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Mobilizing master narratives through categorical narratives and categorical statements when default identities are at stake[AQ: 1]

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Abstract

In research interviews, interviewees are usually well aware why they were selected and in their narratives, they often construct 'default identities' in line with the interviewers' expectations. Furthermore, narrators draw on shared cultural knowledge and master narratives that tend to form an implicit backdrop of their stories. Yet, in this article, we focus on how some of these master narratives may be mobilized explicitly when default identities are at stake. In particular, we investigate interviews with successful female professionals from diverse geographical contexts. We found that the interviewees deal with challenges to their 'successful professional'-identities by drawing on categorical narratives or categorical statements. As such, the interviewees talk into being a morally ordered gendered worldview, thus making explicit gendered master narratives about their societies and workplaces. In general, this article shows that categorical narratives and statements can bring – the typically rather elusive – master narratives to the surface and that these can thus contribute to the narrators' identity work.

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Introduction

A decade ago, the 'centrality of narrative as a privileged locus for the negotiation of identities' was already widely accepted (De Fina et al., 2006: 16), and research that illustrates how telling stories, in particular narratives of personal experience, forms an 'important means by which we communicate this sense of self and negotiate it with others' (Linde, 1993: 3) is vast. From the currently generally accepted social constructionist perspective in discourse analysis, identity is regarded as a construct that interlocutors talk into being in every single stretch of talk and it is pluralized, as interlocutors can construct a wide variety of locally emergent identities. In spite of this endless potential, narrators typically construct not just *any* identity: when telling a story, narrators tend to present themselves as good people 'who behave[s] correctly' (Linde, 1993: 31). Constructing such good identities may require extensive discursive work. For example, narrators' identities may be challenged by other interlocutors who are present in the storytelling context, as has been extensively illustrated for collaborative tellings (see Georgakopoulou, 2007). Of course, this may also be the case in narratives that are obtained through research interviews, which we regard as 'interactional events' instead of as 'artificial social encounters' (De Fina, 2009: 237). This not only means that we incorporate the contributions of the interviewers into our analyses – as these form a crucial part in the process of the construction of meaning (Holstein and Gubrium, 2003) – but also that we take the implications of the research interview as a sociocultural practice into account.

In particular, this implies that it is important to realize that interviewees are usually well aware why they were selected for a research interview and that this already makes relevant certain identities that interviewees often orient to, in one way or another, in the interview itself (Van De Mieroop, 2011). These can then be considered the 'default identities', as they are generally recognized as being relevant to a particular context and participants in talk are normatively expected to orient to them (Richards, 2006: 60). Just like in other, 'real world'-contexts such as the classroom or the medical practice, participants more often than not tend to construct such default identities (e.g. teacher or pupil). It is of course important to note that these should not be regarded as monolithic, fixed identities, but instead they are highly personal constructions which interlocutors may shift in and out of in relation to the local interactional context, while they may simultaneously engage in many different kinds of other identity work. Nevertheless, we argue that also in research interviews, in which participants are not only expected to enact certain discourse identities (Zimmerman, 1992) – namely, that interviewers ask questions and interviewees answer these – the interlocutors also orient to particular default identities on the situated or transportable identity level (Zimmerman, 1992). These identities are

usually somehow made relevant prior to the interview, sometimes even in the form of an explicit account of why the interviewee was selected, as well as during the interview due to the interviewers' identity projections upon the interviewees. And just like a teacher's professional identity may be undermined when a pupil questions the teacher's expertise, an interviewee's default identity may be challenged by the interviewer. In this article, we particularly focus on such cases in which the interviewees' default identities are at stake.

Of course, there are many ways in which such identity challenges can be dealt with by interlocutors, but we focus on one particular tendency that we found in our data, namely, that interviewees explicitly mobilize master narratives in their stories. As research has shown, narratives are not only embedded in their local, interactional context, but also within the wider, sociocultural context. When formulating a story, narrators 'situate that experience globally' by drawing on cultural knowledge (Schiffrin, 1996: 168), which, among others, includes master narratives or 'big D' Discourses. These can be defined as 'socially accepted associations among ways of using language, of thinking, valuing, acting, and interacting' (Gee, 1999: 17). Of course, master narratives should not be regarded as deterministic ideologies (Kiesling, 2006: 266), as they can change, be challenged and countered (Andrews, 2004). Furthermore, what is – and is not – regarded as *socially* accepted is a matter of local negotiation, as different social groups may consider particular ways of thinking as generally accepted, while other groups may not. Hence, making a '*tout court* distinction' between what is a master narrative and what is a counter-narrative is often quite difficult (Bamberg, 2004: 353) and it tends to be an etic, rather than an emic, endeavor (Clifton and Van De Mieroop, 2016).

Such master narratives are often quite elusive, as they are considered as the shared backdrop against which narrators sketch their stories but which is rarely made explicit in the interaction itself. This is why various means to tap into these generally shared ways of thinking about the world have been suggested (see for example, De Fina, 2013; Georgakopoulou, 2013). However, in our dataset, we observed that narrators regularly made their ways of interpreting how the world works explicit. This not only offered an interesting insight into the ways in which interlocutors constructed these discourses and how they related them to the local interaction, but it also struck us (1) that this tended to happen at moments during which the interviewees' default identities were challenged and (2) that these master narratives were formulated as categorical narratives and categorical statements. In this article, we aim to explore in detail how these master narratives are mobilized in the interviewees' stories and how they function in the local interviewing context. For this, we draw on a geographically widespread, yet thematically similar, dataset of interviews that is described in the following section, after which we present detailed analyses of a few selected extracts.

Data and method

The data for this article comprise 36 semi-structured interviews with women employed in top positions in various organizations. Central themes of all these interviews, which were initiated by the interviewers in the course of the interactions, were the interviewees' professional success as well as, and in relation to, the fact that they were women. The interviewers probed for these topics by asking for the interviewees' views on women in

the workplace in general, as such typically eliciting argumentative discourse, while also inquiring about their personal experiences related to this topic, which typically resulted in the formulation of various types of narratives.

The interviews were conducted over the last 9 years in three different geographical contexts, namely, in Croatia, India and Belgium.[1] Even though it is clear that these three datasets cannot be considered as globally representative at all, the similarity of the strategies with which the interviewees from these different contexts, each with different societal norms, deal with these identity challenges, illustrates that the phenomena we discuss in this article are not unique for one particular social context. The language of the interviews was English, except for the Belgian data which are in Dutch. All the interviews were transcribed using conversation analytic transcription conventions (Jefferson, 1984).

We analyzed these interviews using narrative analysis from an interactional sociolinguistic perspective (cf. De Fina and Georgakopoulou, 2012). As mentioned in the introduction, in these preliminary analyses, we paid particular attention to investigating these research interviews as interactions, thus incorporating a critical scrutiny of the formative role of the interviewer in this socio-communicative event (Van De Mieroop and Clifton, 2014).

In this article, we present fragments that were selected from three interviews, which we briefly discuss in more detail here:

- Interview 1 was conducted in Croatia in 2007. The interviewee was in her early 30s and had been working in the business field since her graduation. At the time of the interview, she was the only high-ranking female employee in the company and she was also the first one who had managed to climb the career ladder as high in this organization. In the interview, she focuses a lot on her paving the way for younger female employees and the effort it has taken to reach that position and, above all, to be taken seriously in this male-dominated world.
- Interview 2 was held in India in 2013. The interviewee was in her 40s and she had worked at various (quasi-)governmental institutions before joining a high status educational institute where she held a senior position in administration. This is quite exceptional for a woman, as the workforce in India for high-skilled jobs is still strongly male dominated (for more details, see Chatterjee and Van De Mieroop, 2017; Sehgal et al., 2013). Importantly, the interviewee relates that she had to resign from one of her earlier jobs because she was verbally harassed after she had refused to comply with her male boss' orders.
- Interview 3 took place in Belgium in 2011. The interviewee was in her early 40s and was a high-level employee of an international company in the financial domain, which she describes as a 'man's world'. As is also discussed in the interview, only few women make it to the level the interviewee is at and this becomes a focal point in the discussions in the interview.

Analyses

Introduction: Constructing default identities

In the course of these interviews, the interlocutors construct many different identities. In this article, we focus on one of these, namely, the construction of the interviewees as

good and successful professionals. In this case, these 'successful professional'-identities were actually projected upon the interviewees because of the specific context of the research interview, in which they knew their success had been a criterion for their selection. Hence, this aspect of the interviewees' identities was often made relevant from the start and it remained prevalent throughout the interviews. As this is not the main focus of our article and for reasons of space, we only briefly illustrate the construction of these default identities here.

In most interviews, the 'successful professional'-identities were talked into being when the topic of the interviewees' recruitment was discussed. We found that many interviewees highlighted the strict and extremely competitive selection process they went through, often by drawing on the rhetoric of numbers (e.g. how many applicants there were, how long the selection process took). As such, as the ones who got selected, they present themselves as belonging to the absolute top of their professional field. Even when they keep their recruitment stories quite factual, as interviewee 1 does, indirect references to excellence are made:

Extract 1 – Interview 1 – Croatia

13   IR   And eh how did you get the job?
14   IE   Eh I started to work here eh seven years ago (1.8)
15   ehm they had eh it was a career day (.) event in eh the university of economy
16   and ehm they (.) [company name] came there and presented (.) themselves
((6 lines omitted about career days))
23   so it's kind of a good way to for for raising awareness of s- some company
24   and you know good eh opportunity to acquire the best students in the
25   generation (.) so they came over there and had a presentation

Interviewee 1 started working in the company as an intern while she was still in college. Of course, competition for obtaining an internship may not be as fierce as for getting a top job, so it is not surprising that her answer to the interviewer's question (line 13) comprises a rather factual sounding 'chronicle' that contains an enumeration of 'chronologically and spatially ordered events' (De Fina, 2009: 246). Yet, she briefly interrupts this chronicle-format to insert a general positive evaluation of 'career days'. Significantly, she closes this evaluation by saying that a career day is a 'good eh opportunity to acquire the best students in the generation' (lines 24–25). As such, she establishes an implicit link between herself and 'the best students', thus indirectly attributing excellence to herself – in spite of the fact that she initially 'only' got an internship at this company.

In some cases, the interviewers almost immediately initiated face-threatening topics, for example, about problems at work, thus leaving almost no room for the construction of the default identity of the successful professional. Interview 2 is a case in point. The interview starts with a discussion of the importance of a good professional atmosphere. In the initial line of the following extract, the interviewer probes for any changes in this atmosphere (cf. 'this', line 39), thus initiating a stepwise topic shift to work-related problems. Yet, before actually answering this question, the interviewee presents herself as a valuable employee whose professional contribution was above average:

Extract 2 – Interview 2 – India

```
39   IR   <And did you find that>something affected this: (.)
40        e:rm while you were working there?
41   IE   Yes, (.) (it did definitely). Initially, everything was nice.
```
((5 lines omitted with a discussion of the length of this initial period))
```
47        e::r (.) everything was fine (.) till say one and a half years
48        the person who took my interview
49        >the person who selected me
50        and the person under whom I was working<
51        .h they were very happy with my work (.)
52        the way I was working, with the honesty, with (.) say (.)
53        >>my qualification was also good so definitely
54        I was contributing more to the work<<hh.
55        so everything was fine.
```

In line 41, the interviewee starts her answer by confirming the change in atmosphere by means of the affirmative particle 'yes' and a boosted confirmation ('definitely'). She then seems to embark on the orientation phase of a narrative of personal experience (Labov and Waletzky, 1966) about this change, as she sets up a contrastive time frame by the temporal markers 'initially' (line 41) versus 'till' (line 47). In line 41, she emphasizes the positive nature of the initial situation by the repeated extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) 'everything' (lines 41 and 47). Then, in the middle of line 47, one could assume that the orientation phase reaches its end and the story will now move to the complicating action, as suggested by the time indication ('till say one and a half years', line 47). However, the interviewee sidesteps and introduces a number of people[2] (lines 48–50) with relatively powerful positions in the organization, as the three relative clauses indicate, thus stressing their importance. She then factually states by means of a boosted positive adjective ('very happy', line 51) that these people evaluated her way of working positively (lines 51–52). She continues with a boosted ('definitely', line 53) evaluation of her work, which is implicitly comparative ('contributing more', line 54). As lines 53 and 54 are not formulated in a parallel way with the previous lines (namely, preposition + noun; for example, 'with my work', lines 51–52), this utterance does not fit into the 'evaluation-by-others'-format and so it can be considered as a self-evaluation. Possibly due to the face-threatening nature of this positive self-evaluation, this sentence takes the form of a rush-through, after which the general evaluation – already formulated in lines 41 and 47 – is repeated as a conclusion to this part of her answer (the follow-up is discussed in extracts 3 and 4).

So in this fragment, the interviewee inserts a preliminary to her actual answer in which she sketches the situation prior to the changes. This sketch contains a thrice-repeated positive general evaluation (lines 41, 47 and 55) and positive evaluations of her work by others and by herself. As such, the interviewee explicitly constructs her default identity as an excellent professional. Overall, we observed that such identity work was prevalent in our data – even though to greatly varying extents, compare extract 1 with 2 – and that these identities of successful and hardworking professionals can be considered as default ones in our dataset.

Default identities at stake

Importantly, at some points in the interview, these default identities were challenged, and this happens mostly after probes by the interviewers, which may be fairly direct (cf. extract 5) or quite indirect, as in the preceding extract. We now first discuss the follow-up of the latter extract, after which we focus on extracts from the two other interviews. In this section, we will demonstrate how the interviewees drew on, respectively, a categorical narrative and categorical statements to tackle challenges to their default identities and as such talked into being master narratives, in these cases relating to gender.

Categorical narrative. As interviewee 2 had to resign from her workplace, the question in line 39 (extract 2) clearly challenges the interviewee's identity as a good professional, which also explains why she explicitly constructed this default identity as a preliminary to the main events of her story (cf. discussion above). In extract 3, the story moves into the complicating action about changes in the professional atmosphere:

> Extract 3 – Interview 2 – India
>
> 56 IE But ↑then (.) the chairs changed you can say.
> 57   The person who interviewed me left the institution,
> 58   so: then there was somebody else who came in his position.
> 59   Now the main problem what (.) was (.) with him was,
> 60   if: a lady is more qualified <than the male,
> 61   and she is junior to you,
> 62   so that male cannot bear the fact that she is a lady>,
> 63   she is more qualified, she knows, she has
> 64   more knowledge (.) so that's what hurts the ego of a male.
> 65   So once they get this thing in their mind (.)
> 66   whether what your work is, whether how honest you are,
> 67   whether that lady is respecting you, ↑still,
> 68   they ↑will (.) not (.) tolerate you (.)

In the first line of this extract, the contrastive conjunction ('but'), the time indication ('then') and the use of the simple past indicate that the story now proceeds to the complicating action in which the interviewee describes a change in staff (lines 56–58) and an announcement of a problem (line 59). In these initial four lines of the extract, the interviewee clearly frames her story as a narrative of personal experience (Labov and Waletzky, 1966) that typically focuses on the recounting of events that happened to her as a story protagonist (viz. 'me', line 57) vis-a-vis a specific antagonist (viz. 'him', line 59). However, as soon as the story's complicating action arrives at the climax and her identity as a good professional is at stake, the interviewee pauses, reformulates ('what (.) was (.)', line 59) and makes substantial alterations to the story format. As we see in the subsequent line, she changes the storyworld characters to 'lady' and 'male', shifts the verb tenses to the simple present and also describes a more general state of affairs instead of a series of events that culminate in a story climax. These shifts are emblematic for a change in story type, thus clearly abandoning the canonical 'narrative of personal experience'-format.

The story type that is employed here could be labeled as a 'generic narrative', which 'claims typicality' and is linguistically characterized by features such as the use of generalized actors and the general present, which signals a repeated state of affairs (Baynham, 2006: 383, 388). Yet, an important difference with the generic narrative is that in this case, the generalized actors are categorical and dichotomous, as they are identified on the basis of their opposing gender. Moreover, these categories are constructed as having moral implications in various ways. First, while men are denominated by their biological gender term, namely 'male', women are referred to by the term 'lady'. This immediately sets up a contrast between the two genders, since – instead of using the neutral terms 'men' and 'women' – by this lexical choice, the interviewee reduces the 'males' to their physical and biological features, while she implicitly attributes positive and refined qualities to the 'ladies'. Second, the interviewee explicitly attributes positive professional characteristics to the women, which are often repeated and thus receive more emphasis (lines 60, 63–64 and 66–67). This is contrasted to the attribution of negative characteristics to men (lines 62, 64 and 68), of which the conclusion receives emphasis, both through the rising prosody of 'will', as well as through its slow pace due to the repeated insertion of pauses (line 68). Third, it is also important to note that in the course of the discussion, the men are increasingly presented as a group, referred to by means of the third person plural pronoun 'they' (lines 65 and 68), while the 'lady' is first referred to by means of the single 3rd person pronoun 'she' (lines 61–63) and, later on, by the generic 2nd person pronoun 'you' (lines 66 and 68), which we discuss in more detail below. Given this contrast between a collective group (for the men) versus a single person (for the women), the latter are presented as more vulnerable.

In the next 45 lines, the interviewee continues with a generalizing description of the typical actions of men, from which we select one short extract here:

Extract 4 – Interview 2 – India

```
95   IE   That is what happens at work↓place.
96        They (.) harass you in <each and every thing>.
97        Whatever you ↑do (.) they say that it's ↓wrong.
98        (2.8)
99   IE   They keep on telling everybody,
100       that she has done this wrong, she has done that wrong.
```

This extract illustrates that the interviewee uses a generic perspective for references to the place ('workplace', line 95) and the actions, for which she consistently uses extreme case formulations, both for the objects ('each and every thing', line 96; 'whatever', line 97) and for the people involved ('everybody', line 99). The marked prosody of a number of words (lines 95 and 97), as well as the higher speaking volume (lines 96 and 100), the slower speaking pace (line 96) and the pauses (lines 96–98) all give this extract an emphatic character.

Overall, in these extracts from interview 2, we saw an important shift from a narrative of personal experience in which a personal perspective is adopted (mainly in extract 2) to a more generic perspective, in which the agents have become 'generalized actors' identified on the basis of dichotomous gender categories. Throughout extracts 3 and 4, the lexically marked opposition 'the lady' versus 'the male' for these categorical protagonists and

antagonists is used and they are also referred to by means of generic pronominal forms. Interestingly, the interviewee on the one hand uses the second person pronoun for the women ('you'). Such a switch from 'I' (extract 2) to 'you' typically constructs a speaker that is 'distancing himself [sic] from the act' by indexing a 'self as generically or commonly like others in that position', while also involving the audience 'through the positioning as fellow agent' (O'Connor, 1994: 48). On the other hand, the men are referred to by means of the third person plural pronoun 'they', thus setting up a collective identity for the men and constructing a more general applicability of the described features and actions to – potentially – 'all' members of the category of men at 'all' times relating to 'each and every thing' (cf. extract 4).

So by formulating her story in such a depersonalized and categorical way, the interviewee not only constructs a story that is generic, but, because of its morally loaded dichotomy between the two gender categories, she sets up a worldview in which men are framed as morally inferior to women. As the opposition between two categories is the focal point of the narrative, we call this story type a 'categorical narrative', of which the main function here is to make master narratives[3] explicit in the interaction, thus bringing the usually implicit 'sociocultural forms of interpretation' (Bamberg, 2005) to the surface. The effect of using an accumulation of categorical statements and generic pronominal forms within a story format is also that sharedness of these views among the interlocutors is suggested, thus constructing this worldview of two morally loaded, dichotomous gender categories as a commonly accepted backdrop of the story events. As such, it neutralizes the threat to the interviewee's face – namely, that she would be perceived as an incompetent employee who had to resign for professional reasons – in two ways. On the one hand, it actually replaces – or *absorbs* – a detailed account of what exactly happened, thus avoiding to tell a face-threatening personal experience narrative, while on the other hand, it also makes explicit a frame of interpretation, of *how* these events should be understood, namely, as an act of gender discrimination instead of as an illustration of professional incompetence. So through this categorical narrative, a morally structured worldview is talked into being as shared among interlocutors and this story type functions in the storytelling world as a counter to the challenge to the interviewee's default identity of successful professional.

Categorical statements. However, narrators do not very often shift to this 'categorical narrative'-format in such an elaborate way. In our data, we usually see short snippets of these categorical narratives, or just a few categorical statements. These are then inserted within a personal experience narrative (cf. extract 5) or vice versa (cf. extract 6). Both may interact with one another in various ways, which we now discuss on the basis of two extracts.

The first extract was selected from the Belgian dataset and it occurs almost at the end of the interview. The interviewer's question actually executes a stepwise topic shift after a discussion of the company as an 'old-boy network':

Extract 5 – Interview 3 – Belgium (the Dutch original can be found in Appendix 1)

```
1050   IR      e:rm if I may ask (if you) what is y-
1051           you:r most extreme experience with the men's culture of ((the company))?
1052           so really a concrete event or something like that, or an experience that you
```

1053		encountered that made you nevertheless (.) feel different as a wo:man?
1054	(1.9)	
1055	IR	if there is one hey (.) °I don't know that°
1056	(2.1)	
1057	IE	.hh I think that erm the worst (.) as a woman is
1058		that indeed men amongst each other
1059	(3.7)	
1060	IE	I won't say gossip (1.5).h but that there more (.)
1061		I once upon a time sat with it
1062		>only he did not know on the phone that I was also in that room< (.)
1063		but that something was indeed said about me (1.3)
1064		of the one on the phone who thought that here
1065		were only two three men and he actually did not know
1066		that I was there too.h and then he is about me (1.2)
1067		what was not entirely positive (.).hh erm but (1.1) hm
1068		<I think that men (.) do that more than (.) women>
1069		I think that women gossip gener- well gossip (.)
1070		>if you speak about gossiping in both cases
1071		I think that women gossip more generally about
1072		'her hair is not okay' or 'what kind of dress is she wearing now'
1073		.hhh or 'what pants does that man wear' if you're talking about the men
1074		or 'what did he with his' hey 'which hairdresser did he go to'<
1075		that sort of things more generally (then)[4]
1076		I think that men go more for the: for the man then (1.8)
1077		amongst each other hey, that the women are passed once in review
1078		they will gossip less about each other
1079		while I think that women gossip already quicker about other women=
1080	IR	=ah yes
1081	IE	.h and that men will gossip more about the women (.) well gossip
1082	IR	yes
1083	IE	talk amongst each other and then also give negative remarks
1084		.hhhh and that (.) then (.) ((sighs)) I was shocked for a while hhh.
1085		that I thought of 'okay, so men will talk like that
1086		amongst each other about women'
1087	IR	yes

The interviewer probes for the 'most extreme experience' the interviewee encountered at her workplace and she clearly frames it in gender terms, by characterizing the company as having a 'men's culture' (line 1051) and by projecting the category of 'woman' (line 1053) upon the interviewee. The initial hesitation and reformulations (line 1050) of the interviewer already anticipatorily qualify this question as difficult, and also the following pauses (lines 1054 and 1056) and the hedging statement offering the interviewee the option to respond negatively (line 1055), emically demonstrate that the interviewer orients to this question as problematic. This is also mirrored in the initial part of the interviewee's answer (cf. the interviewee's audible in-breath, hedge ('I think', line 1057), hesitation, pause (line 1059), the paralipsis ('I won't say gossip', line 1060) and the broken-off sentence (line 1060)).

Interestingly, in her answer, the interviewee adopts a generic perspective and makes relevant dichotomous gender categories similar to those in extract 3. In particular, she

introduces the antagonists in the plural ('men', line 1058) and these are then linked to the morally questionable activity of 'gossiping' (even though this relation is downplayed due to the paralipsis). Interestingly, the addition of 'indeed' (*inderdaad* in Dutch, line 1058) gives the sentence an affirmative tone and frames it as common sense knowledge, thus adding to the factuality of the interviewee's claim.[5] This claim functions as the abstract of the upcoming story, of which the brief and vague orientation phase is formulated in line 1061. In this line, the interviewee shifts from a categorical to a personal perspective, thus marking the start of a narrative of personal experience. The relatively short story then moves to the complicating action in which the interviewee describes a meeting during which one member who was not physically present gossiped about her over the phone. Interestingly, in the part of the story leading up to the climax – the actual gossip – the verbs are omitted (*dan is hij over mij*, 'then he is about me', line 1066) and the gossip is framed euphemistically as 'not entirely positive' (line 1067). At the point at which the gossip could have been inserted in the story, there are a few pauses, hesitations and an audible in-breath ('(.).hh erm but (1.1) hm', line 1067). The interviewee subsequently switches back to a categorical perspective topicalizing the gossiping practices of the two dichotomous gender categories. In this section, the interviewee frames her words repeatedly as her personal opinion (cf. 'I think' in lines 1068–1079). Although the two categories are both denominated by the neutral, plural labels 'men' and 'women', a moral contrast between the two categories is set up. While women are described as gossiping about 'general' things, men are depicted as gossiping less innocently, since they target people[6] and are gender-biased regarding their gossip objects (line 1078).

Interestingly, the way women gossip is explicitly performed by the interviewee who mimicks four[7] examples of gossip by means of direct reported speech. The topic of all these concern appearance and both sexes are presented as gossip objects, thus demonstrating a lack of gender bias.[8] Furthermore, the formulation of these examples is quite innocent and implicit due to the use of the rhetorical question format.[9] In contrast with that, the interviewee does not mimic any gossip by men, but she simply evaluates it as personal and solely oriented to women, thus presenting it as factual, but also in a fairly vague way. Furthermore, she holds on to a categorical perspective and avoids hinting at the comment that was made about her personally in any way.

In line 1084, the interviewee abruptly shifts back to a personal experience narrative and formulates a story resolution in which she relates having been 'shocked for a while' by the colleague's comment she overheard (line 1084). This resolution is also performed paralinguistically through the pauses, the sigh, the audible in-breath and out-breath in line 1084. The interviewee then closes her story by an evaluation in the form of a reported thought that contains a categorical generalization of the way men talk about women (lines 1085–1086).

Thus when considering the whole story, we see an oscillation between a personal and a categorical perspective. The interviewee starts her answer with an abstract in the form of a categorical statement, then shifts to a personal perspective, but at the point of the story climax, she shifts back to generalizing claims about the two opposing gender categories, and then changes perspective once more to narrate the final part of the story from a personal perspective, but with the insertion of a categorical generalization as a story evaluation. Hence, the personal and the categorical form an intricate interlacement in the interviewee's answer, which actually mirrors a similar interweaving in the

interviewer's question. Finally, it is important to note that this interviewee hedges her categorical statements extensively, as the repetition of the shield 'I think' mitigates her 'commitment to the truth-value of the whole proposition' (Markkanen and Schröder, 1997: 5; Prince et al., 1982) and her self-repairs of the verb 'to gossip' (lines 1069 and 1081) downplay the negative connotation of this verb.

These categorical statements function in a similar way as in the Indian interview, as they allow the interviewee to avoid the face-threatening matter of voicing a negative comment that challenges her default identity of successful professional. At the same time, these statements talk into being a dichotomous worldview in which men are depicted as a collectivity that conspires against women by gossiping, while women's gossip is mimicked as innocent and usually even oriented to their own gendered ingroup (line 1079), thus underscoring the lack of a gendered strategy in the women's actions. And so, even though the dichotomous categories were initiated by the interviewer, it is the interviewee who constructs a moral distinction between them. As such, she talks into being a morally structured worldview concerning the two gender groups, thus explicitly voicing a master narrative about how men and women function in the workplace and how incidents, such as the gossip-story, should be understood.

In other cases, however, categorical statements do not always function as a way to *absorb* the challenge to the default identity of the successful professional. Unlike interviewees 2 and 3, interviewee 1 actually formulates these challenges herself, but then frames them within a gendered 'conservative society'-master narrative. The extract does not immediately follow a particular question by the interviewer but it emerges while the interviewee is discussing different 'types' of women:

Extract 6 – Interview 1 – Croatia[10]

112	IE	I'm not the ty- type of woman I'm very very eh energetic and eh
113		I'm (.) eh maybe eh too bossy sometimes maybe even too bitchy
114		b- but you need to be (.) eh (.) this way
115		because eh that's the only way you can survive (.) eh
116		between your male (.) co-workers so (.)
117		I never had a problem (1.1) to you know put things in eh perspective
118		even eh (.) you know ehm (2.4) that relates to this conversation
119		I had with my superior
120		because eh (.) he expr- some doub- expressed some doubts
121		if eh some clients would eh (.) probably prefer
122		if eh their investment banker was male rather than a female
123		because eh this is eh very (..) ehm (..) kind of conservative society
124		where eh male (.) eh eh males are really (1.3) males are really ehm (1.7)
125		kind of taken seriously by by other males and
126		sometimes probably eh men don't want to take advice from a female
127		and they don't want her to tell him what to do
128		okay I can understand that
129		but eh my point is that I never had a problem to really put things in place
130		immediately if I s- saw and there have been some (.) cases
131		if I saw that eh I was not taken seriously but it took maybe five minutes (.)
132		before I just you know said 'okay (.) now this and this it will be this way

133   I'm telling you (.) you will do it' (.) like that
134   and (.) never I had (.) any problems
135   I I I am taken seriously very f- ((laughs)) really fast

Preceding this extract, the interviewee describes 'feminine women', from which she explicitly distances herself in line 112 ('I'm not the ty- type of woman'). Initially, she presents herself by means of a boosted positive characteristic ('very very eh energetic', line 112) and two negative characteristics ('too bossy' and 'too bitchy', line 113). The latter are mitigated by the repeated use of the hedge 'maybe' (line 113) as well as by adding a justification that frames her behavior as a survival strategy in a male-dominated world (lines 114–116). Interestingly, she shifts to a generic perspective in this justification, thus constructing a 'shared agency or experience' (O'Connor, 1994: 47) which frames it as a generally accepted 'rule'.

In the subsequent line, the interviewee shifts back to a personal footing and formulates a general evaluation of her own approach (line 117), which turns out to be the abstract of the upcoming story that serves as an illustration of this 'rule'. Yet, in line 118, the interviewee sidesteps by referring to a 'conversation' she had with her 'superior'.[11] Subsequently, the gist of the conversation is recounted, that is, that her superior expressed doubts regarding a female investment banker. The many reformulations, pauses, hesitations, hedges ('some', line 120, 'probably', line 121) and the repetition of the conditional format ('if', lines 121–122) all mark this discussion as a dispreferred activity. Importantly, the criticism targets a gendered category (viz. female investment bankers) and not the interviewee herself. As such, the implicit challenge to the latter's default identity is clearly framed as a form of sexism instead of as a challenge of her competence.

This impersonal perspective is maintained in the following lines, in which the interviewee further suspends the story format to account for her superior's point of view by relating it to a master narrative of the patriarchal, conservative society. Interestingly, in this section, the two gender categories are mainly denominated by their biological terms 'male' and 'female'. This sets up a contrast between the two categories on the basis of biological and physical differences rather than on character traits or skills. Initially, the only agents of the conservative society are 'males', thus effacing the 'females' (lines 124–125), after which the interviewee switches to the reference 'men' for the protagonists and opposes it to the singular antagonist 'a female' (line 126). This opposition between plural and singular forms still lingers in the beginning of line 127 ('they'), but then it dissolves when 'her' is contrasted with 'him' (line 127). This categorical statement thus shows a gradual shift from a biological categorization in which 'males' dominate, over a plural–singular opposition to the use of singular pronominal forms ('him' vs 'her') which downplays the asymmetrical character of the gender opposition. This shift from plural to singular is accompanied by two other complementary shifts which further mitigate the categorical contrast, namely,

1.   The gradual replacement of the use of boosters ('really', line 124) by hedges ('kind of', line 125; 'sometimes probably', line 126) and
2.   A change in actions that are reported, namely, from the neutral action of 'taking someone seriously' over 'taking advice' to the threat to one's negative face (Brown and Levinson, 1987) of 'being told what to do' (lines 125–127).

So, on the one hand, we observe a mitigation of the categorical opposition and the way it is formulated and boosted/hedged, while, on the other hand, the actions become gradually more face threatening when women are explicitly involved as agents. These complementary processes thus almost neutralize the gender opposition framed as typical of the 'conservative society' and they downplay the patriarchal nature of the master narrative, as it is normal that one does not appreciate threats to one's negative face ('they don't want her to tell him what to do', line 127), whether these are formulated by a woman or not. This actually paves the way for the interviewee's subsequent expression of her own understanding of (line 128) – and thus acquiescing position to – this gendered master narrative. So instead of challenging the master narrative of the male-dominated conservative society directly, the interviewee uses it as an account for her boss' doubts (lines 121–122).

In the subsequent line, the interviewee shifts from the categorical statement back to her narrative of personal experience by repeating the story abstract (line 129, cf. line 117). Then she continues with the main story events. Instead of recounting one incident, the interviewee formulates a generic summary of how she handled 'some cases' (line 130) in which she 'was not taken seriously' (line 131). This summary is formulated in a factual way and it revolves around the direct reported speech utterance in lines 132–133. This utterance not only adds vividness to the story, but it also enacts the way in which the interviewee formulated her orders (cf. Buttny, 1997), namely, in quite an authoritarian way. As such, she not only performs the characteristics she attributed to herself earlier (bossy and bitchy, line 113), but she also causally links this approach to her 'survival' in the workplace, as the emphatically pronounced (cf. the pauses in line 134) and boosted ('very', 'really', line 135) story resolution illustrates.

In sum, the interviewee presents herself as a successful investment banker who is not only energetic, but also bitchy and bossy. Although this does not undermine her default identity as a successful professional, it challenges her identity as a good and sociable person. She then accounts for these negative character traits by framing them as necessary strategies for a female investment banker. In order to make her point, she illustrates this with a summary of how she handled 'some cases' in which she experienced problems. Importantly, these examples of professional difficulties also potentially damage her default identity. But by anticipatorily switching to a categorical perspective, by attributing sexist points of view regarding female investment bankers to an external source (viz. her superior) and by making explicit a master narrative of the conservative society, the interviewee makes categorical statements about 'the way things are' for men and women in the investment banking world in conservative societies. She frames these statements as generally shared knowledge, not only by means of the generic second person pronoun (lines 114–116) but also by the repeated use of 'you know' throughout the fragment. Hence, these categorical statements frame her negative character traits not as personal shortcomings, but as the result of the gender roles typical of the conservative society which are well known to the storyteller as well as the story recipient. Thus, the interviewee protects her default identity of a strong, skilled and 'good' employee by accounting for her negative character traits by means of a gendered master narrative that is constructed through the categorical statements that are inserted in her story.

Interestingly, the interviewee actually not only acquiesces to this master narrative, but, by initially distancing herself from women and femininity (cf. her initial statement that she is not a 'feminine woman'), she also uses it to normalize her own dominant position and her authoritarian behavior. At the same time, though, she, as a woman, usurps the men's position and thus also counters the master narrative of male dominance. This thus demonstrates how the interviewee carefully navigates the internal contradictions of this master narrative, or, more precisely, of the particular version of this master narrative that she talks into being here, thus illustrating once more how 'contradicting positions to potentially contradicting master narratives may co-exist' (Clifton and Van De Mieroop, 2016: 208) as they are locally accomplished in interaction.

Finally, it is important to note that in both extracts, the interviewees' answers can be characterized as forms of argumentative discourse, in which categorical statements and personal experience narratives feed off one another. In particular, in extract 5, the categorical statements are inserted into the story format of the interviewee's answer to set up an explanatory backdrop to which the story should be related and subsequently understood. In extract 6, the narrative functions as an illustration of these categorical statements, thus providing proof for the interviewee's line of reasoning. The personal and the categorical perspective are thus not only closely intertwined in the way the interviewees formulate their answers, but also in the way their line of reasoning is constructed and the challenges to their default identities are tackled.

Conclusion

We have demonstrated that there are many differences regarding the extent and the way in which narrators shift to a categorical perspective through which they make certain master narratives explicit. We observed a main difference between the Indian interview on the one hand and the Belgian and Croatian interview on the other. In the former case, the shift was so complete that a 'categorical narrative' emerged that talked into being a factual description of the way the world is morally structured on the basis of gender categories. In the latter cases, the categorical descriptions were intertwined with narratives of personal experience and they were hedged much more extensively, either by the use of shields (extract 5) or by downplaying the categorical contrast in the gendered master narrative (extract 6). This significant difference can be related to the extent to which the default identities of successful professionals are at stake: in the case of the Indian interview, this default identity was severely challenged as the interviewee had to resign from her workplace, while there is a much smaller face threat in the other interviews as they only concern minor incidents in the workplace. And thus it is not surprising that the Indian interviewee switches consistently to a categorical narrative, which, like a generic narrative, is hegemonic, as it also 'write[s] out of the account other types of experience' (Baynham, 2006: 395), thus leaving very little room open for contestation. Furthermore, because of its categorical nature, this narrative clearly sets up an ingroup–outgroup dichotomy and attributes a moral hierarchy to the categories, thus explicitly talking into being a master narrative of a gender hierarchy with firmly separated gender groups. In the other interviews, the mitigation of these categorical statements constructs a more limited scope for the interviewees' description of the gendered way in which the world

works, but nevertheless, also in these cases, the categorical statements clearly prioritize the interpretation offered by this gendered master narrative.

Moreover, it is interesting to note that all interviewees make relevant gender categories to formulate generalizations about men and women from which they distance themselves at the same time. The use of biological labels (viz. male and female) in the final extract is a clear illustration of this. So instead of setting up an interactional ingroup with the interviewer or a collectivity of female professionals, the narrators focus on describing the actions of the two gender groups (e.g. gossiping) as category-bound activities. These have clear inferences for the moral identities of the group members (Hester and Eglin, 1997; Sacks, 1992) and, as such, a morally ordered gendered worldview is constructed.

Furthermore, by using the generic second person pronoun and categorical labels, the narrators position their story recipient as someone who accepts these categories as unproblematic (Lee, 2003: 54), which makes it particularly hard to challenge them. In this case, this projects agreement upon the listeners regarding the relevance of a gendered differentiation in workplace contexts, in the same vein as research on racism demonstrated regarding ethnic categorical generalizations (for an overview, see Every and Augoustinos, 2007: 418). This projection of sharedness thus upgrades these narrators' statements from personal opinions about colleagues to generally shared master narratives about the moral behavior of the different gender groups in the workplace. These, then, often literally *absorb* the challenge to the narrators' default identities – as they replace the story passage in which this should have been voiced (see extracts 3 and 5) – or they frame the issue as an example of sexism (see extract 6).

In sum, with this article, we aimed to show that categorical narratives or categorical statements that seem to intrude upon the canonical structure of the narrative of personal experience (cf. Labov and Waletzky, 1966) can be instrumental in explicitly constructing master narratives. These mainly derive their argumentative strength from the fact that they are presented as generally accepted ways of understanding the world, as such presenting a response to 'default identity'-challenges, that is, in turn, hard to challenge. Thus, we have demonstrated that the mobilization of these master narratives performed important identity work for the interviewees when their default identities were at stake. Finally, this study also intended to contribute to the 'small story' line of research that looks at stories 'beyond the prototype' (De Fina and Georgakopoulou, 2012: 108; Georgakopoulou, 2015: 259 ff), either by studying different types of narrative, like the 'categorical narrative' discussed here, or by scrutinizing what the function is of apparent sidesteps that intrude upon the prototypical format of the narrative of personal experience.

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Notes

1. The Croatian interviews were conducted in 2007, the Indian ones in 2012–2013 and the Belgian ones in 2010–2011.
2. Two or three, depending on whether line 49 is interpreted as a paraphrase of the previous line.

3. One could argue that in Indian society as a whole, which, as research has shown, is still strongly patriarchal, this is not a master narrative, but a counter-narrative. However, as discussed in the 'Introduction' section, we consider what is a counter-narrative and what is a master narrative as an etic rather than an emic issue.
4. In Dutch, the word '*dan*' can be used as a temporal adverb ('then') and as a conjunction after a comparative ('than'). In this case, both uses are possible which is why this word is enclosed within parentheses.
5. As the topic of gossiping is not mentioned prior to this extract, this modal adverb cannot be interpreted as affirming some previous evaluation of men and gossiping.
6. In the extract, the narrators use the expression '*op de man af spelen*', which is translated as 'go for the man'. This is a general phrase to refer to an orientation to people rather than objects, instead of a gender-oriented expression.
7. We interpret 'which hairdresser did he go to' as a reformulation of 'what did he with his' (line 1074).
8. The interviewee actually contradicts this in line 1079.
9. Except for the first gossip example: 'her hair is not okay'.
10. Extract based on an extract used in 'Workplace conflicts as (re)source for analyzing identity struggles in stories told in interviews' in Van De Mieroop and Schnurr's *Identity Struggles: Evidence from Workplaces around the World* (in press).**[AQ: 2]** Reprinted with kind permission from John Benjamins Publishing Company (Amsterdam; Philadelphia, PA (www.benjamins.com)).
11. This orientation phase is quite fragmentary, which is due to the fact that the interviewee already hinted at this conversation earlier in the interview.

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Appendix 1

Dutch original of extract 5

```
1050  IR    eu:hm als ik 't mag vragen (als u) wat is u-
1051        u:w extreemste ervaring met de mannencultuur van ((the company))?
1052        dus echt een concrete gebeurtenis of zo, of 'n ervaring dat u
1053        heeft meegemaakt dat u toch (.) als vrou:w anders heeft doen voelen?
1054  (1.9)
1055  IR    als er een is he (.) °ik weet da niet°
1056  (2.1)
1057  IE    .hh ik denk dat euh het ergste (.) als vrouw is
1058        dat inderdaad mannen onder mekaar
1059  (3.7)
1060  IE    'k ga nie zeggen roddelen (1.5).h maar dat er meer (.)
1061        ik heb er ooit 'ns bij gezeten
1062        >alleen wist hij niet aan de telefoon dat ik ook in die zaal zat< (.)
1063        maar dat er wel over mij iets gezegd werd (1.3)
1064        van diegene aan de telefoon die dacht dat hier
1065        alleen twee drie mannen waren en hij eigenlijk niet wist
1066        dat ik er ook zat.h en dan is hij over mij (1.2)
1067        wat niet helemaal positief was (.).hh euh ma (1.1) hm
1068        <ik denk dat mannen (.) da meer doen dan (.) vrouwen>
1069        ik denk dat vrouwen roddelen algem- allé roddelen (.)
1070        >als ge spreekt over roddelen in beide gevallen
1071        ik denk dat vrouwen meer algemeen roddelen over
1072        'haar haar zit nie goe' of 'wa voor kleedje heeft dedie nu aan'
1073        .hhh of 'wa broek heeft dieje man aan' als ge 't over de mannen hebt
1074        of 'wa heeft hij me zijn' he 'bij welke kapper is hij geweest'<
```

1075		dat soort dingen meer algemeen dan
1076		ik denk dat mannen t dan meer op de: op de man af spelen (1.8)
1077		onder mekaar he, dat de vrouwen wel eens de revue passeren
1078		ze minder over mekaar gaan roddelen
1079		terwijl denk ik vrouwen al sneller over andere vrouwen roddelen=
1080	IR	=ah ja
1081	IE	.h en dat mannen meer over de vrouwen gaan roddelen (.) allé roddelen
1082	IR	ja
1083	IE	praten onder mekaar en dan ook negatieve commentaren geven
1084		.hhhh en da (.) toen (.) *((sighs))* schrok ik wel efkes hhh.
1085		dat ik dacht van 'ok, zo gaan mannen dus onder mekaar
1086		over vrouwen spreken'
1087	IR	ja

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