

# Political Institutions “Doing Gender”: The Limits of the Knowledge Approach

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## **Abstract**

“Knowledge” seems to be a central category of current policy analysis. But this mainstream discussion not only tends to overlook the feminist discussion about a “gender knowledge approach”, but it often underestimates the limits of focussing solely on the knowledge of policy makers. In this paper I intend to make the boundaries of the knowledge approach visible by enlarging the originally sociological gender knowledge approach with findings on the political construction of knowledge and the role state-run organisations play as institutions—as providers for orientation and socialisation. My thesis is that the “doing gender” of political institutions relies on how political institutions are modelled and by whom and how they are controlled: if they are independent of or dependent on civil society and its organisations.

I base this article on a study I carried out on state-run vocational guidance agencies in Germany and the ways in which these agencies reproduced gender relations. On the basis of the “frame theory” of institutionalism and the importance symbols have in political life, I propose to work with the category of “role models”, the guiding principles of gender relations, instead of searching for more different “forms” of gender knowledge. When predicting political change, we rather should ask, “Who produces gender knowledge by what means” and furthermore, “What kind of gender knowledge is inscribed in procedure, norms and cognition”.

## **Zusammenfassung**

“Wissen” scheint gegenwärtig eine zentrale Untersuchungskategorie der deutschsprachigen Politikfeldanalyse zu sein. Nur wenig Beachtung geschenkt wird dabei bislang der schon seit längerem unter feministischem Vorzeichen geführten Diskussion um einen Gender-knowledge-Ansatz. Auch den Grenzen eines Wissens-Ansatzes wird m. E. häufig zu wenig Beachtung geschenkt. Ziel dieses Beitrages ist es, am Beispiel des Gender-knowledge-Ansatzes diese Grenzen aufzuzeigen und den Gender-knowledge-Ansatz zu erweitern. Dazu stelle ich aus der Empirie gewonnene Erkenntnisse um die politische Konstruktion von Wissen vor und beleuchte die Rolle, die staatliche Organisation als politische Institutionen, als orientierende und sozialisierende Instanzen spielen. Meine These ist, dass das

„doing gender“ von politischen Institutionen davon abhängt, wie letztere konstituiert sind und kontrolliert werden; ob und inwieweit sie von der Gesellschaft und deren Organisationen abhängig oder unabhängig sind.

Der Hintergrund ist eine Studie zur Steuerung der Geschlechterverhältnisse durch die Berufsberatung der Bundesagentur für Arbeit. Auf der Basis der Rahmentheorie politischer Institutionen und der Bedeutsamkeit von Symbolen plädiere ich dafür, anstelle weiterhin nach verschiedenen Formen von „gender knowledge“ zu suchen, zur Kategorie der Leitidee, zur unterlegten Vorstellung der erwünschten Rolle, die Männer und Frauen in dieser Gesellschaft einnehmen sollten, zurückzukehren. Um politische Veränderungen zu entdecken sollte vielmehr gefragt werden, wer wodurch Wissen herstellt, – und darüber hinausgehend – welche Art von Wissen in Verfahrensweisen, Normen und Kognitionen eingelassen ist.

## 1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In Germany three out of five school leavers take up an apprenticeship in the “dual” system of vocational education and training (VET). The apprenticeships alternate between school and training companies. In this system sex segregation is remarkably persistent. Since the end of the 1970s, when policies to open up male-dominated apprenticeships for girls were first carried out, the participation of girls in such apprenticeships rose on average at a rate of just 0,1 per cent yearly. Girls now make up 3.2 per cent of the apprentices in metalworking and 4.1 per cent in electronics.<sup>2</sup> Research has shown that job histories of women depend solely on the initial vocational education and training they completed, and not—as often supposed—on the number of children or the income of the husbands (Born 2000, Krüger 1998). Thus, vocational guidance is of outstanding importance for forming and directing gender-relations. In Germany vocational guidance is primarily the responsibility of the Federal Employment Agency (Bundesagentur für Arbeit – BA); and until 1998 it even had a

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<sup>1</sup> I thank Dr. Dorian Woods, Tübingen, for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> I included those apprenticeships with a duration of at least three years of learning and with a ratio of girls not higher than five per cent in 1991. Excluded are a small number of apprenticeships which regularly need only two years of training and education, and special apprenticeships provided for the handicapped. Source: Statistisches Bundesamt 2011.

monopoly on vocational counselling. Nearly two million young people ask the BA for advice every year.

In my empirical study about the “gendering” of the vocational guidance agencies (published in 2005) I found that the BA hinders girls to choose more uncommon occupations. This is not caused by the overall opinions and norms of the counsellors, but by organisational rules and by working tools. The counsellors must work with tools like brochures and computer programs and this was indeed where gender norms were reproduced. Moreover, I detected that the counsellors have substantial knowledge gaps about girls’ and boys’ needs. The reason for these gaps can be found in the way counsellor-specific knowledge is produced and dissimilated.

In political analysis “knowledge” currently seems to be a central category. For example the section “Policy Analysis and Administration Science” of the German Association for Political Science (DVPW) devoted its annual congress in 2011 to “Knowledge in Politics and Administration”. In feminist analysis a so-called “gender knowledge approach” is—as Angelika Wetterer (2008a: 13) points out—an approach which is just as “booming”. Meanwhile, this originally sociological approach has spread over to feminist political scientists.<sup>3</sup> In this essay I discuss this “gender knowledge approach” and in doing so, I intend to elucidate the benefits and limits of the knowledge approach in general. In my opinion, this gender knowledge approach is able to give worthy insights; but as I explain in this essay, it is not sufficient to unravel the reasons of gendered outcome of political institutions. The gender knowledge approach needs to be supplemented and improved with some political theories and approaches which I will present here.

This essay is divided into three sections. First, I give a brief overview of theories and methods of my study and then discuss the “new institutionalism”. The next, main section starts with an introduction of the gender knowledge approach. I then present my findings on the knowledge of vocational guidance counsellors. These findings show substantial deficiencies and pose the

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<sup>3</sup> See: Çağlar 2010, Cavaghan 2010 and 2011, Eberhardt/Schwenken 2010 Young/Scherrer ed. 2010.

question of why such deficiencies occur. The personal backgrounds of the counsellors brought some insights into insufficient supports for girls, but the main reasons were found in the political structure and in the construction of the BA. I elaborate where “gendering” can be interwoven in organisational design, and I argue that if the “gendering” of political institutions—their outcome—is analysed, then we need to focus not just solely on the knowledge of the actors but on the institutional frameworks which are of utmost influence. Here I illustrate the importance of the theses of James J. March and Johann Olsen (1984, 2005) who point out that political institutions can be “actors in their own right”. In chapter four I summarize these findings and introduce “guiding principles” as more useful categories of theory, as opposed to “forms” of knowledge.

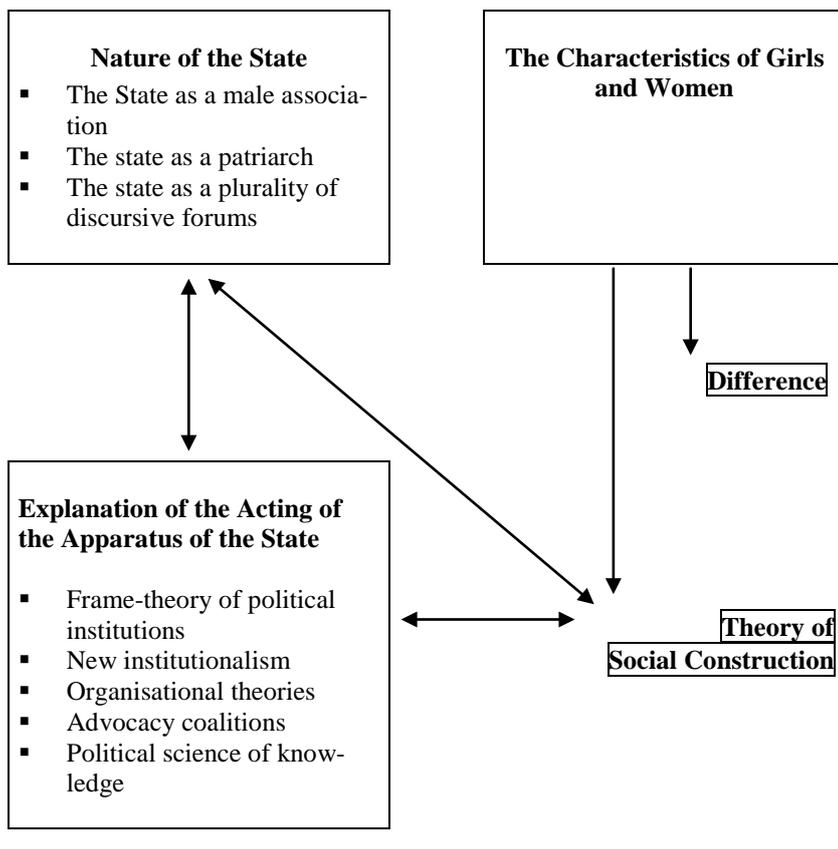
## **2 Institutional Approach and Methods of my Study**

My research project was centred on two questions: First, I wanted to find out why the public career-guidance-agencies place just a low number of girls in male-dominated education and trainings, and, secondly, I asked why some local agencies arrange more apprenticeships for girls in such trainings than others. The study is basically grounded in “new institutionalism” (March/Olsen 1984, 2005; Mayntz/Scharpf 1995) accompanied by a frame-theory of political institutions (Göhler 1997a & b) (see Fig. 1): These theories about the nature of the state lead to questions on how the state-apparatus acts. Connected with policy analysis approaches, theories on institutionalism have been proven to be particularly useful. The second building block of theories was taken to explain the “nature or character of girls and women”. These theories can be divided in two conflicting strands: the theory of gender-difference and the theory of gender as a social construction. Last but not least, the theories which explain “gender as a social construction” and “state apparatuses” can be thought together. This leads to the consequence that the sociological theory of gender as a social construction has to be enlarged: Gender is not solely a social but also a political con-

struction. Institutions “have distributional effects”, as Georgia Waylen (2009: 248) points out.

Fig. 1:

### Theoretical Approaches



Gerhard Göhler defines political institutions as follows:

„Political Institutions are systems of rules for the construction and conduction of binding, relevant decisions that relate to society as a whole, and the instances of a symbolic display of the basic accomplishments of and measure of orientation within a society. As such, they are not only a fixed frame but they are also a congealed pattern of the political bargaining space” (Göhler 1997b: 26; own translation).

Institutions can guide and steer a society by regulations, bans, and incentives. Moreover, they provide orientation about values and principles of the social and political order. The fundamental moral concepts and principles of orientation are made visible by symbolic display.

In Gerhard Göhler's theory symbols play a crucial role. Symbols are signs with a "surplus" (Überschussgehalt). Due to the condensed message they inherit, the meaning of symbols—in contrast of that of signs—is not unambiguous or fixed. Symbols leave possibilities for interpretation and different possibilities as well as for consent and for rejection. The messages can be varied individually by different interpretation. But if a soundboard exists, the message will be emphasized "enormously" (Göhler 1997b: 32). Like playing a violin, particular sides of the addressees have to be brought into vibration (Göhler 2007: 104). Steering by symbols is intentionally and a conventional means of steering horizontally in non-hierarchical systems. As such it is "soft power" par excellence (ibid.: 103). Göhler points out that it is important to understand the function symbols have for the construction of social reality. For a gender knowledge approach these remarks cannot be weighted enough: Symbols construct social reality by carrying gender norms. I will come back again later to this thesis (see Fig. 6).

While Gerhard Göhler's work is based on political theory, the starting point of James J. March's and Johann P. Olsen's work has been founded in empirical observations. In their work on "new institutionalism" (1984) they emphasize organisational factors in political life and highlight (1) the inefficiencies of history, which involve "a greater concern for the ways in which institutions learn from their experience" and "the role of standard operating procedures, professions and expertise in storing and recalling history" (ibid.: 743). Furthermore, they stress (2) the relevance of time for when problems arise, (3) the relevance of the ways in which interests and preferences develop, (4) the relevance of relationships of norms and their significance, ambiguity and inconsistency, (5) the relevance of the "institutional demography", the mosaic of private lives that impact on collective behaviour, (6) the relevance of the "symbolic order", i.e. the "ordering force of symbols, rituals, ceremonies, stories and drama in political life" (ibid.: 744). They do not deny the social context of politics nor the motives of individual actors, but "the new institutionalism insists on a more autonomous role for political institutions" (ibid.: 738):

“The bureaucratic agency, the legislative committee and the appellate court are arenas for contending social forces, but they are also collections of standard operating procedures and structures that define and defend interests. They are political actors in their own right” (738).

By using the term “new institutionalism” March and Olsen signal that they connect the “old” institutionalism of political science with political theory. In my opinion the often used term “historical institutionalism” (Hall/Taylor 1996 and others) is misleading because this approach is not solely useful for historical research. In contrast, it is “a promising theoretical approach for the study of gender, institutions and power” (Kenny 2007: 97), and—indeed—is “helpful for feminist political science” (Waylen 2009: 253).

The work of Fritz W. Scharpf has much in common with the ideas March and Olsen presented (see, for example, Scharpf 1977, 1982). Most of the attention on this work focuses on an essay he wrote together with Renate Mayntz on “actors’ centred institutionalism”. They present their “temporary results” of endeavours to develop a “tailored approach for research on the problematic of steering and self-organisation on the level of entire areas of society” (Mayntz/Scharpf 1995: 39; own translation). Their approach tries to overcome the analytical dichotomy of structure and actor by engaging a double perspective. However, Scharf and Mayntz say themselves that this approach has the danger of getting overly complex. To simplify this approach, they claim that one does not need to explain something from the perspective of actors if this phenomenon can be explained institutionally (ibid. 66). Nevertheless, Mayntz and Scharpf oppose the thesis of March and Olsen which says that political institutions can act “in their own right”. Their argument is that systems of rules cannot act. The capacity of organisations to act as a whole would depend on the ability of collective decision making and the action of those who are directing these actions. Hence, the ability of political institutions of collective decision making is the key to understanding the influence held by political institutions. Altogether, these theories and approaches present an entire “shopping basket” of research questions for the role (gender) knowledge plays.

The institutional approach and the methods of my study incorporate these approaches, with both an examination of institutional and of actor centred data. I examined statistics, office instructions, publications by members of the BA and such data as brochures, books and computer programs directed to young people who were searching for an apprenticeship. In addition, I conducted face-to-face interviews with the heads of the career guidance divisions and the equal opportunity advisers of twelve employment agencies, dispersed throughout Germany. Four agencies were in Eastern Germany, six in Western Germany and two in Berlin which were responsible for single areas of East and West Berlin simultaneously. The staff was composed of counsellors of the eastern and western part of the city. These interviews were accompanied by a questionnaire addressed to career guidance counsellors whose task was to serve the “general” public in these agencies. (I excluded those guidance counsellors whose work is usually addressed to handicapped applicants or to applicants who want to take up studies at university.) Ninety counsellors answered my questionnaire (57 from West-, 19 from East-Germany and 13 from Berlin<sup>4</sup>). The interviews took place in autumn 1998. Current research suggests that more current interviews would have the same results, or even worse ones—not only from a feminist point of view. Since 2002, the BA has turned to running its operations with a strategy adopted from New Public Management (NPM) and reformulated its institutional goals and instruments. But it transformed the strategy of NPM into “micro-economisation”, and this has translated into the agency’s interest in placing financial profits ahead of the needs of young people seeking advice (see Ostendorf 2011, 2012).

### **3 The Gender Knowledge Approach—Useful but Limited**

The gender knowledge approach can be traced back to a study carried out by Sünne Andresen, Irene Dölling and Christof Kim-

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<sup>4</sup> One did not answer this question.

merle (2003).<sup>5</sup> In this section, I intend first to introduce this approach. Then I present examples of gender knowledge in my findings, and I explain why German vocational counsellors have momentous knowledge gaps. While the work of Andresen/Dölling/Kimmerle is based on sociology and deals with the question whether gender representation can be archived inside political institutions, political scientists usually focus on outputs and outcomes of political institutions. Therefore, I then explain where gender knowledge can be interwoven in procedures and rules. In the last section I focus on the institutional framing of public administrations.

### 3.1 The Gender Knowledge Approach

The primary research question of Irene Dölling, Sünne Andresen and Christof Kimmerle was if NPM would reduce gender hierarchies. Feminists, researchers as well as activists, were hopeful it would, because the organisational rules would become more objective and would offer fewer opportunities to discriminate against women. Dölling, Andresen and Kimmerle interviewed executive officers in a district council (Bezirksamt) in East Berlin and women who applied for a job in this administration. Their results did not support feminists' expectations but brought insights into what kind of role “knowledge” plays for gender relations. They found diverse types of gender knowledge, from “natural, biological differences” to rejection of ascriptions of “typical behaviours”. Some interviewees thought that the existence of two sexes bears no relevance to job qualifications; others had a good instinct in distinguishing social differences and their implications for job qualifications. But the interviewees denied that gender either played a role inside the organisation or influenced sexed hierarchies, although they existed. The interviewees argued that everybody should be seen as “human” and it was therefore logical that under this “universal code” (Andresen/Dölling 2005: 177) equal-opportunity-policies like gender mainstreaming were seen as unnecessary.

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<sup>5</sup> The authors published their results many times; some publications even are reprints.—A proof for the boom, this approach has evoked.

The authors define gender knowledge as follows:

“[Gender knowledge is] knowledge ... about the difference between the sexes, the reasoning of the self-evidence and evidence [of these differences], [and] the prevailing normative ideas about the ‘correct’ gender relations and divisions of labour between women and men” (Andresen/Dölling 2005: 175).<sup>6</sup>

The authors differentiate “roughly” (Dölling 2007: 17) between three ‘forms’ of gender knowledge:

- “Practise, everyday knowledge. This knowledge is predominantly unreflected and tacit. It may be dominated by cultural stereotypes.
- Institutionally produced knowledge (such as that in religion, academic disciplines, or law). This form of knowledge is distanced from practise and is more abstract.
- Popular[ized, H.O.] knowledge found in journalistic features, consultants, unions, social movements. This is an important intermediary between expert and everyday knowledge” (Cavaghan 2010: 20).

These ‘forms’ of gender knowledge offer a “map” where the variety of knowledge can be located, as Angelika Wetter (2008b: 56) points out. However, Wetterer views them as not being complete and not differentiating enough to grasp the entire varieties (ibid. 60). She suggests additional forms, such as “visual” gender knowledge. In my opinion, the search for more ‘forms’ might be futile for political scientists, but—as Rosalind Cavaghan (2010: 33) notes—the gender knowledge approach “has the potential to stimulate particularly interesting insights into policy processes”. I would argue that political structures can be scrutinized as well on the basis of a gender knowledge approach. Thus, doing so, the limits of this approach come to light, which I will explain further (see section 2.3).

Moreover, there are some additional points that need to be discussed. First of all, the authors do not take wholly into account from which sources the knowledge stems.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, “prac-

<sup>6</sup> Translation taken from Rosalind Cavaghan’s text (2010: 19).

<sup>7</sup> Irene Dölling (2003: 118) points to political socialisation by highlighting different phases of gender policies in GDR. In my opinion this approach is useful to explain the origins of attitudes and meanings but not those of knowledge. This approach denies the influence of the multitude of further training the East German executive officers had since German unification.

tice knowledge” and “everyday knowledge” should be analytically separated. Much of the “everyday knowledge” is usually automated: leaving home for work, we do not have to reflect if we should turn right or left, nor do we need a map. In contrast, “practice knowledge” is open to and stimulates reflection.

The two next forms of gender knowledge are more institutionally bedded. The second ‘form’, the “institutionally produced knowledge”, has to be critically analysed: Religion produces beliefs, not knowledge, in contrast to “academic disciplines”, although knowledge itself is always a construction. Academic disciplines have systems of their own, and outsiders are ignored simply due to their lack of cognitive coherence, of “formulaic interlocking with normal procedures of validation” (Douglas 1986: 77). The third ‘form’, “popularized knowledge”, plays an important role in politics. But:

“Much of the social science that affects policy is a pop social science, filtered through popular coverage in newspapers, magazines, and television, attenuated by selective attention, and reduced further by sheer forgetting of details. Much is simply out of date” (Weiss 1977: 18).

In my opinion, it would be more rewarding to work with the category of “knowledge markets” than with ‘forms’. Frank Nullmeier (1993) who developed together with Friedhelm Rüb a “political science of knowledge” (Wissenspolitologie) stresses—in contrast to the sociology of knowledge—that the societal and cultural conditioning of knowledge is subject to ongoing processes of political mediation. The constitutive, social structure of thinking and knowledge should be exposed and identified beyond attempts to wilfully deceive it. After the loss of religious, metaphysical, or habitual certainties, knowledge competes for general application, and, moreover, becomes selectable. Nullmeier identifies three stages: Firstly, preferences, criteria and systems of knowledge are filtered. This filtering steers the choice or acceptance of the knowledge relevant for the action to be taken (choice of knowledge). In the second stage, the filtering processes of the situation, alternatives of action, preferences and norms that are regarded as legitimate, take place (choice of interpreta-

tion). Then, at the third stage, exactly one of the alternatives of action will be chosen (choice of action).

In contrast to the gender knowledge approach, the “political science of knowledge” does not refer to ‘forms’, but to the specific character of knowledge underlying the action chosen. If we apply this political science of knowledge approach to gender knowledge, then the overall question of the gender knowledge approach should be: From which market does the knowledge come from? Regarding gender knowledge, I propose that two overall markets can be identified: one, where the underlying principle is gender difference, and the other that assumes that gender is a social construction. This differentiation implies different norms of how things should be. Adding to Nullmeier and Rüb, Gülay Çağlar (2010: 64) puts in the idea of “normative knowledge” and she differentiates between gender knowledge as normative and knowledge related to specific policy-fields. I think that gender knowledge cannot be scrutinized independently from policy-fields. Gülay Çağlar’s empirical research itself underscores this: Contrasting the gender-budgeting-policies of the United Nations Development Programme (UNPD) and the World Bank she found out that the UNDP favours a traditional gender division of labour while the World Bank sees women as well-educated income-earning mothers. The difference of the policies is based on different gender knowledge. Furthermore, knowledge is always somehow normative. The decisions on all three stages of Nullmeier’s knowledge selection are based on norms. Norms are not knowledge but people may accept new knowledge as less challenging, if it conforms to their norms. In the following section I will introduce findings of knowledge about gender issues in the field of vocational counselling.

### **3.2 Gender Knowledge of Vocational Counsellors**

In addition to questioning the overall meaning of the counsellors’ attitudes to gender-relations, some of my questions have been premised on Frank Nullmeier’s work. The markets of knowledge can range from large numbers to a monopoly. Whereby, Nullmeier (1993: 183) notes that state’s capacity to govern will be

enlarged if the state is able to steer the supply of knowledge, either by subsidising the production of knowledge, or by state-owned think-tanks. The BA has such a think-tank of its own. Leaning on Nullmeier’s approach, my hypothesis has been that there are knowledge gaps. In fact, I have found severe ones. I will present two examples and then illustrate the “knowledge markets” of the counsellors.

I took up a list of occupations in my questionnaire and asked the counsellors: “For which of these occupations do you think girls or boys are more suitable?” Referring to most occupations, the majority of the counsellors answered that both sexes might learn all of them. But relating to some occupations, a considerable minority thought, one of the sexes might fit in better. I found that counsellors in East Germany were more apt to segregate than in West Germany.<sup>8</sup>

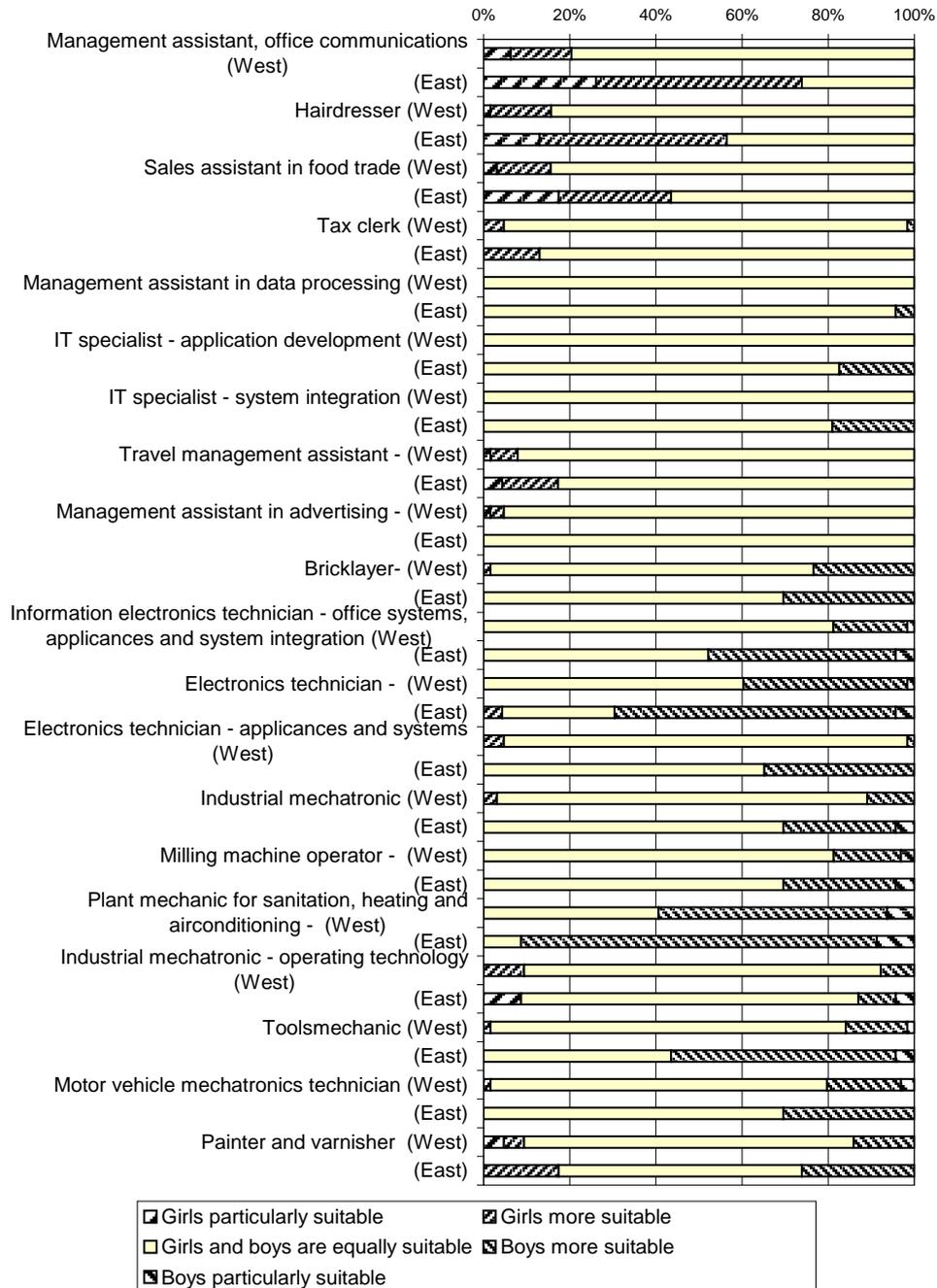
Obviously, several counsellors conclude from government statistics that those apprenticeships having traditionally large numbers of girls are eligible for girls, and—vice versa—if the number of girls entering this field is low, these trainings are appropriate solely for boys. Interestingly, ergonomically founded research is widely unknown by the counsellors; and, therefore, they do not know which occupations are suitable for girls and women and which are not. Hence, even a standpoint pro equal opportunities can turn out to endanger the careers of girls. Seventy-two per cent of the counsellors think that girls are as well suited to learn “industrial mechatronic for operating technology” as boys. But this occupation requires—in contrast to most of the other occupations—too often bodily strength that most women do not have (Graß 1985).

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<sup>8</sup> In a study dated some weeks before the Berlin Wall fell, the Central Institute for Occupational Training of the GDR reported that in GDR the companies expended considerable effort not to train as many girls as was required by law (Zentralinstitut 1989: 17).

Fig.: 2

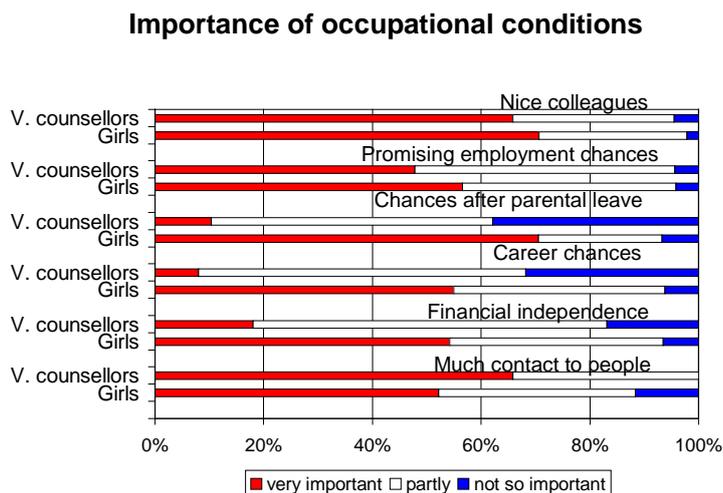
**Girls' and Boys' Suitability for Different Occupations**



Another question of my study asked what counsellors thought to be the most important occupational conditions in girls' opinions. The answers again show a knowledge gap. Daniela Hoose and Dagmar Vorholt had carried out a study on the wishes of girls in

Hamburg (Hoose/Vorholt 1996).<sup>9</sup> I transformed one of their questions into: “What do you think are important occupational conditions for girls”? This allowed me to compare the answers given by girls and vocational counsellors.

Fig. 3:



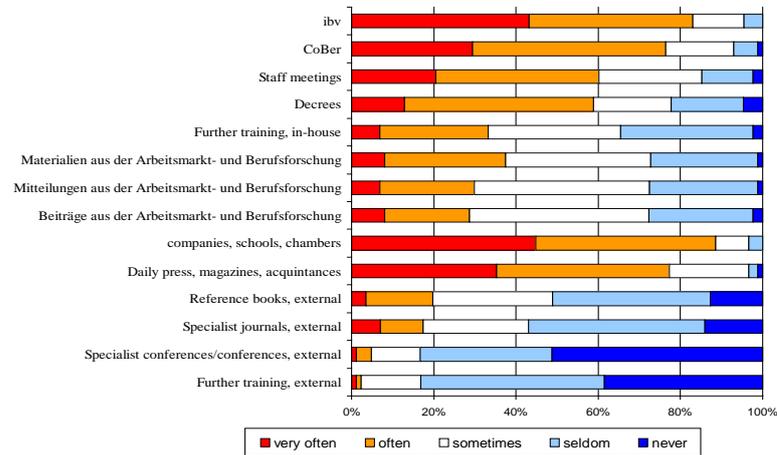
Girls' answers taken from: Hoose/Vorholt 1996, p. 177.

In some categories the answers of vocational counsellors and girls have nearly similar weights of importance (“nice colleagues”, “much contact to people. To the question on employment chances, more East- than West-German counsellors were of similar opinion with the interviewed girls from Hamburg (West Germany). But most counsellors think that possibilities for re-entering the labour market after parental leave, good prospects of promotion and financial independence are not so important for girls' career choices, whereas many girls weigh these conditions highly. This result not only shows that career chances are rarely on the agenda in the process of counselling, but it signifies once more that the counsellors are not informed about the results of current (in this case two years old) research, although it offers basic information for their work.

<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile more studies are available on this question. In general they show the same results. Hoose and Vorholt asked 439 schoolgirls of the 8th to 10th grade.

Fig. 4:

### The Most Important Sources of Information for Vocational Counsellors



The cause for this knowledge gap can be found in the “markets” where counsellors receive their knowledge. One of my questions in the study was: “From where do you get the most important information for your work”? The data show two crucial facts: First, scientific knowledge is produced for the most part in-house, and secondly, (practise-)knowledge gained from training companies, school teachers and the staff of chambers etc. is of particular importance for the counsellors. Popularized knowledge, acquired through press, magazines and acquaintances, is nearly just as important.

In figure 4 the first eight lines show internal sources of the knowledge of the counsellors. Of crucial influence for the counsellors’ knowledge gathering is the “ibv”, an in-house produced weekly revue offering condensed information, followed by “cober”, an internal database. Staff meetings and directives issued by the management play a role, too. Further training offered by the employer and the following three publication formats, all issued by the in-house think-tank IAB, the “Institute for Em-

ployment Research”<sup>10</sup>, were not marked so frequently by the counsellors. But it should be taken into account that several issues of these publications are directed to other departments, to the case managers of unemployed adults or to policy makers. Moreover, the counsellors would naturally use more “often” publications at hand, like the database, rather than read a book or an academic revue in their daily work. But solely about 28% “rarely” or “never” take important information from publications issued by the IAB and 45% rarely or never take useful information from in-house further training measures. These findings about the importance of in-house produced knowledge can be mirrored by external counterparts (the last four lines of fig. 4). Most counsellors “never” or “rarely” gained knowledge from further training and (specialist) conferences offered by external organisations. “We are not allowed to go there”, somebody wrote.

These findings were able to offer some pretty conclusive answers to my research question: Why do local vocational guidance agencies act differently? Practise knowledge was more important for agencies which arranged *more* apprenticeships for girls in male-dominated occupations than others. Yet, agencies where in-house produced knowledge, like publications published by the IAB, played a major role, *less* girls were placed into male-dominated apprenticeships. I argue that this result is reflected in the content of the in-house publications. The IAB had not published much on the question if und how girls could enter male-dominated occupations during the last two decades before my interviews took place. There were two such studies which were extremely important and frequently cited on the question as to what extent young women who were skilled in male-dominated occupations could find jobs (Kraft 1985; Stegmann/Kraft 1986). The message was that these women were overwhelmingly jobless. Although these studies were not impartial and also had serious methodological problems which could be said to have com-

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<sup>10</sup> I took this term from the English website of the IAB. A “correct” translation of its German name would be: “Institute for Labour Market and Occupational Research”. But rarely carrying out occupational research since the 1980s, the institute also left out this task in its own English translation of its title.

pared “apples with oranges”<sup>11</sup>, their message had not been challenged. Other studies with opposite findings had not been reviewed by the staff. Most of them read quite seldom reference books and revues that were not published by the employer.

“Practice knowledge”, gained from training companies etc. provided contradictory knowledge. First-hand knowledge that local companies were willing to educate girls and offer jobs to skilled women was more important for their daily work than the message which they were obtaining from the IAB. Additionally, organisational rules turned out to be of crucial importance. In their daily work vocational counsellors do not have many opportunities to talk with their colleagues. They either visit schools and companies, or give advice to individuals (usually behind closed office doors). Therefore, new information can only be passed to colleagues in arranged meetings: If the number of companies visited *and* the number of arranged meetings is high, then more girls are placed in male-dominated occupations.

The local environment clearly comes into play. At one agency large numbers of girls had been sent into male-dominated education and training. Here the staff was composed mainly of elderly men, who were of the opinion that girls should not learn such occupations. But a large local company wanted to train girls. The consequence of sending girls to this company was that the usually long list of applicants shrank, and work got easier for the counsellors.

But, although the knowledge gaps are not due to the core beliefs of the counsellors or filtering processes based on beliefs, my findings support Nullmeier’s theory of the influence of—available—knowledge markets: The BA steers gender-relations by monopolizing the knowledge of the staff by providing their

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<sup>11</sup> Their category “women with male skills” was largely composed of other occupations than the comparative category “men with male skills”. The men mostly had learned occupations in metalworking and electronics, while the women were cooks, bakers, confectioners, gardeners or carpenters. Furthermore, Stegmann and Kraft frequently changed the perspective: They emphasized either that women skilled in male-dominated occupations had fewer opportunities in the labour market compared to their male counterparts, or that these women had fewer opportunities than women with female-dominated occupations.

education at an in-house university of applied science, by in-house further training, by in-house produced reference books and specialist revues and in-house produced working tools which the counsellors are determined to use. Which ‘form’ this knowledge has (practise, everyday, institutionally produced or popularized), is, thereby, not of importance. Even institutionally produced scientific knowledge can be false. In this context, Annette Henninger notes that already at the early stage of planning a research project, individual interpretation influences the design of the study and the tailoring of the approach, as well as the choice of theories and methods and the character of the leading questions (Henninger 2005: 202). I think that this metaphor illustrates the gendered “design” with which the IAB intends to advise vocational counsellors, and so I am not surprised that such frameworks produce the actual results in gender-segregated occupations.

### **3.3 The Organisational Design**

The gendered structures of organisations are well documented. However, there are no general statistics available on the sex composition of counsellors in the vocational career departments of the federal employment agencies. I was able to acquire data just on the agencies I researched. In these twelve agencies most executive officers were men, although 52% advisors (in the West) or rather 65% advisors (in the East) were women. Among vocational counsellors women did the same work as their male counterparts. Women were delegated to do more responsible, politically influential, or simply more pleasant work as well as man. These results contradict Eva Kreisky’s thesis (1995) that the state could be characterized as a “male association” (Männerbund), where men gang up against the interests of women. But my primary question was not so much about the relationship of men and women inside the organisation but about the outcome. In her study about organisations, Joan Acker (1990) makes out “at least” five interacting processes of gendering. Among them, she emphasizes “the construction of symbols and images that explain, express, reinforce, or sometimes oppose” other divisions

like divisions of labour, allowed behaviour, etc. (146). This statement generates two questions: How and with what instruments are political institutions “doing gender”? Which role do “symbols and images” play in “doing gender”? The first question can be answered, I argue, with an early conclusion of Fritz W. Scharpf, that “organisation matters” (Scharpf 1977, 1982), and the last question can be answered with Gerhard Göhler’s point on the role of symbols (see above). Additionally, and in my opinion very fruitful for answering the last question, is the matrix of “institutional pillars and carriers” that Richard W. Scott (1995) offers. His work deals with the question, of how social institutions are inherited in organisations.

Fig. 5:

#### Institutional Pillars and Carriers

|                          | <i>Pillar</i>                     |                            |                                     |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|
|                          | <b>Regulative</b>                 | <b>Normative</b>           | <b>Cognitive</b>                    |
| <i>Carrier</i>           |                                   |                            |                                     |
| <b>Cultures</b>          | Rules, laws                       | Values, expectations       | Cognitive typifications             |
| <b>Social structures</b> | Governance Systems, power systems | Regimes, authority systems | Structural isomorphisms, identities |
| <b>Routines</b>          | Protocols, standard procedures    | Conformity of duty         | Performance programs, scripts       |

Source: W. Richard Scott(1995). Institutions and Organisations, p. 52.

In this essay I can not run through my research study in its entirety (for more details on the actual study, see Ostendorf 2005a+b), but I will give two examples of my findings: The first example is about “standard procedures” which ignore that 16 years old girls usually are at the stage of adolescence. Vocational counselling routinely starts with 9th graders. The counsellor visits the school class, introduces him- or herself as the one to be asked about pos-

sible occupations and hands out distinguished booklets and web-addresses. In the following months, the counsellor visits the class again, or he/she gives seminars to introduce single occupational fields, and he/she offers a parent-teacher conference. At the beginning of the last school-year, the class visits the “BIZ” (Vocational Guidance Centre) where a multitude of booklets, films and computer programs is provided. At this stage in the process, a large number of school leavers ask for personal advice, and the calendars of the counsellors get overly full. In the time the applicants have to wait for individual counselling, seminars are offered at the BIZ. But these offers do reflect on whether adolescent girls will go to a seminar providing information about male-dominated occupations. Carol Hageman-White (1992: 80) argues that girls simply might choose apprenticeships which are associated as womanly. The choice of a female-dominated occupation helps adolescent girls to display femininity. In the meantime, the time window to interest girls for other occupations falls short; renowned firms usually start their selection procedure mid of October, and there is no space left to interest girls for untypical apprenticeships. This “standard procedure” directs girls into female occupations.

Fig. 6:

**Dressmaker**

“Always following the latest fashion trend, fabrics (...) and numerous trendy accessories are used. Tasks also include personal customer advice and accurate cutting out of material, both in manufacturing new clothes as well as making alterations.”

**Toolmaker**

“The products are made by hand or machine after working models or technical drawings with complete dimension accuracy. All goods are made in job shop production by the toolmakers independently.”

Source: Bundesanstalt für Arbeit: Beruf Aktuell. Issue 2001/2002, pp. 73 and 159; own translation.

My second example is about symbols. Gerhard Göhler wrote that symbols cannot direct decisions by themselves, but need a soundboard. In a booklet, given to every(!) 9th grader in Germany (except those visiting schools that lead to baccalaureate), I found “gendering” job descriptions (see fig. 6). The portrayal of a “dressmaker” resounds in the “soundboard” for adolescent girls—it is a symbol for femininity. “Toolmaker” in contrast is not only described in a gender-neutral style, but this description could just as well have been taken for “dressmaker”. Girls constituted 95% of the dressmaker trainees and boys 96% of the toolmaker trainees in 2003 (in 2010: 92% and 95%). More of such symbols are to be found in other media.

Simultaneously the BA “meticulously” attempted not to use sexist language and to always put in the female form of the designation of occupations, as a staff member of the Nuremberg head office told me. On the pictures of their booklets very often girls in male-dominated trainings were shown. But in the most important media for vocational choice, which informed about every single occupation, “symbols” were taken up, signalling girls to choose one out of female-dominated occupations and not others. A computer program published on the net “did” the same and directed girls into occupations that usually are learned by girls. Especially a button “people” was misleading. It was not explained and gave the impression that occupations to which “people” was assigned, would be occupations where the girls could work together with other people or where they could help other people—occupational conditions that usually are more important for girls than boys. Instead, this button lead to—what Peta Tancred-Sheriff (1989) calls—“adjunct control tasks”, occupations, in which women help mostly male bosses to control and socialize customers, patients and clients.

Single signs indicating the aim of gender sameness not always are signs of institutional layering signalling institutional change. Indeed, a small number of people at the head office promoted a change to a more girls’ friendly policy, and every now and then a brochure or an article was published. From the view of the management such activities might be seen as useful symbolic

policies to disguise the reality, primarily addressed to other organisations, not primarily to inform girls.

The proportion of young women the BA had listed to be placed in male-dominated apprenticeships was smaller than the proportion of young women actually entering in these apprenticeships: Not the employers, but the BA hinders the process of achieving better paid jobs for women. It does so by providing false knowledge, ignoring important knowledge gaps of the staff, loading up descriptions of female jobs with womanly attributes and providing a procedure of business which ignores the situation in which 16 years old girls find themselves.

### **3.4 The Institutional Frame**

My results about the career guidance of the federal employment agencies confirm the thesis of James J. March and Johan P. Olsen, which claims that institutions can evolve to be “actors in their own right”. Contrary to the thesis of Mayntz and Scharpf, the management of the BA has the ability to steer the collective decision making inside the organisation. In the following paragraphs I explain why the BA is able even to work against policy aims of the Federal Government and especially how the structures of power enable them to do so.

The BA is a federal corporate body under public law. It is governed by a board consisting of employers’ organisations, trade unions and the state (federal government, Länder and associations of local authorities). It is composed of a head office in Nuremberg, ten regional directorates and 178<sup>12</sup> local employment agencies, and it acts widely independently from the federal government: The Federal Minister of Labour supervises on points of law only, not on subjects. The local agencies have each a Management Committee, which is constructed like the Board of Governors in Nuremberg, except that only local authorities are involved. This construction and in particular this independence explain why the BA did not have to support the government policies to open up male-dominated occupations for women.

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<sup>12</sup> Currently the BA is reducing this number.

In addition, the Management Committees of the local agencies seldom talk about vocational guidance. If they do, they mostly discuss numbers of apprenticeships and jobless young people—not the quality of advice. Their members are more interested in “active labour market policies”, not solely to reduce the number of the unemployed, but the funds provided by the BA enable them to ameliorate local infrastructure, and—last but not least—to supply themselves—as providers of continuing education—with salient work.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, the organisations send labour market experts, and not experts for vocational guidance into these boards. In sum, the career guidance lacks any democratic control of quality.

Furthermore, in the field of vocational guidance different government departments are involved: The Federal Minister of Education is responsible for the dual system of vocational education in general; the Federal Minister of Economy and—depending on the occupation—other ministers sign the training regulations. The career guidance departments of the employment agencies are under surveillance of the Federal Minister of Labour; and the schools are under authority of the Länder. A board that puts them all together aiming to improve career and vocational guidance does not exist.

This construction empowers the executive board in Nuremberg to organize its vocational guidance without being externally controlled. Beginning in 2002, a reform of the Federal Employment Agencies took place, after it had been discovered that the Department of Employment Exchange had falsified statistics and had worked ineffectively. This reform originally should have been conducted along the patterns of New Public Management (NPM). Actually, this reform transformed into “micro-economization” (Ochs/ISO 2006, Hielscher 2007). The Career Guidance Department that had been quite independent from other departments was dissolved in 2005, and its staff has been integrated into the Department of Employment Exchange. The vocational counsellors still have the same tasks—by law—but are hindered to fulfil them.

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<sup>13</sup> Günther Schmid classifies this practise as typical failure of policy networks (Schmid 2006: 504).

The multitude of government departments involved in the field of vocational education and training provided a “window of opportunity” for micro-economists. The president of the BA even claimed that the BA would not have to perform social policy. One of his assistants once declared: “In the long run we cannot afford to give vocational guidance”. Since 2005 the number of young people asking for advice has decreased, and the formerly high number of companies asking the BA for suitable applicants has dwindled (Bundesinstitut 2010: 36). Under “micro-economisation” there is no space either for supporting school leavers to choose an occupation nor for support of policies that promote equal opportunity.

Without any doubt, the BA is an “actor in her own right”. The head office of the Federal Employment Agency in Nuremberg steers the collective decision making inside the organisation by steering the knowledge of the staff, and, furthermore, creates and provides the classroom aids the staff has to work with. And, most importantly, the head office guides the goals and determines which tasks the counsellors are able to fulfil.

#### **4 Conclusion**

Whereas students of micro-politics question, how a specific *output* arises, highlighting that “the main objective of micro-political studies is to systematize political decision-making processes according to observable practices and collective knowledge as an organizational culture“ (Willner 2011: 166; see also Nullmeier et. al. 2003), the question in this article was if and how the *outcome* comes about, how the results of decision-making (i.e., the output or the paragraphs of the law on vocational counselling) are implemented. From the perspective of the *outcome*, knowledge is not solely part of the knowledge of the actors, but “carried” by cultures, social structures and routines. And, due to this, it is based on regulative, normative and cognitive pillars. The sociological gender knowledge approach clearly needs to be enriched by theories about political institutions (e.g. politically influential organisations). Furthermore, the recourse to

approaches provided by policy analyses will be fruitful. Which of these theories and approaches can be rewarding depends on the policy field scrutinized.

The knowledge approach is able to illustrate which knowledge the actors have or do not have (and additionally about the “forms” of this knowledge). If questioning how (gender) policies can be changed, it is not only inevitable to find out which knowledge is required, but how the actors might acquire this (new) knowledge: It must be examined where the knowledge in this policy field usually originates from, which the influential think tanks are, and how the knowledge is disseminated and by whom. In other words, we have to talk about interests and political power. Thereby, the structure of (state) organizations enables the actors to act and limits their actions as well. Gender training, a measure of gender mainstreaming, for example, can supply the actors with new knowledge. As for changing policies, however, structures have to be remoulded. Göhler (1996) notes, the change of political institutions either needs “critical junctures” or it is a sneaking process. The BA was in a crisis in 2002. But, crisis and reform do not change gender policies automatically. In this case, the original tender beginnings of gender equality and gender mainstreaming policies have widely vanished. This has nothing to do with “knowledge”, but is —maybe unintended—a consequence of fundamental change in business policy.

In general, I would say, when norms, cognitions, cultures and social structures have changed, regulations and routines will be adjusted—but this might take generations. Policy alternatives need time to become familiar, mature and politically resonant (Mätzke, Ostner 2010). As Wetterer points out, in “practises” latent and incorporated bodies of knowledge carry knowledge stemming from “old” positions (Wetterer 2008b: 46). But is this knowledge really “old”? At least in Germany there is a cultural divide as to the duties of men and women. There are considerably wide spread milieus that are of the opinion that men and women have different tasks, but others believe the opposite (Wippermann et. al. 2008: 44pp.).<sup>14</sup> And, furthermore, the members of an organisation, e.g. a political institution, are constantly arguing about the suitability of single measures planned to be tak-

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<sup>14</sup> The same is the case in Austria; see: Dackweiler 2005.

en up; it is their job to do so. If one fraction becomes the majority, the others have not vanished automatically. Because knowledge is filtered by core beliefs and expectations about its usefulness, “old” knowledge remains alive for a considerable amount of time and can be located in pillars and carriers, as Scott has shown. Not surprisingly, the German incentives on the basis of the new strategy of the EU to raise women’s employment rates are partly “contradictory and ambiguous” (Betzelt/Bothfeld 2011: 73).<sup>15</sup>

As a conclusion I pose the question of whether returning to the conception of guiding principles that lead actors might be more beneficial than searching for “forms” of knowledge. These guiding principles are inherited and made visible through symbols. Focusing the aims of gender policies, Franz Urban Pappi and Ilona Ostner (1994: 139) distinguish between three “role models”: difference, equality and sameness. Against the background of my study I would propose to investigate which one of these three models is inherited in different symbols, thereby the usage of the matrix of W. Richard Scott can be helpful.

Here, institutional theories and policy analysis approaches come into play. The management of the BA is able to steer gender relations not only because the BA has—by law—the task to provide vocational guidance, but also because it is fairly independent from the federal government and because it is independent from the multitude of involved ministries, employer’s organisations and trade unions. Thereby, most of these organizations see the task of the BA primarily in integrating jobless people into labour market, and, doing so, they deemphasize the task of vocational counselling. Hence, information given to the staff during their studies at the in-house university of applied science and at their work places overlook as well as counsellors tools new gender roles, and this reinforces traditional gender role models.

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<sup>15</sup> For example, the Federal Parliament (Bundestag) decided that the number of public nurseries for children under three years of age should be fundamentally enlarged to give mothers the possibility to take up gainful employment. In the same session the parliament decided to give parents a child home care allowance if they raise their children at home and do not use public nurseries.

Knowledge is a useful category, but it cannot explain entirely how political institutions act, and why they are doing what they do. Under certain circumstances political institutions even can be “actors in their own right“. For explaining outputs and outcomes of political institutions I propose to take up the approach of “new institutionalism” and enlarge it with approaches deriving from policy studies, instead of focussing on knowledge solely.

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