

## ARTICLE

## **‘No, I do not suffer from it’: the analysis of the manipulation of the subjectivity of the executive woman in the rise of the career**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The insertion of women in executive positions has grown, but they need to adapt to the impositions of management to achieve and preserve a successful career. In this context, this article sought to analyze the manipulation of the subjectivity of executive women in career advancement. For this purpose, a descriptive study was carried out with 14 executive women working in national and multinational companies, with the information being analyzed using the content analysis technique. The results show that the executives conform to the impositions of the position and try to adapt themselves to exemplary behavior. They create defense strategies to deal with disposability, personal resignations and justify taking their place. With a support team to handle their demands, they deny the labyrinths of the trajectory, evidencing the presence of the queen bee phenomenon, and reproduce a behavior that privileges masculinities in organizations.

### **KEYWORDS**

Executives Women, Dispositives, Manipulation, Subjectivity

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Recent modes of management contribute to shaping the ways of working and living (Grisci, 2008) of professionals, who need to adapt creatively and respond in a profitable way to the pressures of the world (Gaulejac, 2007). To achieve organizational success and social recognition, executives are subject to the impositions of management that, manipulating their subjectivity, shape and control the way they work and live. Management appropriates the executives, using, through seduction, justification, sophistication and subtlety, strategies and practices that control the ways of working (Gaulejac, 2007; Siqueira & Mendes, 2009), a fim de obter a adesão voluntária (Grisci, 2008).

Control takes place through dispositives, the essence of which is the restructuring of production and the capture of subjectivity (Alves, 2011). This is because the dispositives have the ability to shape and direct both the actions and thoughts of individuals (Alves, 2011; Mansano, 2009), because they are “anything that in any way has the capacity to capture, guide, determine, intercept, model, control and ensure the gestures, behaviors, opinions and speeches of living beings” (Agamben, 2009, p. 12).

In order to meet the demands of management, the subjectivity of the subject is manipulated so that he self-compares, controls himself and covers himself for results, living as his own boss (Gaulejac, 2007; Alves, 2011). Consequently, the subject leaves his personal life aside, regardless of the losses he may have, to meet, with availability, through self-discipline, the work and expectations of society. Therefore, rhizomatic control changes the ways of life of individuals and the community (Grisci, 2008). In this context, we question: how does the subjectivity of executive women in their career rise?

Although studies relate the career growth of women and their behavioral behaviors (Abele, 2003), they do not delve into why such behavior. The manipulation of subjectivity by means of control dispositives, especially in women in high hierarchical positions, has been a theme rarely addressed in the literature. A survey carried out in journals, on the Sucupira platform of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education (CAPES, 2020), covering 1,250 journals, from 2008 to 2018, demonstrated that the combination of the terms ‘executive’ and ‘dispositive’, ‘executives’ and ‘dispositives’ does not present any study carried out, which suggests that the literature does not have the terms executive and dispositive (Olbermann, 2017). When they were researched separately, it was found that 21 articles were related to the proposed themes, which dealt with career, gender, employability and prejudice.

A survey in the international database Scopus, from 2008 to 2018, resulted in 195 articles. The search using the junction of the terms did not detect any study, which suggests that the international literature has also not linked the terms executive and dispositive, corroborating the Brazilian panorama, as evidenced by Olbermann (2017). Therefore, studies on dispositives related to the manipulation of the subjectivity of the executives were not found in the Brazilian and international literature.

In appreciating the Brazilian context, the labor market has been marked by several changes. However, the Brazilian labor market still shows structural inequality between men and women, since they reach yields 29.7% higher than those obtained by them (IBGE, 2018), even when there are equal performances (Joshi, Son, & Roh, 2015). In occupying higher positions, there is a lower proportion of women (Tanure, Carvalho Neto, & Andrade, 2007): only 11% of the administrative advisor positions of the 500 largest companies in Brazil are filled by women and, in executive positions, they occupy 13.6% of the positions (Instituto Ethos, 2018). Therefore,

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it is opportune to add new approaches to the discussion on women to advance the discussions on gender.

Therefore, the study aims to contribute to the literature by showing different ways in which management appropriates individuals, to make companies more profitable. Regarding gender studies, the reproduction of a behavior that favors masculinities in executive positions is shown, to justify the organizational rise. It is necessary, therefore, to review the policies and practices of People Management and the way they privilege and reproduce these masculinities organizationally, both in the recruitment and selection stages as well as in the ascension, remuneration and performance evaluation.

## 2. EXECUTIVE WOMEN ON CAREER RISE

Some companies have taken initiatives to increase the number of women executives, but most have not been successful in the results (Dawson, Ho, & Kauffman, 2015; Dewally, Flaherty, & Singer, 2014; Shortland & Perkins, 2020). This may be related to the fact that the executives are also responsible for household chores, which is not always the case with executives. For them to be able to dedicate themselves to the challenges of their professional careers, the wife takes care of the welfare of her husband and family (Tanure et al., 2007; Brett & Stroh, 2003). Executive women who have children and work long hours, however, need to pay for outside help to care for their children (Brett & Stroh, 2003).

Although social discourse preaches that the couple invest in their careers and share the responsibilities of the home, studies show that women are still the most responsible for household activities (Rocha-Coutinho, 2005), for example, Brazilian women, in general, dedicate 18.1 hours per week to domestic care (IBGE, 2018). Among women, there is a predominance of professional activity in just one shift and, compared to men, they take more days off due to household chores, implying fewer hours worked and less years of experience in the labor market (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

In this context, many female executives who choose to associate their professional life with motherhood feel guilty and some prefer to slow down their investment in their careers to ensure family rebalancing (Tanure et al., 2007). Others postpone motherhood (Tanure, Carvalho Neto, & Andrade, 2006) or give up having children and family (Fidelis & Mosmann, 2013; Schlickmann & Pizarro, 2013), because “for women to match at least in some points the married man with children, many times she needs not to get married and decide not to have children” (Hryniewicz & Vianna, 2018, p. 340).

In this context, many times not even the executives recognize the existing difficulties and the prejudice expressed in relation to gender (Carvalho Neto, Tanure, & Andrade, 2010; Hryniewicz & Vianna, 2018; Mota-Santos, Tanure, & Carvalho Neto, 2014). These circumstances are part of the queen bee phenomenon, in which “women who ascend in their careers exhibit behaviors that, more than help, other women to develop professionally” (Gomes Neto, Grangeiro, & Esnard, 2020, p. 2). Many women, when promoted, tend to credit their success to random factors such as luck or being in the right place at the right time (Hryniewicz & Vianna, 2018).

One study found that male leaders are rated as most successful, even when they demonstrate an equivalent level of competence to that of female leaders (Hopkins & Bilimoria, 2008). Thus, women need to work harder than men to be promoted (Grisci, Deus, Rech, Rodrigues, & Gois, 2015) and follow well institutionalized paths of career progression (Bowles, 2012). They also need to articulate a strongly strategic vision to attract supporters for their ideas and leadership (Bowles, 2012).

Such evidence exposes the phenomenon called ‘glass ceiling’, which shows the difficulties of women ascending to leadership positions in companies due to disputes and prejudices (Mota-Santos et al., 2014). Eagly and Carli (2007) differently understand the rise of women in management positions, as they consider that the ‘glass ceiling’ metaphor does not problematize all the difficulties they face. These authors consider that the labyrinth metaphor is the most appropriate to explain women’s difficulties: “prejudices and discriminations that eventually block the paths of women have not disappeared but are presented as labyrinths” (Fraga & Rocha-de-Oliveira, 2020, p. 5).

Seemingly neutral organizational practices end up shaping work structure, defining and evaluating performance and awarding rewards, reinforcing gender inequality (Joshi et al., 2015). This is because organizations are male contexts, having been “created mostly by men and for men” (Oliveira, Gaio, & Bonacim, 2009, p. 92), reflecting organizational structures based on male experiences (Oliveira et al., 2009).

Organizational structures, by privileging masculinities, tend to devalue everything that is different, disqualifying the dissimilar (Eccel & Grisci, 2011). As a result, the expected and ‘normal’ behaviors favor masculinities (Eccel & Grisci, 2011; Oliveira et al., 2009; Fraga, Antunes, & Rocha-de-Oliveira, 2020), which induces women to reproduce this type of behavior in order to ascend organizationally (Eccel & Grisci, 2011). By masculinities we mean the ideals of hegemonic masculinities, accessible to a few men, but imitated by all genders in order to enjoy the privileges (Eccel & Grisci, 2011).

Masculinities are perceived as a social construct and are not associated with the biological characteristics of male and female. This conceptualization of masculinities is in line with studies by Eagly and Carli (2007) and Eagly and Karau (2002) who understand genders to be consensual beliefs about the characteristics of women and men. Masculinities concern the way of dressing, behaving at work and in the family and sexuality (Eccel & Grisci, 2011). The subjects must speak up calmly and firmly and their considerations must be based on facts and probabilities, without exposure of feelings or subjective perceptions, as emotionality is associated with femininity, and is even undesirable for managers (Eccel & Grisci, 2011). These characteristics are socially correlated to masculinities, however that does not mean that all male people – or no female person – possess them, since they are not connected to biological characteristics.

## 2.1. CONTROL OF SUBJECTIVITY IN THE NEW MANAGEMENT MODES

The current business context reveals the subjectivity of the executives being shaped, manipulated and controlled (Mansano, 2009), because management takes advantage of the availability of executives who struggle to reach their space and positions of more prestige, glamor and status. Women must believe in the dictated organizational proposals, as well as disseminate them, subordinating their personal interests, their contact with other people, their time, their feelings towards production goals (Pizza Junior, 1995). When the woman starts to represent the company, her subjectivity is captured, as she needs to become the character imposed by management (Olbermann, 2017), in order to guarantee the position reached (Olbermann, Oliveira, Capaverde, & Grisci, 2017; Pizza Junior, 1995).

The process of capturing subjectivity involves mechanisms of manipulation, coercion/consent, which, through dispositives, consciously or unconsciously mobilize the human mind (Alves, 2011). The subjectivity of the individual is hijacked and their actions are legitimized by a questionable rationality (Siqueira & Mendes, 2009). The manipulation of subjectivity is understood as the mobilization of knowledge, attitudes, values, capabilities – necessary elements for the subject to add value to production and not only produce (Alves, 2011). The subjects are subjected to

institutional impositions and, as if they were reified, they are considered part of the productive process (Siqueira & Mendes, 2009).

The manipulation of subjectivity takes place through control dispositives used as practices to manipulate the individual. For Agamben (2009, p. 42), “today there would not be a single moment in the life of individuals that is not modeled, contaminated or controlled by a dispositive”, emphasizing that the dispositives intervene in the subjects’ lives at all times, in all spheres.

New dispositives are continuously created, allowing control over individuals, generating rules of social conduct and normalizing procedures (Mansano, 2009). According to this assertion, the dispositives become evident in various ways in the lives and bodies of individuals. They affect the subject from all sides: by the company, by the family, by society, by the individual who remains their prisoner. For their ascension and their personal progress, the subject therefore depends on variables that are beyond their control (Gaulejac, 2007).

The dispositives used in modern times are decentralized and can be activated from anywhere, at any time, by anyone, according to the strategy adopted to make this process feasible (Mansano, 2009). According to the rhizome principle, control is not exercised by reproduction and hierarchy, but by variation and flow (Grisci, 2008), showing itself in a subtle way (Grisci, 2002; Hardt & Negri, 2006).

As the dispositives affect the daily lives of individuals and penetrate it, they participate in the production of subjectivity (Mansano, 2009). The less subjectivities are formed by dispositives in the bodies of individuals, the more dispositives are created in order to try to subject them to the commands of power (Agamben, 2009). When being modeled by the dispositives, the subjects remain immobile under such impositions, leaving only to adapt and submit to them (Bauman, 2007). Alienation and blockade before any attempt to change reality (Mendes, Costa, & Barros, 2003) emerge in the form of defense strategies (Dejours, 1999) or coping (Mendes et al., 2003), which are produced as a means of minimizing suffering and preventing illness at work (Dejours, 1999).

### 3. METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

The present research has a descriptive and qualitative approach, in order to unveil the meaning that the participants attribute to the situation or phenomenon under analysis (Merriam, 2002). In this study, executive women are those who assume the role of president, vice-president or director of the company and those positioned in the third level, that is, occupants of positions below those of vice-president and director, but who have decision-making power (Lima, Carvalho Neto, & Tanure, 2012).

As the literature considers both women who work in their own company (businesswomen) and those who work in a third-party company to be executive (the employees), here we analyze only the employees. Although both categories share meanings related to executive life, they are different, because women entrepreneurs are not subjected to the manipulations of organizational management, but as employers, exercise control over their employees. As a result, power relations and tensions are not the same for the two categories. The concern of the female entrepreneur is to position her business in the market, that of the female executive is to occupy, as an employee of a company, a prestigious and status position, experiencing disputes to remain in the achieved position (Andrade, 2014).

For data collection, we contacted several executives through social networks and personal referrals. To find different perspectives, time in the company, time in the labor market, age, marital status, education, area of training, characteristics of the operating company (type, size and sector)

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were not taken into account). Through the snowball technique - whoever participates indicates other people for the interviews -, we reached 14 interviewees, when the field was saturated.

We consider it important to adopt this technique, because, when indicating other executives, the interviewees already show dispositives that manipulate the subjectivity of the executives, such as lifestyle, clothing, business and social events, importance of the role exercised. When asked to nominate other executives, the interviewees asked for time to think and then made the nomination by making the contact available. We believe that this strategy also represents the dispositives acting on the executives. While they do not want to be upset because of the indication and ask for prior authorization to forward the contact, they also look for women who are part of their nucleus and legitimize their speeches. Therefore, the contacts were sent after the request and only after the prior authorization of the appointed executive.

The interviewees are identified as follows: E1 to E7 - executives who are at the top of their careers; E8 to E14 - executives on the rise in their careers (Table 1). Executives at the top of their career were those who are in a management position and who did not have great professional ambitions during the interviews. Some of them stated that they would like to assume the presidential position, but they already feel very well in the leadership position. We emphasize that, in general, the position of president is held by one of the partners of the company. As rising executives, women were considered employed, in management positions, who have not yet reached the level of management in the executive career. They explained that there is still a long way to go to be recognized and to reach the top of the executive career.

We used the semi-structured interview as data collection instrument, with a script based on the theoretical framework, which underwent a pre-test with three women executive. The collection of information took place between the months of July and October 2019. All interviews were conducted online, due to the geographical distance between the participants and the researchers. In the interviews, initially, it was communicated that the meeting would be recorded, guaranteeing anonymity and a commitment to the scientific use of information. The total duration of the interviews was 19 hours and 4 minutes, resulting in a transcript of 403 pages.

After the transcripts of the interviews, they were organized into preliminary categories in the Max-Qda software that helped in ordering the categories. For the analysis of the interviews, we used the content analysis technique, which consists of discovering the essence of meaning that comprises a communication, through three stages: pre-analysis; exploration of the material; treatment, inference and interpretation of results (Bardin, 2016). After the organization by categories, they were reorganized, configuring the categorization process and resulting in eleven analyses categories (Table 2).

**Table 1**  
*Profile of the executives participating in the study*

Executive	Age (years)	Current Position	Company Type	State	Income	Children	Marital status
E1	51	South America Country Manager	Multinational 1	SP	BRL 46 thousand	1	Married
E2	49	IT Director	Multinational 2	SP	BRL 45 thousand	1	Divorced
E3	44	Director	National 3	RS	–	1	Married
E4	51	Commercial director	Multinational 4	SP	BRL 43 thousand	2	Married
E5	55	Finance and Marketing Director	National 5	PR	BRL 30 thousand	1	Married
E6	55	HR Director	Multinational 6	SP	BRL 45 thousand	0	Single
E7	49	Fleet and Operations Director	National 7	SP	BRL 26 thousand	1	Married
E8	33	HR Manager	Multinational 8	RS	BRL 18 thousand	0	Married
E9	45	HR Executive Manager	Multinational 9	SP	BRL 20 thousand	2	Separated
E10	31	Social Media Manager	Multinational 10	SP	BRL 11 thousand	0	Single
E11	37	Libero Manager	National 11	RJ	BRL 9.5 thousand	1	Married
E12	–	HR Manager	National 12	SP	BRL 25 thousand	2	Married
E13	39	Accounts executive	National 13	RS	–	1	Married
E14	43	Commercial / Operations Manager	Multinational 14	SP	BRL 21 thousand	1	Separated

*Source:* Authors' own elaboration (2020).

#### 4. RESULTS ANALYSIS

The analyzes show that the control dispositives normalize the executives, causing them to fit a pattern due to the pressure of the position. The executive's visibility, therefore, refers to a perfect life, but the journey is long, gradual and full of mishaps. The analysis of the executive's subjectivity manipulation has been exposed in a gradual way, since the initial rise (E8-E14) in career until one reaches the top (E1-E7).

The first part of the analysis portrays the comparison of the two groups on how they perceive the pressures of the position differently and on how the manipulation of subjectivity changes according to the status of the position. The second part of the analysis shows that the executives who reached the top justify the naturalization of their behaviors according to the demands of the position, to show that they are unique and exalt behaviors that privilege masculinities, denying the difficulties of the trajectory and the solidarity with other women. This does not mean that rising executives have not reported similar perceptions, but as they still have a way to go and have not acquired the status of the position, the manipulation of subjectivity was more explicit in the other group. Therefore, we sought to emphasize the subtleties and justifications for behavior, which were more evident in top executives.

The more the executives justify and naturalize their behavior according to the demands of the position, more control dispositives act on them, because the reproduction of the management discourse is a mere manifestation of the performance of these dispositives in subjecting the

**Table 2**  
*Analysis Categories*

Analysis Category	Examples of dialogues
Organizational Benefits - imposition and glamor	“I will be much more uncomfortable, I will have a lot more responsibility, I will have to deal with a president who is very complicated, a guy who doesn't share my values, a super centralizing guy. Then I said ‘oh, I don't want to get beaten for that money” (E9).
	“I participate in events with the directors and owners of the construction companies. Anyway, the status is very good” (E5).
Control - competitiveness and standard behavior	“It's a very aggressive, competitive area, but it's not a healthy one, it's a destructive one” (E12).
	“It is based on stereotypes, on what you're wearing, the way you put on makeup, how you do your hair, the way you talk, gesture. I think it really matters, at least here I know it has” (E2).
Loneliness - competitiveness and not showing weaknesses	“The happier you are, the more pressure you have to put on” (E14).
	“Loneliness is not physical, I feel that loneliness is having a position that does not allow you to talk about everything with everyone” (E1).
Defense strategy (disposable, irreplaceable)	“I have a full schedule in shared outlook” (E1).
Reproduction of behavior that favors masculinity in organizations	“People think I am angry that I am very demanding and I must be, I must be” (E6).
	“If we are almost all more like tommy boy than pretty, like this, we tend more to this side because everyone came from working in the the store floor” (E3).
Affirm themselves as unique	“When they promoted me, he called me and told me that I was the only woman in the entire company as CEO” (E3).
	“I was the only woman on the team” (E6).
Reconciling work and leisure	“Last year I had to, I won't say to cancel, but give up on a trip, having to divert my script to solve a problem, but I think everything within what I think is acceptable for my position” (E2).
Support team	“Reconciling is easy, I have no problem, I have no difficulty in reconciling, no. (...)I have a maid, of course, you can't do everything” (E1).
Denial of trajectory difficulties	“I think that in my career, it is obvious that there is a lot of my effort to know how to take advantage of opportunities, to be in the right place, at the right time” (E6).
Discrimination and harassment	“I didn't have any discrimination because I see myself as a woman with a very high testosterone load. I don't see myself as a weak woman. Perhaps this is one of the differentials. Even if you look at the management level there in the company itself - because we are all strong women - you will not find any Barbie like women, in the sense of dress sense, that person who has the beauty that maybe I could have some kind of discrimination, the cute little dummy, things in that sense” (E3).

*Source:* Authors' own elaboration (2020).

executives to the imposed determinations (Agamben, 2009). The more they deny it, the more dispositives are acting on them. It is noteworthy that, at times, they are aware of the rules of the game and are willing to give up their personal life in favor of the benefits of the position. This study emphasizes, however, how top executives ‘sell’ the idea that ‘bonuses and liens’ are desired and that they are in control of management and not the other way around.

Rising executives are the ones who most clearly explain the pressures and dispositives required to match their prestigious position and status. They admit that “there is a lot of collection, a lot of collection, a lot of stress. It’s like having things that may not go as expected and the responsibility is yours” (E10). Although executive life is related to glamor and international travel (Pizza Junior, 1995), the interviewees do not report pleasure in making the trips, as revealed by E8: “I say: ‘guys, when I’m on the trip where we work, it’s not a party’. When you go abroad, it is hard work”. Sometimes they must fulfill tasks that they would not like and the travel inherent in the executive position becomes a sacrifice to be fulfilled, as expressed E9: “it is the burden of my life! I hate traveling for work”.

As executives move up the organizational hierarchy, reports indicate the manipulation of subjectivity (Grisci, 2008) of the interviewees to adapt and naturalize the travel routine consistent with the functions of the position. This context can be seen in E6’s account: “for many years, I traveled and did not know anything. There are places that I went to in the world that I say: ‘my God, I just went, I saw the place, I saw where I worked, I saw the hotel and I left’. Not today. I think I learned that over time. I go, I travel, I get to know” (E6). It is observed, therefore, the gradual difference of the dispositives that model the executives. Those on the rise need to submit and travel and those on the top glamorize business travel.

As the professionals move up in their careers, loneliness is installed as a consequence of the high level of power (Tanure et al., 2007). The executives who are in the beginning of their career still do not have the perception of loneliness, as they are closer to the work team: “as a matter of fact, eventually, we even travel together, we go to the beach and such” (E10). However, they already signal evidence of rhizomatic control (Grisci, 2008), in which colleagues themselves control their behavior, there being no need for the boss to do it (Gaulejac, 2007; Alves, 2011), as the E11 report illustrates: “there is that chain effect, one person demanding, the other has to delegate to another, demand from one, demand from another and it keeps going down”.

The control carried out by peers is shown differently for executives who are at the top of their careers. It is exercised by moral judgments and relies on various personal manifestations, such as the way of speaking, the way of dressing, the choice of places to be visited, socializing with friends (Agamben, 2009; Mansano, 2009). This way of manipulating subjectivity can be seen in E1’s report: “some colleagues, peers, said that I should behave differently or talk to some people, not talk to others”. The new modes of management seduce individuals (Grisci, 2008) and their adaptation to the impositions of the position constitutes a strategy to ascend organizationally.

The control society can be characterized as an intensification and, at the same time, a synthesis of normalization and disciplinary mechanisms (Grisci, 2002; Hardt & Negri, 2006) that affect the way of life of individuals (Grisci, 2002). Controls are subtle and difficult to perceive (Grisci, 2002), invading the lives of individuals in the form of a moral assessment that watches and controls (Mansano, 2009), as can be seen in the E5 report: “I never drink, never, never at any given time. I never gave up on being aware. I can even drink at home, but not outside, so as not to lose control”.

Management appropriates the subjects who control the ways of working through seduction, justification, sophistication and subtlety (Grisci, 2008). Executives accept working conditions, become submissive (often unconsciously), because they need to become the character imposed by management (Olbermann, 2017) in order to guarantee the position reached (Olbermann et al., 2017; Pizza Junior, 1995). Reports show that they often act consciously to meet the position’s

demands. What they do not realize, however, is how management manipulates this behavior and how they justify their behavior as something natural.

This scenario can be seen in the report of E6: “I have suffered a little with some rules of behavior that didn’t quite match my way of being. But, obviously, a leadership position requires some things because you are a reference for others”. It is noticed that ‘being a reference in the organization’ due to the position is indicative of the manipulation of subjectivity because it makes the interviewee behave according to the rules. Executive life affects and organizes interviewees’ lifestyles, “because at the same time that it provides certain conditions, it also imposes limits and rules” (Eccel & Grisci, 2011, p. 67).

Competitiveness along the way in the professional career and the adequacy of ways of living cause the weakening of bonds between co-workers (Olbermann, 2017): “this feeling that we are lonely in the company you know, because most of your peers are trying to compete with you, they see you differently and you end up not trusting them” (E12). Rising executives perceive loneliness due to competitiveness, the executives at the top perceive loneliness due to people having ulterior motives: “people have a little difficulty getting close to you or when they want to get close to you it is to ask for something. You end up shielding yourself a little” (E1).

Shielding can be analyzed as a defense strategy (Dejours, 1999) that executives create, because they cannot allow someone to be so close to them as to realize their uncertainties: “it is a position that you show less vulnerability than normal” (E6). Therefore, they no longer share their doubts and anxieties, in order not to become targeted (Gaulejac, 2007) and not appearing fragile, since fragility does not match the position of executive (Tanure et al., 2007).

The results reveal that the control dispositives are perceived in different ways by the interviewees according to the hierarchical level in which they are. Rising executives see some benefits as mandatory and tiring, top executives have already naturalized forms of control and are looking for ways to adapt to the pressures of the job.

#### 4.2. EXECUTIVE ANALYSIS AT THE TOP OF THE CAREER: MORE CONTROL DISPOSITIVES

The results show that the higher the hierarchical position, the more the executives tend to soften the pressures to which they are subjected and create defense strategies (Dejours, 1999), full of inventiveness against the difficulties experienced at work, in order to be able to endure them without being overwhelmed (Dejours, 2007). Defense strategies (Dejours, 1999) emerge in the form of justifications for dealing with disposability (Bauman, 2007) and the pressures of the position, as exposed in the report of E1: “I do not believe that a CEO who stays 30 years in a company is healthy. One must renew. So, I’m always getting ready for tomorrow. You can’t be taken by surprise or think you’re on top”.

The new management modes foster the subjects’ fear of disposability, so that they dedicate themselves intensively to the achievement of organizational results (Gaulejac, 2007). The executives praise the accumulated vacations and the overcrowded agenda as a way of showing that they are irreplaceable and shielding themselves at the top: “this when I travel for work and I can take a few days because I always have accumulated vacations” (E6).

As the executives move up the hierarchical scale, they must gradually adjust their behavior, aiming at adapting to the position. When molding themselves to meet an executive stereotype, some interviewees report that they were born with an appropriate profile for the position, as expressed by E1: “since I was a child, I was the controlling sister, the one who organized everything. So, I always had the profile of caring and controlling. I’ve always been, it wasn’t the executive position that made me be like that, it’s the profile. I think you’re born like that, you don’t become”.

Even though research shows that high-ranking women have agency characteristics (Abele, 2003), some studies point out that women reproduce male behaviors as one of the strategies for career advancement (Gomes Neto et al., 2020). The purpose of this analysis is to show that the interviewees find justifications to explain their place in the organization through characteristics that refer to masculinities (such as control) and do not value the characteristics that refer to femininities, as these are not desired organically (Eccel & Grisci, 2011). In this way, they foster the idea that masculinities are the desired characteristics for high hierarchical positions, corroborating the idea of man as an ideal worker (Eccel & Grisci, 2011; Fraga et al., 2020). Although the interviewees may have adopted the reproduction of this behavior to ascend in the organization, they have already naturalized the discourse and show no alternatives for other women who seek to ascend in the organization.

The executives who reached the top even deny that they wanted the job and, therefore, reaching the top of their career was not difficult, as it was a natural journey, “it was happening (...) I never wanted this position of mine” (E1). Career advancement is related to random factors (Hryniewicz & Vianna, 2018), such as proximity to those in charge: “it was an invitation. I was a friend of the owners’ couple and when the president of the company heard that I left [the other company], he invited me to work here” (E5).

Although they say it was easy to get to the current position, the executives need to assert themselves and perceive themselves to be different among other women, insisting on proving that they are more competent than the others, as illustrated by E7’s testimony: “the company is almost 60 years old, I was the only woman to lead the shop floor team inside the warehouse”. As evidenced in the study by Eccel and Grisci (2011), they also admit that they do not provide a more open environment for women: “I wasn’t careful to keep looking at my team talking like that: ‘guys, there needs to be more women on this team’. I was never one to raise any flags. I want to say that I did not insult the woman, but for me, what mattered was about being a good professional” (E2). This testimony refers to the queen bee phenomenon, in which women in high hierarchical positions do not show solidarity with other women to promote gender equality policies (Gomes Neto et al., 2020).

When analyzing the interviewees’ personal lives, it is understood that they claim to be able to reconcile several roles: “people say: ‘how can I deal with so many things?’” (E4). However, they must “select what is important in their life. Are there things I would love to do? I would love it! But then, if I want the excellent in the professional part, in the personal part, it will not work” (E4).

Even assuming that there are activities that she would love to do and cannot do, E4 says that she does not have to give up anything: “no, i don’t suffer from it, I don’t struggle. Even because if there is a presentation of my son in my office and I can fix myself with an agenda, I will”. These contradictions reinforce the manipulation of subjectivity, against which the executive needs to develop defense strategies so as not to admit that she faces difficulties to reconcile the personal and professional sides. As an example, E1 reports that she does not have much time to participate in child rearing, justifying: “a child who is not raised all the time with the mother, gets stronger. You have to learn to manage yourself”. It is evident the search for justifications to soften the routine in which work becomes a priority, as if the resignations related to the personal side were compensated by labor gains (Gaulejac, 2007).

In the search for conciliation between work and leisure, the executives shape themselves, aiming to meet the demands imposed by management (Gaulejac, 2007). For example, they take work home, filling with it the moments that would be dedicated to leisure – “I usually do [home

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office], but I do it because I like it, I'm a night person, I have a lot of difficulty with morning performance" (E3). The executives hardly even notice that their work time mixes with the time of 'non-work' (Gaulejac, 2007; Tanure et al., 2007), because this is already part of your routine. Adequacy to such a situation is a way of not feeling the suffering of having your leisure space invaded by work. Here, again, justifications for the appropriateness of their behavior appear, such as 'like this' or 'being a night person'.

Despite all the achievements made by women in society, many are still responsible for most household activities (Rocha-Coutinho, 2005; Eagly & Carli, 2007; IBGE, 2018). This is also the reality of the interviewees, as they feel responsible for organizing domestic activities: "I have to manage my house, I travel a lot. I am so lucky that I have a person who has worked with me for 15 years" (E6). Occupation with domestic activities means that women have less time at work and, consequently, less work experiences. This explanation supported by Eagly and Carli (2007) helps to understand the wage and rise differences between men and women in organizations. The female career is understood as a maze (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Fraga & Rocha-de-Oliveira, 2020), because different setbacks and difficulties encountered in their trajectory make women get lost along the way, there remaining a few with the possibility of reaching the top. The career maze is different for men and women, since socially there are factors that benefit the former and penalize the latter (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Women need to organize a support team to assist them in caring for their children (Brett & Stroh, 2003) – "I hired a taxi service, there is a trustworthy person who takes her [the daughter] and picks her up from all these places, with time, we can have this independence" (E7). The fact that the interviewees report some dispositives as benefits of executive life emphasizes that the manipulation of subjectivity occurs in a subtle way in meeting the demands of management (Grisci, 2008). They consider the private driver or the best school for children to be a benefit gained from the financial resources derived from executive life, but they do not realize that this is one of the ways that management manipulates their subjectivity so that they have more time available to the company.

The executives say they have no difficulty in reconciling work and family, however, they need to have an apparatus that sustains their career. It should be noted that the purpose of this analysis is not to discuss who is responsible for domestic responsibilities. We try to show that the interviewees do not perceive the dispositives they have at home – babysitters, drivers, family, spouses, among others – as necessary to be able to dedicate themselves exclusively to their position. Possibly, other people without all these dispositives would not be able to ascend in the executive career, since management requires that the occupant of an executive position be exclusively focused on the organization, with no time left for leisure. They just consider that it is possible to reconcile professional and personal life, in order to support their statements that it was not difficult to get there.

This type of reflection is important to understand what is valued in the work environment to ascend organizationally. This type of discourse reproduction provides People Management policies and practices that value overwork, which has caused workers to become ill. Executives considerably increase their responsibilities and workload (Oltamari & Grisci, 2014) and as more working hours has been associated with better rewards and organizational ascension (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Hryniewicz & Vianna, 2018), women with more domestic demands are harmed in their professional trajectory, making time for work a hitch in their professional maze (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Companies must therefore develop People Management policies and practices that



promote better conditions for reconciling work and leisure, as well as encouraging the attribution of family benefits to men (Eagly & Carli, 2007), such as longer paternity leave.

Although there is an increase in job opportunities for women, they still face difficulties in reaching positions of power and status in companies. Although research shows that men achieve 29.7% higher earnings than women (IBGE, 2018), the executives do not perceive discrimination: “the three women in the company earn equally or more than men. It is not because you are a man or a woman because you don’t have it, you don’t have it. And because I’m the one who manages” (E6). In reality, it is not she who manages. Although the interviewee makes the decisions in the company, she does not realize that many of the People Management policies and practices of ascension and permanence in the organization privilege masculinities (Eccel & Grisci, 2011; Fraga et al., 2020), although their organizational practices appear to be neutral (Joshi et al., 2015), because most of the organizations were structured by men and for men (Oliveira et al., 2009).

The executives who managed to ‘break’ the glass ceiling (Madalozzo, 2011; Meroño-Cerdán & López-Nicolás, 2017) do not recognize the difficulties in relation to gender (Carvalho Neto et al., 2010; Mota-Santos et al., 2014), denying the existence of barriers to reach the occupied position and to remain in it. E6 reports that there are companies in Brazil that discriminate “the woman who is married, because the woman is going to have children, because the woman does not know what... I think it’s absurd, but I didn’t live through that”. This speech can be understood as a denial of the difficulties of women in the labor market. The same interviewee chose to stay single, not have children, live alone, however she says she did not experience this type of discrimination.

This type of situation corroborates the studies that reveal that executive women are giving up having children and family (Schlickmann & Pizarro, 2013). This is because for the woman to be able to match, at least in some points, the married man with children, she needs to not get married and have no children (Hryniewicz & Vianna, 2018). This way she can dedicate her leisure time to work, because women need to show many more results than men to be able to ascend in their careers (Grisci et al., 2015), as E4 reports: “you can make a career, of course you often have to work harder than men because you have to demonstrate to people”.

The interviewees even blame women for being harassed, considering harassment as a consequence of unacceptable female attitudes, in order to show their achievement and their exemplary behavior: “and I will say that I understand that there is harassment, but I think that women are harassed only when they let them be harassed, in the first place” (E1). The hegemony of masculinities is also validated by women when they (de)qualify the behavior of other subjects (Eccel & Grisci, 2011), showing what it is acceptable or not in the work environment. Furthermore, when the interviewee justifies bullying as the fault of the woman, she silences the credibility of the woman’s voice, as exposed by Solnit (2017).

The seduction for a life worthy of prominence invades the executives completely, through dispositives, which minimize and even deny the difficulties (Olbermann et al., 2017). The executives are subject to acts imposed by society and organizations with collective and singular meanings, being required to reproduce behaviors in accordance with the norms set. When submitting to certain orders, the executives internalize behaviors and lifestyles to be followed, in a movement that manipulates their subjectivity, even if, sometimes they are conscious behaviors to ascend organizationally. This context allows the ratification of the well-known barriers and difficulties that arise in the organizational rise of women.

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## 5. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Executive life in modern times can be perceived through different lenses. One of them shows a life of glamor, power, status and money; another shows suffering, barriers, responsibilities, impositions. To reach and maintain high positions, women submit to dispositives that manipulate their subjectivity.

The present investigation, with the objective of analyzing the manipulation of the subjectivity of executive women, showed the pressures and challenges they face daily to stay in the positions that they occupy. As they move up the ranks, executives become more and more isolated and lonely, because the co-workers' complicity no longer exists and because they cannot demonstrate fragility. Their position does not allow them to be sensitive, much less that they cannot solve their problems. Asking for help may show weakness, which does not match the position assumed.

Women who ascended in the executive career show signs of manipulation of subjectivity by control dispositives, which are responsible for their subjection, showing their importance in handling and controlling the way they live. The executives overvalue themselves and perceive themselves as differentiated women among the others, denying the difficulties to reach that position, that is, denying the maze of the woman's career (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Fraga & Rochade-Oliveira, 2020) and evidencing the occurrence of the queen bee phenomenon (Gomes Neto *et al.*, 2020). Some statements are perceived as defense strategies (Dejours, 1999) necessary to minimize the difficulties inherent to the career.

The results demonstrate that behaviors that deviate from the ideals of masculinity are repressed and rarely emerge in the organizational environment (Eccel & Grisci, 2011; Fraga *et al.*, 2020). This leads many women to exalt their masculinities and sometimes reproduce gender discrimination without realizing it (Carvalho Neto *et al.*, 2010; Mota-Santos *et al.*, 2014). Many of the behaviors described and statements exposed by women could very well be attributed to men, for reflecting masculinity valued socially and organizationally. However, it is emphasized that "positioning side by side with men, legitimizing their domination, as if it were no different to be a woman, does not have the effect of improving the conditions of equality at work, but rather of fostering the logic that men are the ideal workers, especially in managerial positions" (Eccel & Grisci, 2011, pp. 73-74).

The analysis of the results highlights the greatest evidence of subjectivity manipulation in the executives when justifying their behaviors. This does not mean that they are being completely manipulated by management or that they are unaware of their actions. The purpose of the investigation was not to analyze the masculinities of the executives, rather how they extol these masculinities, to justify its place in the organization, thus revealing the manipulation of subjectivity.

We believe that studying executive women and the dispositives that manipulate their subjectivity contributes to individuals understanding that the denial of difficulties increases pressures and stress, as well as the reproduction of the organizational discourse implies the well-known barriers and difficulties in the organizational ascension of women. Motivated by this study, the executives can seek to have a better knowledge of their needs and desires; promote a less sexist organizational environment; help to have more women in management positions, mainly in the new social and organizational arrangements resulting from the pandemic caused by Covid-19.

For future studies, we suggest analyzing the dispositives for manipulating workers in lower operating positions, in order to verify which dispositives act in the manipulation of their subjectivity; analyzing how the homogenization of executive behavior, subtly imposed, benefits or harms the management of companies; investigating retired executives, aiming to rescue their trajectory and

identify their perception about work after they have retired; investigating the career trajectory of women from different social conditions, bringing social differences to the discussion.

One of the limitations of the present study is the length of the interviews. We chose to interview only executives in high positions, whose time for dialogue proved to be scarce due to their routine. Although the schedules were previously established and the executives were available, there was a concern that they would not take too much time. We emphasize that the subjectivations and manipulations shown here are not subject to generalization, being applicable only to these interviewees. We observed that all the interviewees were white women, heterosexual and who had family support. Even those who reported that they came from the lower class are currently in a different position from the reality of most Brazilian women.

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**AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION**

Author 1 – Wrote the draft; collected and analyzed the data; and formatted the paper.  
Author 2 – Supervised the development of the research; deepened the analyses; updated the theory.

**CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

