1999: 70\)](#) as embodying "values, characteristics, and qualities more commonly associated with one sex than the other". The societal norm has contended for a long time now the traditional gendered division of labor whereby men specialize in paid employment and women specialize in unpaid family work. This is not just premised on the organization level. Difference and inequality is framed at the global level and is embedded in institutional processes at state level. Therefore, organizations and respective practices are often considered as more male-oriented, i.e. more in line with stereotypical masculine values such as aggressiveness, competition, status-orientation, hierarchy, and control ([Maier, 1999](#)). This gender inequity infiltrates through the organizational system and impacts TM practices, including the persistence of gender stereotypes, biases in recruitment and selection processes ([Davidson and Burke, 2004](#)), few female role models and limited training opportunities ([Wirth, 2001](#)).

In sum, the preceding discussion has illustrated that the language of the pioneering TM publication by McKinsey has succeeded in normalizing TM ideas and social practices around a masculine rhetoric and has been followed by an extensive practitioner literature on talent management that tends to be very prescriptive and overlooks issues such as class, gender, power, and ethics ([Swales, 2013](#)). The dominant discourses around talent management are thus framed by a masculinist ethic and logic. Indeed, it has been argued that hegemonic masculinities are promoted by many global institutions (see for example, [Elias and Beasley, 2009; Hearn, 2004](#)). Transnational business masculinities represent an elite group of men who liaise through global male networks and constitute and communicate the imagery and ethos of the cultural representations of talent and the types of talent that are valued and being evaluated. Against this backdrop, [Björkman et al. \(2013\)](#) recommend that organizations should ensure that they "consider the potential long term implications of identifying talent, and to counterbalance the focus on top talent' with approaches that encompass diversity and are more inclusive than very elitist systems" (p. 210). Similarly, [Tansley \(2011\)](#) argues that diversity of thought and how differently people operate is the most important talent that will allow the organization to develop in the future.



### Commodification and performative utilitarian logic

Similar to the *WFT* discourse, a performance discourse is a central tenet in the deliberations and arguments of the TM philosophy that stress the importance of acquiring knowledge of the key “individuals” who will “make a difference” (Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Cooke et al., 2014; Schuler et al., 2011; Walsh and Taylor, 2007). This performance discourse is discussed by Al Ariss et al. (2014) who noted that TM is increasingly linked to HRM practices in organizations with an end goal of increasing business performance. This idea is further supported by the review carried by Thunnissen et al. (2013) who found that “talent refers to those employees who rank at the top in terms of capability and performance and who make a significant difference to the current and future performance of the organization” (p. 1750). In addition to having TM’s conceptualization that reflects a performance-driven approach, the discourse also stresses the importance of building and attaining an organizational competitive advantage through TM practices (Bhatnagar, 2007; Hughes and Rog, 2008; Khilji et al., 2015; Stahl et al., 2012; Thunnissen, 2016; Tymon et al., 2010). For example, Tarique and Schuler (2010) discuss the importance of maximizing organizational talent as a unique source of competitive advantage. Similarly, McDonnell et al. (2010) and Hartmann et al. (2010) highlight that the systematic identification of key positions in an organization will significantly contribute to its competitive advantage.

Further, Collings and Mellahi (2009) describe that “the focus of talent management systems should be on high potential and high performing employees operating in key roles and not on all employees in the organization” (p. 306). Such an approach, they argue, will facilitate a more deliberate utilization of organization resources” (p. 306). The underlying logic of this deliberation is a utilitarian rhetoric that seeks to maximize organizational performance through adopting TM practices that leverage top talent and resources. This rhetoric was further discussed by Meyers and Van Woerkom (2014) who refer to TM as “the systematic utilization of HRM to attract, identify, develop, and retain individuals who are talented” (p. 192). This utilitarian and performative approach, thus, commodifies people and disregards any considerations of gender and inclusivity.

### TM’s gender invisibility discourse

An additional way in which we can unveil masculine, masculinist and masculinities as a social organizing logic and practice inherent in TM theorizing is the way in which gendered codes are silenced, glossed over, and rendered as insignificant. Current debates do not delegitimize totalizing TM masculinist regimes but offer short extracts which show some understanding of the epistemological implications if one readily accepts the “magic realism<sup>4</sup>” of exclusive TM discourse. Taking a closer look at the TM literature, the debate around gender was largely absent throughout our readings with for some exceptions (e.g. Böhrer and Schinnenburg, 2016; Daubner-Siva et al., 2017; Deery, 2008; Festing et al., 2015; Handley, 2014; Marmenout and Lirio, 2014; Tatli et al., 2013; Van den Brink, 2011). Some scholars

expressed concerns about exclusive talent management from an ethical and organizational justice standpoint in the business and management literature (e.g. O’Connor and Crowley-Henry, 2017; Swailes, 2013). Dries (2013), for example, explains that “an exclusive and output-oriented approach to talent management is more likely to fit well in an organization with a meritocratic, competitive culture and an up-or-out promotion system than in an organization that promotes egalitarianism and diversity” (p. 12). These shy attempts to address gender and inclusivity in the talent management literature have unveiled only glimpses of how gendered TM and organizational practices can have a detrimental effect on female talent and other marginalized groups. With the exception of the studies mentioned above, the identification of talent is typically portrayed in the literature as a neutral and normative activity that is free of biases where those with the most promise will get the best chances to rise to the top. In sum, gender-invisibility (de)sexes and homogenizes the employee’s identity.

The TM literature has also expanded to include articles focused on Global Talent Management (GTM). We were hoping that these articles would capture this variation in the gender landscape across contexts but discussions around GTM remain mostly gender blind and ignore other relevant social policy issues relevant to our time (e.g. immigration, migrants, refuge, etc.). The GTM literature constitutes and reconstitutes TM as representing and embodying elitism, with its scholars writing about the challenges that MNCs from the global north face while unknowingly serving the transnational capitalist class. For example, Schuler et al. (2011), Scullion et al. (2010), Stahl et al. (2012), Tarique and Schuler (2010), and Vaiman et al. (2012) point to some forces and shapers that pose some challenges for GTM. All discuss the changing demographic landscape, but the discourse around changing demographics remains gender neutral and reduces the discussion to a shrinking and aging population in developed economies versus a young and expanding population in the developing world. Similarly, when discussing demographic challenges in Europe, Collings et al. (2011), refer to the challenge related to the retirement of “baby boomers,” and the challenge of meeting millennials’ expectations, without any discussion of migrant populations, for example. Only Al Ariss et al. (2014) highlighted the importance of linking TM to topics skilled migration and diversity management.

### Discussion and avenues for future research

We have shown the critical politics of power/knowledge production that swoop and swirl around ideas of TM, TM consultancy, and TM as strategy in order to problematize the “disciplinary affects” and power of the many discourses that marginalizing women and those who do not live up to the ideals of dominant hegemonic masculinity (McDowell, 2014). What is important for the future of TM theory and critiques of political economy is that critical feminists’ academic authority, as well as other critical standpoints are considered, not just to make visible our critical positioning within the structure of power, but to radicalize and re-imagine more configurations of organizing, organization, and management behaviors which are increasingly relevant in

<sup>4</sup> Magic realism is a literary genre that combines magic and reality and become fantastical.

these precarious times (Standing, 2014). It is also a concern for HRM scholars and strategists that TM presents a key gear change in human development and classifies and segments workers akin to the *Hunger Games*. HR Differentiation is now a normalizing cry from consultants, and it is at odds with the soft characteristic of HRM—developmental humanism (Legge, 1995)—the philosophies of human and sustainable development. We extend our discussion to further (a) challenge the basic tenets of the TM discourse and (b) unravel the power of management consultancies. We conclude by considering avenues for future research.

### Challenging the basic tenets of the TM discourse

TM language is imbued with imagery of maleness and of constructing male identity work. The processual and collaborative dimensions of TM dynamics are often under-investigated. These latent meanings create and sustain gender work/social hierarchies and legitimize forms of subordination and domination. This linguistic framing (Eagleton, 1996; Fondas, 1997) permits the TM imaginary to become embedded and institutionalized within the collective culture which, as we have demonstrated, is constructed within masculinist discourses. The way in which TM is conceptualized equates talent and organizational performance with maleness; these two things are not synonymous. By making them synonymous, we fail to recognize the other embodiments of talent and the diversity of voices and continue to privilege men and masculinity. By ignoring the diversity of voices and different identities, the text legitimizes the preeminence of a masculine discourse that dominates TM theorizing. Indeed, the social sciences have traditionally been conceptualized without the consideration of gender, race, class, and sexuality (Lykes and Stewart, 1986), and TM is no exception.

The ideas and logic of TM have been normalized as a managerial/organization prerogative, part of everyday HRM discourse, and the gendered, raced, and classed processes and effects of TM philosophy have not been considered as part of the debate for strategy enhancement. We suggest that this oversight has created the structures and the regime for the exercise of the transnational capitalist class, specifically transnational business masculinities. On the other hand, transnational business feminism is based on business case scenarios for gender equality (Roberts, 2015, 2016) and highlights how organizations use aspects of feminism “selectively,” and at “selective times” to address particular configurations of power abuse in diverse locales. For instance, Hollywood scandals around the sexual harassment of women and the Plaza fire disaster in Pakistan are examples where oppressive practices were called to account for their adverse effects. The way in which power in transnational business feminism and transnational business masculinities are played out in contemporary organization strategy is often linked to “gender equality as smart economics” (World Bank, 2012; Roberts, 2015, 2016).

Thus, as TM scholars, we find it important to unveil dominant masculinist discourse and challenge the basic tenets of TM in order to make TM more relevant and representative of the current employee demographics and business imperatives in various contexts. We argue for the need to

question the prevalent masculine norms and epistemologies that underpin conducting and writing TM research, as we have demonstrated how gender inequalities and gendered powered dynamics are still at work in the contemporary analysis of organizations. Hence, we call on scholars to move away from a positivistic approach to writing TM to one that acknowledges the pervasive influence of gender in the TM discourse and takes into account the experiences of women and other gender minority groups at the workplace. In sum, we have an epistemic concern to try to push forward a more feminist approach to the writing of TM.

We now consider the role of management consultancies and their power in creating business knowledge and highlight the contextualization and historicization of TM logics in order to inform future HR corporate policy.

### Unraveling the power of management consultancies

An important aspect of feminist poststructuralist analysis is to explore the socio-material and historical construction of knowledge. A central feature of the field is that management consultants have helped to constitute TM knowledge, specifically McKinsey. McKinsey is a management consultancy formed in 1930 and has operations in 43 countries. Technical associates and partners are predominantly men and have largely been recruited from the “male” MBA program (average 80% of MBA students have been men over the last 60 years). Research has shown that MBA programs reinforce white, upper class “cultural masculinism” (Lewis, 2010) and rarely addresses diversity and difference in curricula. The socio-cultural and educational background of consultants are often white males educated in elite USA colleges. Although practitioner focused, the *War for Talent* was written by Harvard graduates and McKinsey succeeded in conjuring a global mystique around TM, equaling, if not overtaking *In Search of Excellence* by Tom Peters and Waterman (1982), which was foundational to HRM theorization and highlighted that corporate success was premised on managing organization culture. In creating the dominant discourse of TM, McKinsey promotes a business identity that has “mastered” TM, and that McKinsey consultants are best positioned to advise corporate executives on how to do TM.

However, the global power that consultancies can wield needs unraveling (Beck, 2008). Business strategy is being defined by white male Western leaders who have been educated in leading (and often predominantly white) universities and capitalize on their networks when leaving university. Historically, consultancies have focused on strategy advice to the private sector; however, their position and status in the global political economy has seen them expand into new ventures with assignments attained in worldwide governments.

This shift is significant as McKinsey, especially, has considerable power in directing multiple masculinist versions of thought leadership in their global operations as they control strategizing and management fashions and curate “how their clients think” (see Iles et al., 2010). For example, Suddaby and Greenwood (2001) explain the power that McKinsey has in the global political economy by describing the way they “colonize” (i.e. the way in which management

consultancies embed the knowledge in institutions and global production networks) and “commodify” management knowledge (i.e. involves the codification, abstraction and translation of management knowledge). Management consultancy organizations are thus positioning themselves as either “co-producer” or “creator” of talent management knowledge. The informal way in which McKinsey weaves power through global networks and reasserts their power over the construction of management knowledge represents gendered relations of power. These networks and their “good old boy” fraternity of men in and outside the McKinsey organization favors “homo-sociality” (Collinson and Hearn, 1994), which excludes and subordinates women, other men that are not deemed equal. Understanding how business knowledge is created and communicated is vital, and it is necessary to unveil the interests and privileges that form the power in diverse organizational groups.

## Conclusion and avenues for future research

Despite the rapid growth of the TM field, current debate regarding both the understanding of TM and its conceptual boundaries still prevails (Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Lewis and Heckman, 2006; McDonnell et al., 2012, 2017). In our paper, we contribute to that debate by providing a feminist, poststructuralist analysis of leading TM text and articles. Our aim is to highlight the assumed, gendered assumptions and hegemonic power relations that are discursively produced in the TM literature. By adopting a feminist poststructuralist lens and leveraging a textual and discourse analysis approach, we offer a critique on the gendered nature of TM research that remains dominated by exclusivity, individualization, performativity, and masculine attributes, making it clear that many voices and experiences remain marginalized in the TM discourse.

Analyzing TM from a feminist poststructuralist lens opens up the space to integrate gender and difference considerations within TM conceptualization as the field of TM matures. This lens introduces an alternative view of TM that challenges prior knowledge and questions whether the status-quo conceptualization of TM can stand alternative ways and lenses of validating the TM knowledge. Alternative examples include (a) conducting a feminist analysis of the epistemological assumptions which underlie different ways of knowing and of understating women’s experiences in the TM field, (b) examining and interpreting the methodological approaches to studying TM with a consideration to feminist ideals (i.e. challenging the norm of objectivity that assumes that the subject and object of research can be separated from one another), (c) making use of Derrida’s (1976) concept of deconstruction to further problematize the current language of TM and reclaim the absent one, and (d) continuously and reflexively attending to the significance of gender and gender asymmetry in TM research.

Through our feminist critique, we take a first step toward creating a space for the inclusion of the voices of those who feel excluded from the TM discourse and try to highlight the factors that alienate them. Focusing on women’s voices is a “necessary step” (Calas and Smircich, 1992) as part of poststructuralist feminist attempts to “unveil” feminine sensibilities in contemporary descriptions of organizing TM.

This feminist approach helps us to unravel how organizations are “gendered and with what consequences” (Calas and Smircich, 1992: 227). We feel that a critical lens that encourages a diversity of voices, critical dialogue, and controversy will only serve to further advance the TM field. We argue that TM theorizing is still developing and that we must continuously question, reexamine, and explore new avenues for conceptualization.

Future investigations could explore how the exclusive and elitist TM concept is aligned with global formations of inequalities. While our focus has been gender, intersectional processes that appreciate how multiple signifiers of difference may prove a promising avenue of inquiry since TM researchers explore global HRM systems. This global lens will need to incorporate the implications of the “gendered geographies of power,” i.e. that which involves selecting the spatial term “geographies” to capture our understanding that gender operates simultaneously on multiple spatial scales and across (trans)national terrains (McGovern, 2007) and how space shapes discourses and the materialization of talent ideas and embodied experiences. Spatial analysis of TM is a promising theoretic lens that could strengthen recent research which aims to address contextual factors in shaping management and organization. Through considering gendered geographies of power, we seek to encourage future research to approach TM from the vantage point of the ongoing struggle in the global political economy, adding to or challenging the dominance of Eurocentric, positivistic, and masculine analytical paradigms that largely rest on micro-processes of organization and managerial behavior (Metcalf and Woodhams, 2012). Further, representations of gender, diversity, and difference call for critical self-reflection and examination of the dominant discourses, geographical power relations, and governance regimes in the territories that we investigate (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

Some potential questions to consider for future research are outlined below:

How could using a feminist poststructuralist lens expand the TM literature to include and incorporate HRM/HRD policy issues related to gender discrimination, bias, and prejudice? Through which discursive processes does TM emerge and in what kinds of contexts? How could our reading of the discursive positioning of TM allow us to explore the idea of agency within the TM practice? How are the identities and knowledge construction of the Western world influencing how we understand TM practice? To what extent, how, and with what consequences is management knowledge created by consultancies continuously reaffirming global relations of economic power?

We hope that our feminist critique as well as the questions raised will help both scholars and practitioners rethink talent management practices and urge them to look beyond neo-liberal approaches to reimagine talent management that is gender inclusive, and to encourage inquiry that reflects the contextual complexities of gender and talent management priorities.

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