Gender, Risk and Employment Insecurity: 
The Masculine Breadwinner Subtext

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Abstract
The decline of the male breadwinner model goes hand in hand with an increased perception of insecurity and risk in the new economy. This article explores how the perception of and responses to risk and insecurity are influenced by gender. The article is based on interviews with male and female information communication technology (ICT) workers, and it identifies four main discourses through which they conceptualise risk. First, they draw on a discourse which normalises risk as part of their jobs. A second discourse implicitly suggests that women are less likely to be made redundant. A third discourse is based on the assumption that becoming a breadwinner influences one’s perception of risk. The topic of the final discourse is the importance of continually improving one’s skills in order to remain employable and maintain one’s position as a breadwinner. The discourses all assume- the ideal of a neoliberal self-entrepreneurial subject. The article then discusses ageing as a factor that changes perceptions of risks and the ability to remain on top of one’s game. While there is little difference in the interpretative resources men and women use to make sense of insecurity, the article shows that the subtext underlying all four discourses is that of a masculine breadwinner. The article contributes towards developing a gendered understanding of risk and insecurity through exposing the masculine subtext with which these discourses are saturated.
Introduction

The male breadwinner model is said to be in decline (J. Lewis, 2001). Work is becoming riskier, more insecure and individualised. Insecurity at work is intertwined with an outlook in which employees are encouraged to see themselves as their own brand and operate like a small entrepreneurial business with little allegiance to their employing company (Beck, 2000; Du Gay, 1996; Pongratz & Voß, 2003). Companies use labour power depending on their business needs, so that notions of delayed gratification are being replaced by the mantra of employment flexibility (Sennett, 1998; 2006) and employability security (Kanter, 1995). Gender is said to have less influence on the life course as risk is individualised and made dependent on individual abilities rather than social categories like gender (Beck, 2000; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002b).

The decline of the male breadwinner model and perceptions of risk might have a different impact on women and men, however. It has been shown that experiences of unemployment are gendered, mainly because women often have networks centred around the home (Russell, 1999). The ability to find a new job is often influenced by gender and age and this particularly disadvantages older women (McMullin & Berger, 2006; Weller, 2007). Although flexibility is often discussed with reference to women and the new portfolio careers are seen as ideal for women, women have less time to invest in their human and social capital at work due to the double burden of employment and family commitments. They are also more prone to select risky jobs (Ekinsmyth, 1999; Gill, 2002; Perrons, 2003). While one could argue that the decline of the male breadwinner model leads to the masculine ideal worker and the masculine subtext in organisations becoming outdated (Acker, 1990; Bendl, 2006; 2008; Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998a; b), recent studies (Ekinsmyth, 1999; Gill, 2002; Perrons, 2003) suggest that new employment relations still require the performance of a masculine breadwinner mentality. This mentality is characterised by an individualised worker who can focus on work full-time. Since risk is generally discussed in a strictly individualised and profoundly neo-liberal fashion in which social categories like gender are said to be irrelevant, it is therefore important to pose the question of how far subjective perceptions of risk and insecurity are gendered.
Very rarely are gender and risk explored together. This article aims to fill this gap in knowledge by systematically analysing the discourses concerning risk produced by men and women who work in the information communication technology (ICT) sector. The article is based on interviews with and observations of ICT workers in two technology companies in Switzerland, one small and the other much larger. It explores how gender influences the subjective assessment of risk and the frameworks individuals develop to deal with it. In order to explore the gendered assessment of risk, the article starts by interrogating the literature on job security and risk in respect to gender. It then develops a framework, that of the masculine breadwinner subtext, through which the intertwined issues of gender, risk and insecurity can be studied. This is followed by a section explaining the selection of the field setting, the methodology (a version of discourse analysis) and how the material was collected and analysed. The article then proceeds to analyse four main discourses that people used to make sense of risk and insecurity, showing how the performance of these discourses rendered the masculine breadwinner ideal variously closer or more remote. The major findings are then discussed before a conclusion is offered. The article shows how theories of risk and job security can be seen as intertwined with gender, focusing particularly on how this is played out in perceptions of gender, risk and insecurity among ICT workers.

**Theorising the Masculine Breadwinner Subtext**

It is now widely assumed that work has become more insecure. In a globalising economy, jobs can be outsourced and shifted from country to country, changing the psychological contract and making way for new forms of careers (Handy, 1994; Janssens et al., 2003; Wong et al., 2005). A strong form of individualism is encouraged, through which everybody should see themselves as an entrepreneur of the self (Du Gay, 1996; Pinchot, 1985; Pongratz & Voß, 2003). While objective indicators of security (such as the prevalence of job tenure) have not necessarily changed (Gregg & Wandsworth, 1999), people perceive work as more insecure (Burchell, 2000; Wichert, 2002). This is related to processes of individualisation where old parameters that structured a person’s life chances, like race, class and gender, are no-longer seen as relevant for professional success (Beck, 2000; Beck &
Beck-Gernsheim, 2002b). The individual now shoulders the burden of chance and risk.

Sennett (1998; 2000; 2006) argues that perceptions of risk means that individuals are no longer able to create coherent personal narratives. This is problematic as personal narratives are needed to sustain characters or a sense of self. Through interviews with computer specialists who were made redundant, he shows that after first blaming the company and the economic climate for their failure, they eventually saw themselves as guilty because they had not moved jobs quickly enough (Sennett, 1998). Thus they made themselves responsible for not embodying the ideals of the new economy or as Sennett argues:

‘Workers’ sense of personal responsibility and personal guilt is compounded by the rhetoric of modern management, which attempts to disguise power in the new economy by making the worker believe he or she is a self-directed agent’ (Sennett, 2000, 7).

This theme is well documented in academic literature. It has been argued that employees are increasingly in charge of managing their own labour resources, leading to new forms of self-management (Bröckling, 2000). Employees are encouraged to become more like entrepreneurs who self-manage their labour resources, coining the terms ‘entreployee’ (Pongratz & Voß, 2003) or ‘intrapreneur’ (Pinchot, 1985). People become ‘enterprising selves’ who see themselves as microcosmic businesses (Storey et al., 2005). Those entrepreneurs of the self ‘psych’ themselves up to deal with the challenges imposed on them by the insecurities they face. These challenges are personal, because they threaten the person’s own identity and self-esteem. However, the language of business and enterprise also shelters people from the personal consequences of failure, so that it is not the individual who fails but rather the business (Storey et al., 2005). This tendency can also be observed in younger people just entering the labour market (Smithson & Lewis, 2000). These young people tend to find individualised solutions to dealing with risk, seeing it as part of their autonomy and a challenge they have to overcome. In that sense these young people embrace these new ‘risk identities’ that Beck (2000) has theorised, but the uncertain conditions mean that they postpone starting families and buying property.
The enterprising self has no corporate career but instead a portfolio career (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Cohen & Mallon, 1999; Kirkpatrick & Hoque, 2006; Pink, 2001). Such portfolio lifestyles have been observed in areas like the media, IT or translation work (Barley & Kunda, 2004; Blair, 2001; Fraser & Gold, 2001; Ursell, 2000). Barley and Kunda (2004), for instance, studied IT contractors in the US. Many of those contractors left traditional organizations due to organizational politics and incompetent managers. While contractors in this study earned 50-300% more than in their previous employment, this increase came at the price of higher insecurity. These free agents often reported that free time diminished as much more time has to be used to develop human and social capital to stay up-to-date and to get new business. Staying up-to-date requires a constant updating of one’s own knowledge (Kotamraju, 2002), while networking is essential to find new projects (Manske, 2003; Wittel, 2001). These people faced the pressures of remaining marketable and employable. Employability security - the security to find a job with a given skill - is here replacing employment security (Kanter, 1995).

One could say such perceptions of risk and insecurity reflect a male breadwinner model according to which one person, usually the husband, is responsible for earning a living for his family. His wife stereotypically devotes her time to bringing up their children and to the household. Breadwinner jobs have been designed with this family structure in mind (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Bradley, 1995). This traditional breadwinner model is shifting, however (Fraser, 1996; J. Lewis, 2001). Women have now made considerable inroads into paid employment and while many are still classified as earning an income supplementary to that of their husbands, in many cases working women are single or divorced (Rife, 1995) and thus need to earn their own income. Women’s work experiences are increasingly heterogeneous (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2003; Hakim, 1996) and while some women try to shatter the glass ceiling others are stuck on sticky floors (Cherry, 2002). Women at the lower end of the job market are more prone to being laid off and replaced when technology advances (Appelbaum, 1997), although studies have shown few differences between men and women in terms of job security (Kuhnert & Palmer, 1991; Wichert, 2002). Instead research has suggested that the perception of insecurity for both men and women is linked to the life course and to being a breadwinner (Charles & James,
Although the male breadwinner model seems to be crumbling, however, women are still forced to comply with a male ideal of a breadwinner for whom career takes precedence over everything else (Wajcman, 1998). Women who decide to leave the corporate world either through temporary or permanent so-called ‘off ramps’ (Hewlett, 2007; Hewlett & Luce, 2005) often have little chance of developing a career. Overall then, the ideal of the masculine breadwinner is still structuring women’s participation in the labour market and could potentially also influence their experience of insecurity.

Many of the threats to identity which come with higher risk and insecurity at work seem to apply mainly to a male breadwinner, as women have tended to have alternative identities on which they could draw (Wajcman & Martin, 2002). Men typically have more work-related networks, which has led some to argue that men suffer more from job losses than women (Burchell, 1994; Russell, 1999). Many women have composite identities consisting of work and private life and including home-centred social activities and networks. For many men, work makes up a bigger part of their identity and it is therefore more difficult for them to built an identity based on home life while they are without a job, meaning that they tend to feel more socially excluded (Russell, 1999).

Women’s and men’s experiences might also differ in respect to age. Weller (2007) explores the post-redundancy experiences of airline hostesses. The importance airlines place on the appearance of flight attendants, most of whom are female, is well-documented (Bolton & Boyd, 2003; Tyler & Abbott, 1998; Williams, 2003) and it is evident that airline hostesses - like fashion models (Mears & Finlay, 2005; Soley-Beltran, 2004) - have a sell-by date. It has been shown that women are more likely to confront ageist attitudes in relation to appearance (Duncan & Loretto, 2004). Weller (2007) shows how sexism and ageism are intertwined and how such discrimination is justified by claims about the nature of the job and by age- and gender-typing of the role. Other studies have highlighted the fact that younger women are preferred over older women for being more attractive and cheaper for employers (McMullin & Berger, 2006).
Home-based networks and age are only two of the indicators that suggest that there could be gender differences in the experience of risk. The breadwinner model is also threatened by a cultural feminisation at work, which means that many skills associated with women are in high demand (cf. Hill, 1997; Nixon, 2005; Webster, 2000; Weis, 2006). The importance of being flexible, multi-tasking and collaborative is now becoming standard in the management literature (Kelan, forthcoming).

Although these new skills are rarely acknowledged as feminine (Fondas, 1997), it has been argued that women are the ideal workers of the future (Helgesen, 1990; Rosener, 1990). Castells asserts that the ‘(f)eminization of paid labour leads to the rise of the “flexible woman”, gradually replacing “the organization man”, as the harbinger of the new type of worker’ (Castells, 2000, 12).

Flexible work is often discussed with reference to gender. Flexible work arrangements are commonly thought to enhance the paid-work/care interface and contribute towards gender equality (see also Brandth & Kvande, 2001; 2002; Fulton, 2001; S. Lewis, 2001; Perrons, 1999, 391; Sheridan & Conway, 2001; Tremblay, 2002). However, Smith (1993) states that the effects of flexible working stratify women as well as men, arguing that women’s experiences are diverse. Often flexible work is seen as something that women and particularly mothers do, as it allows them to combine paid and care work more easily (Beasley et al., 2001; Bryant, 2000; Mirchandani, 1998; Sullivan & Lewis, 2001). However, these flexible jobs are often then seen as jobs for mothers and not suitable for a corporate career (Hewlett, 2007). Women working non-standard contracts are also more likely to miss out on training and personal development (Forrier & Sels, 2003; Hoque & Kirkpatrick, 2003).

Portfolio jobs are also said to be modelled on and particularly suitable for women. Perrons (2003) shows in relation to new media work that workers display a ‘make hay while the sun shines’ mentality and often work long hours. That same flexibility in terms of where, when and how much to work had negative implications for women (and men) with caring responsibilities. Due to the double burden, they had less time to work and re-train, were more restricted time-wise and had consequently lower earnings (see also Gill, 2002). Employability is thus limited by gender and by having caring responsibilities. A study by Ekinsmyth (1999) about freelance magazine work came to similar findings. Ekinsmyth (1999, 364) states that ‘those individuals
“choosing” risky employment are more likely to be women, and therefore differentials in degrees of risk between men and women are likely to intensify gender inequalities’. Rather than challenging the masculine model of a breadwinner, the empirical evidence suggests that it is perpetuated within the new economy.

The feminisation of work does not seem to challenge the masculine breadwinner model, which is itself an expression of the masculine subtext which pervades many organisations (Bendl, 2006; 2008; Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998a; b; Puwar, 2004). Acker (1990) has argued eloquently that much that passes as gender neutral and normal in organisations is in fact an unacknowledged expression of normative masculinity. The ideal masculinity embedded in business practices often goes unnoticed and is difficult to articulate (Collinson & Hearn, 2000; 1996; Kerfoot & Knights, 1996). Connell (1998; 2000; Connell & Wood, 2005) has argued that transnational business masculinity holds sway in work under neoliberalism. This mode of masculinity is characterised by organising life like an enterprise, using new technologies to enhance human capabilities and having no long-term commitment and only conditional loyalties. Individuals operate as *Homo economicus*, as rational agents in the market embodying the same egoistic stance of only looking after their own economic well-being. This logic is incompatible with any form of collectivism. There is often little room to articulate a gender-differentiated reworking of neoliberal discourses, but that does not mean that these discourses do not have gendered effects (Fenwick, 2002; Lucey *et al.*, 2003; Pühl, 2003; Pühl & Sauer, 2004; Walkerdine, 2003; Walkerdine *et al.*, 2001). The masculine subtext still seems to influence how men and women can position themselves in the workplace.

So far the relationship between gender and how people conceptualise risk and insecurity has not been explored in detail. Risk and job security seems to be a discourse which is regularly used in the work context when it comes to making sense of changes in employment relationships. Individuals are regularly portrayed as self-directed agents or entrepreneurs of the self. Gender does not appear to matter, even though more women are present in the labour market and their experiences seem to be influenced by gender. Such questions are particularly apposite in the present moment, given that neoliberal discourse does not seem easily able to acknowledge gender-differentiated positions when experiences of the labour market clearly remain
gendered. This raises the question of whether men and women can perform the ideal of the self-directed agent equally well, and thus compete on level terrain within the new economy, or whether the masculine subtext which underlies these discourses is impeding the progress of those who cannot perform the ideal appropriately. In other words, what role does gender play in how risk and insecurity at work are assessed and what frameworks are developed to deal with that? The focus here is on subjective perceptions of work and how individuals make sense of them in light of their lived experiences.

**Methodology, Material and Method**

The ICT sector is a particularly appropriate context in which to explore changes in relation to risk and insecurity. It is characterised by many of the features that the new economy workplace is expected to have, such as project orientation and a focus on knowledge. ICT knowledge perishes quickly and has to be constantly updated to remain valuable (Kotamraju, 2002). Furthermore, the product sold in ICT work is knowledge-intensive and to create this service one has to apply knowledge to information. During the dot.com boom ICT work gained an image of being lucrative and fairly secure, but even though this image may never have reflected people’s experiences, the common perception is that ICT work has become more insecure because the market now appears saturated and even in decline (Ó'Riain, 2002). The ideal ICT worker is expected to be flexible and fancy-free - an ideal with a strong gender dimension (Manske, 2003). Overall there are very few women in high-level ICT work (Crump *et al.*, 2007; Panteli *et al.*, 2001; Webster, 2005; Woodfield, 2000). Careers are often seen as the succession of various projects, and to get new jobs ICT workers often have to engage in what Wittel (2001) calls a network sociality, developing contacts with people who may hire them for new jobs. Informal practices seem to be key to developing a successful career (Ó'Riain, 2000) but mechanisms comparable to old-boys’ networks mean that women regularly lose out when it comes to building a career in ICTs (Tierney, 1995). So far, research has not engaged with how gender is relevant in ICT work when it comes to risk and employment security. ICT work thus seems an excellent example through which to explore how workers in the new economy perceive risk, how they respond to it, and how gender matters in their perception of risk and employment security.
At the heart of this article is the question of how gender impacts the assessment of risk for ICT workers and how they make sense of this. What interested me was to explore the resources used by interviewees and how they talked about and justified certain views of gender, risk and insecurity. A discourse analysis (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) seemed particularly suited for these aims. There are many different varieties of discourse analysis (Gill, 1996; 2000; Phillips & Hardy, 2002). At the most basic level they have in common that they see the world as socially constructed, with discourse both constitutive of and constructed by social reality. Since the aim of the article is to explore how the social realities of ICT workers are constructed in relation to gender, risk and insecurity, discourse analysis is an appropriate tool. While some versions of discourse analysis are influenced by Foucauldian theories and focus on power relations and ideologies, others focus more on the fine-grain analysis of talk. The benefit of a discourse analysis in Potter and Wetherell’s version is that it can be used to focus on micro-details in talk, like turn taking or special language constructions (Speer & Potter, 2000; Speer & Potter, 2002), and can also be used to focus on the wider ideology that influences the utterance of certain statements (Edley & Wetherell, 1999; 2001; Wetherell & Edley, 1999). Discourse is here seen as a social practice that is occasioned, functional and rhetorically organised (Gill, 2000; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Discourse refers to language in action as well as larger ideological constructs that influence language patterns (Billig et al., 1988; Gill, 2000; Wetherell, 1998; Wetherell & Potter, 1988). It is thus possible to show which concepts and understandings of risk people have access to, how they understand risk and how they respond to it.

The study is based on interviews and observations in two ICT companies. One, a local company, is referred to as Redtech and employs about 50 people and creates Internet-related software. The other company, referred to as Bluetech, is the subsidiary of a multinational, employing 3,000 employees in Switzerland. It offers a range of services, from hardware through software, to ICT consultancy. I interviewed 26 people in total, 16 men and 10 women. At Redtech 15 people, 11 men and four women, were interviewed. At Bluetech I conducted 11 interviews, six with women and five with men. The interviews were about an hour long and were conducted in Swiss High German, a dialect of High German.
The interviews were transcribed verbatim and I used a simplified notation system to represent the talk. In addition I wrote fieldnotes on observations and produced short summaries of interviewees. These were coded into subject areas with the qualitative software programme Tams Analyzer and then read and re-read. I analysed the text as such without paying much attention to the gender of the interviewee. Initially I did not distinguish between what men and women said. Only when few gender differences emerged in the discourse on risk did I look at men and women as separate groups. The main focus of the study was how gender impacts on the ways ICT workers talked about risk and insecurity. The expectation was that gender is performed (Bruni et al., 2004; Butler, 1990; 2004; West & Zimmerman, 1991) and that people position themselves (Davies & Harré, 1990) in relation to the masculine gender subtext either by adopting it or by resisting it. I paid particular attention to what is said in one part of the interview but is not said in another, in order to gain greater insight into how certain forms of reality are constructed (Billig, 1991; Gill, 1993; Huckin, 2002).

Pseudonyms were chosen to protect the identity of the research participants. The participant’s age and the company they worked for were added in parenthesis behind the pseudonym and the interview extracts are my own translation from Swiss HighGerman.

Performing a Masculine Breadwinner Model

Job Security as Relative

One of the questions raised in the interviews was about how people perceive risk, particularly in relation to their jobs. When asked about their perception of risk and insecurity, most people replied referring to the fact that times had changed but that they were not too pessimistic about finding another job.

Many interviewees stated that perceptions of risk have changed:

Marcel: Well, three years ago, I would have said it (security) does not play a role at all. Now I’d say that a certain minimum has to be assured. Well, that I can afford my apartment somehow, if the
business activity is not so good, but I am not looking for a secure job. I am willing to run some risk, especially when it is lucrative for me. (…) Well, certain basic needs have to be covered but I can gamble with what is over and above that.

Marcel (29, Redtech) states that although he is not looking for ultimate security, he now takes care to protect his standard of living, at least in terms of such basics as paying for his apartment. Beyond that level he is prepared to take risks, but they have to be balanced by adequate financial compensation.

The change in the perception of risk can also be seen in Pascal’s (33, Redtech) comment:

Pascal: I realised strongly that job security is no longer as assured as it appeared during the hype. (…) Just because you work in informatics² and have a university degree, this does not mean that you will get a job. (-) For a time, it was almost like the idea, I can go out and say that I am looking for a job and 20 companies will queue.

Here, Pascal suggests he could have chosen from many jobs a few years earlier, but these times of ‘hype’ seem to be over, so that having a degree and experience in ICT is no longer enough to be sure of a job. The skills are no longer so much in demand that employers would ‘queue’ to hire him. Such a view is probably not uncommon following the bursting of the dot.com bubble, an event which changed the employment conditions for many ICT workers (Barley & Kunda, 2004).

Danielle (36, Redtech) conceptualised risk in a similar way:

Danielle: Well, in previous years it (risk and security at work) was not a topic at all, because jobs were literally flying at you. That of course has changed a bit in recent times, but I do not have to worry too much about it. There was once a phase when I was a bit afraid, this is a
small company and how long is one able to survive. But now, I am very optimistic by nature and there are always options. I think it depends a lot on yourself what you do with it. If there is a low and one (thinks) that the company will go bust and one will not find a job, then I would use the time in a useful, well use (the time) well, to give me the chance to present myself on the market.

Danielle tells me about the time when jobs became scarcer but overall she does not seem to worry a lot about job security. Even though she acknowledges that there was a period when it was really difficult, she says that she is now optimistic about finding jobs elsewhere. She also thinks that it is down to the individual to find a job in another company and that if one is made redundant, it is the worker’s responsibility to use the time well to position oneself on the market. I will outline the mechanisms through which that could happen later on, but what is relevant here is that she sees the individual as an agent who has to be marketable.

Yosef (33, Redtech) talked about how companies who once offered secure and stable employment were now making thousands of people redundant.

Yosef: The question is then, what does security mean today? Well, I think, security, I erased this word. I’m just looking at my own future and if I see that it is getting too insecure, I look for a more secure workplace. But (-) I don’t expect that I will find a work contract somewhere, where it says, we guarantee you for five years a job. HEHE. With an increasing income. HEHE

Yosef alleges that ‘security’ is a word he no longer actively uses in relation to employment. He adopts an egoistic stance towards security in simply trying to find for himself a place that appears relatively secure. The idea here is that one mainly has to look after oneself when it comes to security, a notion which strongly resonates with self-entrepreneurial tendencies (Pongratz & Voß, 2003; Storey et al., 2005). However, the idea that some company would offer Yosef a five-year contract with an increasing salary appears so unrealistic as to be laughable to him.
Ursula (36, Bluetech) viewed the matter in a similar fashion:

Ursula: Job security is relative. Well, that is really relative. I am really confident that as long as I am flexible, I would find another job within Bluetech as well.

Once again, the individual has to show flexibility to be of use to a company and to the economy as a whole. One of the few differences in this account is that Ursula assumes that she could find another job within the same company whilst most other people imagined that they would work for another employer.

Xavier (36, Redtech) was very articulate about risk when he talked about the changes he saw in the climate at the bank where he worked as a freelancer seconded to Redtech:

Xavier: I always thought that (name of a bank) had an implicit bargain with their employees. ‘We’ll pay you a good salary but you know you could earn more freelancing but the bargain is that you have job security’. And then this year they got rid of a thousand people. And a lot of them came from the IT group. And I think they broke their implicit bargain. You see that a lot in old companies. And I don’t think you gain extra security. (...) So, I don’t think a company would give me any security.

Xavier does not rely on a company to give him any form of security and relies on himself to earn as much as he can through being a freelancer while good times last. He does not trust companies. Here it becomes clear that it is the individual who appears in charge of shaping her/his own life.

This is echoed by Felix (36, Redtech) who reflects on the security a bigger company might offer versus a small one:
Felix: I believe it is a false sense of security. I do not think that there is a company that can give you security. That does not exist. I do not think so. Even a big bank can restructure and just get rid of people.

Felix’s perception of security is shaped by the conviction that it does not really exist. He compares his experience at Redtech with what he might experience in a bigger company and argues that there is no absolute security.

Laura (49, Bluetech) also acknowledges that times have changed:

Laura: Well, I mean it is no longer such a boom. That is clear but I am not a fatalist. I do not give myself a hard time for something that may never happen. What is the purpose of that? I mean, if I were to lose my job, then I would see what I want to do. But I try not to burden myself with such thoughts.

Laura provides here a very positive spin on the risk of losing one’s job. While she sees it as a possibility, she tries not to burden herself with worries and would deal with the problem of losing her job if and when it occurs. She thereby defers thinking about risk and tries to focus on the present.

What shines through in this discourse is that job security is relative and that times have changed. People working in ICTs now accept risk as part of their job. On this level there were few differences in the way men and women talked about this new risk culture and very similar interpretative repertoires were used by women and men relating to the fact that the individual has to ensure that he or she is positioned well. This reflected and enforced the self-entrepreneurial tendencies that have been observed at work, where people render themselves responsible for holding onto a job or finding a new one (Beck, 2000; Pongratz & Voß, 2003; Sennett, 1998; Storey et al., 2005)

**Gender and the Risk of Being Made Redundant**
Direct experiences of unemployment and redundancies were rare in the interviews, but at Bluetech some people used a radical restructuring at the company to explain their changed relationship to work. Robert (46, Bluetech), for example, said:

Robert: From this time on (when Bluetech cut 30% of its staff)
I had a bit of a different relationship to work. Well, I
assume that I’m employed for at least three months,
that is the notice period. You can live with that.

It appears that Robert’s perception of security changed when Bluetech went through a restructuring process and cut many jobs, after which he no longer assumed he had a safe job. This resulted in a short-termism, so that he thought only in terms of the next three months rather than of any long-term job security. Only one interviewee had experienced being made redundant: Hugo (29, Redtech), who was working for a client company of Redtech and seconded to Redtech at the time of the interviews. He told me that he had lost his job when the dot.com bubble burst. He said he was among the first to go since he had no family and thus, presumably, no responsibilities. He was also one of the youngest, and therefore assumed to be the most likely to be able to find a new job easily. This might be due to the ageism of the ICT industry, where younger people are often on a par with if not better at working with new technologies than experienced people (see later). In this case it is the young men without families, i.e. those who are not seen as breadwinners, who had to go first. While one could see this as a ‘last in, first out’ policy, Hugo thought that he was fired as he had no family responsibilities.

Based on this one might assume that women, if they are thought less likely to be breadwinners, would also be at risk of being fired, but the material does not support this. A different mechanism seems to operate here. Since there are few women in ICT work, it appears that ICT companies are keen to retain them rather than lose them through redundancy. Waltraud’s (52, Bluetech) team was reduced significantly in the mid-1990s.

Waltraud: We were ten people here (…) and now we are only two. (…) A year ago three of my colleagues were encouraged to retire (…)
all at once. They could chose but they all took it (early retirement) and it was at the behest of the company. Well, in that sense you can see it as a misfortune but for my colleagues it was also an opportunity. But you can of course see it as a misfortune.

Waltraud here makes clear how two-edged the early retirement offer of Bluetech was for her colleagues and that one can see it as an opportunity but also as a misfortune. She was not offered this choice, possibly because she had the option to retire in her mid-fifties anyway. Women who entered Bluetech in the 1960s and 1970s were given the privilege of early retirement. For Waltraud her job appeared to be less under threat because she could retire a couple of years after her colleagues left in any case. It is also possible that the company did not want to lose one of the few female ICT specialists they had prematurely.

The special position of women ICT workers becomes visible in Laura’s (49, Bluetech) statement. She talks about why she does not think she is in the high-risk group for being made redundant:

Laura: I have the feeling I do a good job and I am not on the risk list. It may be an advantage to be a woman, so that I am not on the risk list.

Elisabeth: Because one wants to keep women as figureheads?

Laura: That one does not, well, if. As long as I do the job, if I don’t do the job well then not, but as long as I do my job well, I’m not very much at risk.

One reason why Laura does not believe she is on the risk list is that she is a woman. I asked her directly if she functioned as a figurehead and if it might just look good to have a woman in her position. She raised this issue earlier in the interview when we talked about how there seems to be a quota for women to ensure they progress well in organisations, a concept she disliked as in her view it undermines women’s
competences. She did not really reply to my question but rather reiterated that she was fairly safe as long as she did her job well. Again we see here the repertoire of being responsible for avoiding redundancy by performing well. Yet here, being a woman is added as an advantage. One possible reason why Laura referred to her good performance could be that she wanted to counteract the impression that there may be a form of positive discrimination at work, meaning that she only held onto her job because she was a woman. Laura referred only hesitantly to the difference being a woman might make to her job security, and no-one else talked about risk with reference to gender.

Laura’s comment, and indeed Hugo’s and Waltraud’s experiences, may indicate that gender is relevant to how working lives are shaped and accounted for. It seems in fact that younger men without breadwinning responsibility and older men are more likely to be made redundant than women of any age. On the one hand this is due to specific structural arrangements particular to the Swiss context, in this case that women can take early retirement. On the other hand it is due to the fact that companies might not want to lose the few women they have in ICTs. Rather than firing women because it is assumed that they are not the main breadwinner, the perception seems to be that the scarcity of women in ICT work means that they are in the special position of being less at risk of being made redundant than their male colleagues. This can only be a tentative suggestion, however, since there were so few instances when the gendered nature of job risk was explicitly acknowledged. That might be due to the fact that it is not politically correct to spell such things out. Alternatively, it might be that people do not perceive gender as relevant.

**Becoming a Breadwinner**

The previous section suggested that young men without breadwinning responsibilities are seen to be more likely to lose their jobs. Breadwinning responsibility coupled with age was indeed a central axis that people used to make sense of risk and why they might perceive the risk of job loss as smaller or larger.

Yosef (33, Redtech), for instance, said the following:
Elisabeth: How important is security for you?

Yosef: The older I am the more important it is. I mean especially if you have children, maybe sometimes a house or something, then you need security. Nevertheless security is a castle in the air. No-one gives you security.

Yosef here maintains that security is elusive, which is in line with his earlier statement. However, he acknowledges that age plays a central role in the perception of job security in that it becomes more important as one gets older, because having children and a mortgage adds to the pressure to earn a living. Even though he has two small children, however, he nevertheless sees security as something that no-one can give him.

Others like Günther (32, Redtech) also alluded to this:

Günther: It is simple with security, if you are doing well, it is important to you, that is also a reason why I (stayed) here. One or two years ago I had one or two offers and I am happy that I did not make the move, I mean (I could have been among those) who were let go. (...) Job security is important for me. On the other hand it is just convenience. I have few responsibilities (-) financially none at all and I do not have to worry a lot. I could focus on finding something else for six months and that would be enough. In Zürich or, I don’t know where, in France or wherever, whatever, and maybe it would even be the impetus for a bigger change.

Although Günther values security, he appears not to be concerned that his world would fall apart if he lost his job. He reflects on job offers he did not take and in hindsight is happy not to have accepted them as apparently these companies subsequently laid people off. Security is not only comfort but also a convenience. He justifies this view by stating that he has few responsibilities such as mortgages or
loans that would put him under pressure financially. He has no children and his girlfriend is earning her own income, which could contribute to his perception that a job loss would not put him under undue strain. He even puts a positive spin on the risk of losing his job, talking about it as an opportunity for change.

A very similar interpretative repertoire is also used by Kristian (36, Redtech) who had just decided at the time of the interview to reduce his hours at Redtech and to do more work on projects that interested him:

Kristian: Well security plays less of a role, because I have no children, no family, so for me that is really a less important point. I still have a certain amount of security. If things change, I still work for the company 40% of the time and they pay a salary on which I can survive. Based on this I have certain security. If I had given notice and had become a (full-time) entrepreneur (…), then the insecurity would have been bigger.

We see here how Kristian justifies his recent decision to reduce his hours at Redtech to set up his own business and have more time to spend travelling. Like Günther, he also seems to refer to additional responsibilities, like a family or children, that would shape his perception of security in the future. He argues that the risks he has taken are very calculated ones in that he did not become an entrepreneur outright but continues to be employed by Redtech part-time.

Quinta (42, Bluetech) provides an example of a woman who saw herself as a supplemental earner, while her husband was the main breadwinner. She works part-time and her husband works full-time to allow her to care for their children. Interestingly enough, this arrangement was recently threatened when her husband was on the brink of losing his job, when she said to him:

Quinta: ‘Okay, if you lose your job, you either find another one quickly or I work 100% (full-time)’. And I knew that last year that would have been possible. Well, the pressure on the family is smaller (-) if one person is not responsible for the whole (all
of the income). (...) And when I think, I no longer want to (work), I want to ride a horse or do some pottery, then I just do it. HEHE. That is what I call luxury, which most men do not have. That is a different pressure, well, to know that you have to survive.

Quinta shows here that it would be theoretically and practically possible to reverse the gender roles if her husband were to become unemployed. She recalls that she would have just worked full-time if her husband had lost his job. For her this limits the pressure on the breadwinner if she as a part-time worker can go to work full-time. At the same time she also sees her position as a luxurious one, as her husband carries most of the breadwinning burden and she can decide to do more leisurely activities. She acknowledges that most men do not have this luxury and have to carry the burden of being the breadwinner, battling to hold onto a job because their families depend on their income to survive.

As previous research has highlighted, attitudes towards job security are influenced by the different life courses of men and women (Charles & James, 2003), as well as by life stages and decisions about who is the breadwinner. Of the people I talked to, only seven had children, of whom one was a woman. The others may have decided to postpone having children or they might have decided not to have any. There is also the assumption that women who have children no longer work in ICTs but care for them full-time, a belief that was explicitly voiced in others parts of the interviews (Kelan, 2007b). However, having children does not mean that breadwinning roles are pre-decided and the division of income earning and caring work often depends on individual arrangements (cf. Nentwich, 2004). Many men and women in the sample were single like Danielle or in a partnership where both worked full-time like Günther. There was a case where a woman, Laura, was the sole breadwinner because her husband was unable to work due to illness. Many people made reference to becoming a breadwinner and linked that with a discourse of age and increasing responsibility. While many of the interviewees were not in a traditional male breadwinner/female supplemental earner arrangement, traditional ideas about such roles nevertheless influenced the discourses they produced on risk and job security.
These traditional notions slipped back into the otherwise very gender-neutral accounts.

**Remaining a Breadwinner**

The responses to the perceived employment risk were rather similar in both companies and among both men and women. Many accounts centred around employability, the ability to remain employable or to remain the breadwinner.

One of the most common answers to questions about risk and job security was that employees should not only accept risk as part of working in ICT, but also take personal responsibility for holding onto a job:

Yosef: You never have security in that sense, that means that you just have to ensure that you are great and that you can always find a job. Then you have security.

Yosef (33, Redtech) continues his earlier statement by saying that the only form of security one has is to be good at one’s job and that the only guarantee of remaining in employment or of finding new jobs is to work on one’s own competence. The implication is that if someone is made redundant then they cannot be very good at their job. This is despite the fact that many redundancies are nothing to do with personal performance but due to the market. By giving himself agency in this situation, Yosef gives the impression that he can control his future employment. Yosef thereby concludes that only he can ensure that he will be employed – thus demonstrating that he has internalised the discourse of being responsible for one’s own security.

A similar form of agency was also expressed by Nikolas (46, Bluetech).

Nikolas: The Buddhist (to whom he referred earlier in the interview) told me that the biggest mistake is to stay somewhere, where you believe you are secure. And I tried to do that in recent years. You have to keep in motion.
Nikolas refers to his religious friend when saying that security is generally a false belief and therefore he tries to be dynamic and is continually change jobs. He talks about risk in such a way that it appears that the individual is the agent, who has to stay in motion and thus avoid losing one’s job. Through this resource it appears that it is the individual who has to be active to avoid being the passive victim of redundancy.

Esther: In informatics it changes so quickly that you sometimes have the feeling, er, learning new names again, a new company there, a new product there and a new abbreviation and I sometimes find this tiring, but principally, if you focus on your core competency, than this is no problem.

For Esther (33, Redtech), it can be tedious to constantly be learning new things but she balances this by a commitment to stick to her ‘core competency’. This is part of the current management jargon and in German is usually used to refer to companies focusing on their strengths (cf. Prahalad & Hamel, 1994). Here this language is transferred to the individual worker, seen as having to manage their own skills, just as a company manages its resources. Market narratives are thus adopted and used by men and women to describe their own skills. However, as Connell (1998) has argued, the performance of such an entrepreneurial self resonates strongly with notions of hegemonic masculinity. In the interviews this hegemonic masculinity was performed and displayed by men and women alike when they talked about employability.

One element that was said to endanger the ability to remain a breadwinner was the possibility that a time might come when one might no longer be able or willing to invest time in learning new technologies. Zacharias (35, Redtech) talked vividly about this.

Zacharias: That is a thing that frightens me a bit because on the one hand one becomes more valuable through experience, as long as you are able to gain further experience. (...) On the other hand technology develops rapidly and in concrete projects one has almost no time to enhance one’s own technical abilities, which means
that my further education happens almost entirely in my private time. That is not too great because one you should really make a stronger distinction between work and private life, but it’s not possible to keep up otherwise. And additionally, as long as one is young, one enjoys exploring new things and new opportunities. But I think that there will be a point in time where you say, I’ve seen it, I don’t want to learn the nth programming language, again a new library and again wallowing in thick books and starting again as a nobody, because there is someone from the university, he is half-baked, but he knows this new technology much, much better than you. (...) You lose your standing. At the moment I don’t have a problem with that.

Zacharias acknowledges that one needs to learn to stay up-to-date but he learns in his private time, as he finds no time during the projects. It might be that he wants to do different things in his private time, like caring for a family, either now or in the future, but he does not specify what he would rather be doing. What he says is that he should distinguish between his work and private life a bit more, but then he would not have enough time to learn new skills. Another thing that may endanger learning, he says, is ageing. He does not say that older people are unable to learn new things, but rather that with age comes a waning of interest in keeping up with the latest knowledge and a lack of desire to struggle every day to defend one’s market position. This would then leave one vulnerable to being overtaken by younger people, who are presented through an extreme case formulation (Edwards, 2000; Pomerantz, 1986; Potter, 1996) as being much better in certain technologies than older people although they might be ‘half-baked’ in terms of their wider knowledge and experience. In an environment where only the latest hype is valued, not being able to learn puts one into a dead-end position (cf. Sennett, 1998) and one needs time to update one’s knowledge constantly. If there are other commitments in one’s private time, such as raising a family, it may become difficult to ‘keep one’s standing’. This account undermines the idea that Zacharias initially cited, namely that one becomes more valuable with experience.
The market narrative most people tended to adopt when talking about employability was thus endangered by the inability to remain flexible to adapt to the changing market. This was true for men and women. However, it might be particularly relevant for women as they generally tend to have the work second shifts to deal with the double burden due to the unequal distribution of household and caring tasks (Dixon & Wetherell, 2004; Hochschild & Machung, 2003). This discourse suggests that the ideal ICT worker is expected to devote most of his/her time to work, revealing a masculine subtext (Acker, 1990; Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998a; b) in the narratives. Both men and women drew on this discourse, and some drew attention to the difficulty of sustaining their performance, particularly with advancing age and greater domestic responsibilities. In order to remain employable it seems that ICT workers have to put their work first and put in the additional hours necessary to remain up-to-date. This means that they have to enact a breadwinner mentality where work takes precedence over other aspects of life.

Discussion

In the previous section I outlined four main discourses that ICT workers used when talking about risk and insecurity and I have shown how gender is relevant in their accounts. First, most ICT workers accepted risk as part of their jobs. They normalised risk and saw it as a fact of life. In the second discourse it became clear that women were implicitly constructed as less likely than men to lose their jobs. This is linked to the scarcity of women in ICT work but also to different rules and regulations, meaning that women could in this case retire earlier than men. Young men without family responsibilities were also constructed as particularly likely to lose their jobs. Thirdly, interviewees used accounts relating to life cycle to justify a certain perception of risk. The basic idea was that as soon as people have responsibilities in the form of mortgages or families, they will have a greater need for security. Fourthly, interviewees regularly drew on a discourse about the ability to remain a breadwinner and the importance of keeping one’s own knowledge up-to-date in order to remain employable.
Although the resources can be analytically separated they were often used in combination. What these four discourses share is a strong orientation towards neoliberalism and the idea that workers are agents of their own future. It became apparent that this neoliberal conceptualisation of a rational deciding subject played a key role, albeit in a new version (see also Boltanski & Chiapello, 2006; Bröckling, 2000; Holtgrewe, 2003; Moldaschl & Voß, 2002; Wajcman & Martin, 2002). This new version of the Homo economicus is market-driven and self-directional, yet constructed as gender neutral, and more an economic person than an economic man. This economic person has to look out for him/herself. They can no longer rely on a company to give them job security and it is their own responsibility to ensure that they remain employable. Even though constructed as gender neutral, this ideal is pervaded by associations with masculinity (Bowman, 2007; Connell, 2000). These ICT workers seem to be very willing to accept higher degrees of insecurity and the pressure to stay up-to-date simply because that is the way the world of work now operates. Many seemed to justify and rationalize the changes brought about by neoliberal capitalism by seeing them as an inevitable part of their working world.

However, people did voice concerns about the future and it was interesting to note that arguments around the life cycle and ageing became significant. Theorists of neoliberal subjectivities and risk have assumed that since everybody is a free agent, each person is responsible for themselves and can shape their own success or failure (Beck, 2000). This tendency to see oneself as able to craft one’s own life path is a precondition of individualisation (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002a; b). This neoliberal discourse of self-fashioning finds voice among the interviewees in this study. In general they treated gender as an outdated category which did not have any bearing on the present. The perceived irrelevance of gender meant that interviewees struggled in other parts of the interviews to account for the relative absence of women from ICT work or for instances of gender discrimination (Kelan, 2007a; b).

The relative absence of gender from the discourses of men and women alike does not mean that gender did not matter. Making gender invisible is a very common feature of the neoliberal self-entrepreneurial discourse, demonstrating how modern and developed the speaker is (Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998b; Eisenhart & Finkel, 1998;
Gill, 2002; Hoeber, 2007; Jorgensen, 2002; Lewis, 2006). This gender invisibility, however, disguises the fact that the implicit ideal of a breadwinner is saturated with masculinity, although it is not male per se. The assumption is that the worker, male or female, has no caring or household responsibilities and can focus on their job full-time. This ignores the fact that many women still have to work the second shift at home (Hochschild & Machung, 2003).

What is particularly interesting about this study, however, is that the difficulties of balancing the demands of a more-than-full-time breadwinner role with a caring role are not voiced in terms of gender. Instead, they are articulated in terms of ageing and the likelihood of having less energy for the job because of decreasing energy, motivation or family commitments. In other words, while gender can be ignored, the self-fashioning discourse of the entrepreneurial self runs into difficulties once ageing is taken into consideration, and anxieties about the challenge of maintaining one’s position as breadwinner are expressed via age rather than gender. As a result, the masculine subtext of the breadwinner discourse remains invisible beneath the apparently gender-neutral discourse (e.g. Collinson & Hearn, 1996; Salzinger, 2004).

**Conclusion**

This article analyzed how the perception of risk and job insecurity and the frameworks developed to deal with these are linked to gender. It is now widely accepted that work has become more insecure and more risky. This is often talked about in light of the decline of the male breadwinner. However, the way in which gender impacts on the perception and experience of risk and job insecurity is rarely the focus of research. I have identified four distinct yet overlapping interpretative repertoires through which ICT workers made sense of risk, insecurity and gender. While risk is seen as a normal part of a job in this sector, women were seen as implicitly less likely to lose their job due to structural parameters and the fact that there are relatively few women in ICT work. Becoming and remaining a breadwinner and maintaining one’s employability were constructed as centrally important concepts. Ageing was particularly important in this regard, functioning as a focus of anxiety about how long it would be possible to maintain this entrepreneurial work on the self in order to stay up-to-date and at the top of one’s game. Theories of
individualization were supported in so far as gender remained unvoiced within the discourses which were mobilized to talk about risk and security. However, the anxieties of being and remaining a neoliberal subject were expressed through the theme of ageing, constructed as a future state in which familial demands are likely to impinge on one’s ability to dedicate time and energy to self-entrepreneurial activities. This article has argued that while individual ICT workers have a difficult, if not impossible, time articulating their own perception of personal risk in the workplace in gendered terms, a gendered subtext became visible through how they voice their anxieties around ageing. It has contributed towards developing a gendered understanding of risk and insecurity through showing that a masculine breadwinner subtext underlies the apparently gender-neutral discourses of individualization and self-entrepreneurial work practices.

There are three questions that further research could explore. Firstly, there are few studies which deal with gender, risk and insecurity in terms of both subjective perception and objective outcomes, and there is much room to further develop and refine theories on how gender and risk intersect. Secondly, one might look in greater detail at the relevance of ageing for men and women, since it remains an under-explored area. Thirdly, this article has shown the masculine breadwinner subtext in risk discourses, but it has not explored how these discourses limit or enhance the ability of women and men to fit the ideal worker template. Previous research has shown that men usually fit the ideal better when skills are constructed as masculine and that even when skills are constructed as feminine, men are often able to perform them equally as well as women, if not better (Acker, 1990; Fletcher, 1999; Kelan, 2008; Peterson, 2007; Woodfield, 2000). Future research might then explore how far the ability to be a breadwinner can be performed by men and women to the same degree. The article has made a first step in developing the field of gender and risk by showing that a masculine breadwinner subtext underlies current conceptualizations of job insecurity.

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1 A simplified version of the Jefferson transcription system (cf. Heritage, 1984) was used: (-) indicates a short notable pause, (0.9) an exactly timed longer pause (here 9 seconds), (inaud) is inaudible, (text) indicates a transcriber clarification on unclear parts of tape or additional clarification such as gender of German word, (...) material deliberately omitted and HEHE stands for laughter.

2 Informatics reflects the German word ‘Informatik’ and refers to information communication technology work.

3 Beck (2000) describes the way in which people are encouraged to see themselves as companies adopting a Me & Co mindset, which is part of the individualisation process society is said to undergo.