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Navigating the Impossible Equation

Early-Career Women and Gendered Expectations in Organizational Evaluation Processes

Abstract

Despite strong commitments to gender equality, career disparities persist in organizations. This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive approach, grounded in a constructionist ontology and interpretivist epistemology, to examine how early-career women in business and economics in Sweden navigate gendered expectations in recruitment and early evaluation processes. Based on eighteen interviews, the study draws on Role Congruity, Double-Bind, and Sensemaking Theory. Three key mechanisms emerge. First, evaluation criteria are not fixed but are shaped in interaction through social norms and asymmetric feedback. Second, women anticipate double-bind constraints on agentic behavior, which shape and often limit how they choose to act. Third, in the absence of clear feedback, individuals interpret ambiguous signals as personal shortcomings, leading them to favor smaller, flatter organizations over larger, more hierarchical ones. Together, these form *the impossible equation*, a system of conflicting demands that produces unequal career starting points without overt discrimination. The findings show that gendered evaluation is not only imposed but co-constructed through the interaction of structural expectations, behavior, and identity.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Gender Equality and Persistent Career Inequalities

Sweden is widely recognized for promoting gender equality, with explicit goals related to equal power, economic independence, and participation in working life (Jämställdhetsmyndigheten, 2025). Employment rates are high for both women and men; however, women are more likely to work part-time and tend to work fewer hours overall. In 2023, 77 percent of employed women worked full-time, compared to 87 percent of men (SCB, 2025a).

Despite these relatively strong labor market outcomes, persistent inequalities remain. Reports highlight ongoing occupational segregation, wage differentials, and unequal representation in leadership positions across industries (SCB, 2025b). Men continue to reach senior roles in both politics and business at substantially higher rates than women (Jämställdhetsmyndigheten, 2025). In 2024, the gender pay gap stood at 10.2 percent, with the previously declining trend having stalled since 2019. Even after controlling for occupation, sector, and working hours, an unexplained wage gap of 4.6 percent persists (Medlingsinstitutet, 2025).

Research suggests that these inequalities do not arise only at senior levels but often emerge early in professional trajectories. Even highly educated women and men with similar initial qualifications experience diverging career paths over time (Albrecht et al., 2018; Kauhanen & Napari, 2011; Merluzzi & Phillips, 2022). These early differences may accumulate and contribute to later disparities in advancement, income, and leadership representation.

1.2 Early-Career Evaluation as a Critical Turning Point

The first years of employment represent a formative phase in professional life. Recruitment, onboarding, and early performance assessments determine access to opportunities, responsibilities, and developmental pathways (Dries & Pepermans, 2012; Player et al., 2019; Tharenou, 1999). During this period, individuals are not only evaluated on performance, but also on how well they align with implicit expectations regarding ambition, professionalism, and organizational “fit” (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2012; Kossek et al., 2017). Importantly, these evaluative criteria are not neutral; they may reflect broader gendered expectations embedded in organizational contexts, where assessments of competence,

potential, and “fit” are shaped by gendered stereotypes and norms (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2001).

Importantly, such evaluations are not confined to formal appraisal systems. Everyday interactions, informal feedback, and subtle signals shape perceptions of who is seen as promising, suitable for advancement, or worthy of developmental support (Acker, 1990; Ibarra et al., 2013; Kossek et al., 2017). These early evaluative encounters thus function as mechanisms through which organizational norms and broader cultural expectations intersect with individual career development.

1.3 From Structural Patterns to Lived Experience

While macro-level statistics document persistent gender gaps, less attention has been devoted to how such patterns are experienced and interpreted by individuals at the beginning of their careers (Ibarra et al., 2013; Kossek et al., 2017). Early-career women entering business and economics professions in Sweden navigate contexts where gender equality is formally emphasized, yet where expectations and judgments may still operate in subtle and implicit ways. Because newcomers have not yet fully internalized organizational norms, early evaluative encounters may be experienced as ambiguous, uncertain, or contradictory.

By examining how early-career women interpret and navigate recruitment and early evaluation processes, this study seeks to illuminate the micro-level mechanisms through which gendered career inequalities may begin to emerge, even in contexts characterized by strong formal commitments to equality.

Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research question:

How do early-career women in the field of business and economics in Sweden interpret and navigate gendered expectations embedded in early-career evaluation processes?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Structural and Institutional Foundations of Gendered Career Inequality

Women's career equality has been conceptualized as a multilevel and dynamic phenomenon, referring to the extent to which women, relative to men, have equal access to career opportunities and experience comparable work and non-work outcomes, including pay, promotions, and job satisfaction. Career outcomes are shaped through the interaction of institutional arrangements, organizational structures, occupational segregation, and individual trajectories (Kossek et al., 2017). Therefore, gender inequality in careers cannot be understood as a single-level phenomenon but must be examined across structural and institutional contexts.

Despite women's near parity in educational attainment and high labor force participation, gender disparities across organizational hierarchies remain pronounced (Bureau for Employers' Activities, 2019; International Labour Organization, 2015, 2025; World Economic Forum, 2025). Women's representation declines at higher organizational levels, reflecting both vertical segregation (the *glass ceiling*) and horizontal segregation into administrative rather than strategic roles (Ellingsæter, 2013; Tanhua, 2018).

Research further indicates that formal qualifications and human capital often shape access to initial managerial roles. In contrast, progression to senior leadership increasingly depends on informal power structures and access to influential networks (Tharenou, 1999). Consequently, even when women meet formal merit-based requirements, structural constraints embedded in organizational systems may limit their advancement. These mechanisms are reinforced by culturally embedded gender stereotypes, particularly those that associate leadership with agentic, traditionally masculine traits and position women as primarily responsible for caregiving (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2012). Such expectations may shape perceptions of competence, authority, and leadership suitability, often in subtle and implicit ways.

Although many countries have implemented formal equality policies and anti-discrimination legislation, research demonstrates that implicit bias continues to influence workplace systems and career outcomes (Kossek et al., 2017). Even when performance evaluations do not systematically disadvantage women, assessments of leadership potential and promotion readiness may still favor men, contributing to persistent disparities in advancement and pay

(Heilman, 2012; Kossek et al., 2017). Therefore, inequality does not necessarily operate through overt exclusion but through institutionalized norms and evaluative practices that appear gender-neutral while reproducing differential outcomes.

These dynamics are particularly salient in welfare states like Sweden, where occupational segregation persists despite top rankings on gender equality indices, a pattern Mandel & Semyonov (2006), term the *welfare state paradox* (Ellingsæter, 2013; Tanhua, 2018; World Economic Forum, 2024, 2025).

2.2 Organizational and Relational Mechanisms of Advancement

While structural conditions establish unequal opportunity landscapes, organizational processes determine how these inequalities are enacted in practice. Research consistently shows that advancement is shaped not only by formal qualifications but by access to relational resources, informal influence, and discretionary evaluation (Kossek et al., 2017; Tharenou, 1999).

Further, social capital plays a central role in managerial progression, as mentoring and sponsorship provide access to visibility, advocacy, and high-impact assignments that signal leadership potential (Linehan & Walsh, 2001; Tharenou, 2001). However, access to these resources is unevenly distributed. Women are less likely to be integrated into elite networks that carry strategic influence, particularly in male-dominated industries (Ibarra, 1993). As informal advancement processes often operate through similarity-attraction dynamics, leadership hierarchies tend to reproduce themselves through homosocial mechanisms (McDonald & Westphal, 2013).

This pattern is theoretically grounded in Lipman-Blumen's (1976) concept of homosociality, which explains how historically male-dominated power structures have institutionalized male-to-male sponsorship systems, while women's networks have lacked comparable authority. Consequently, inequality is reproduced not only through exclusion from dominant networks but through structural asymmetries in access to sponsorship and influence.

Empirical research further demonstrates that informal networks function as gatekeeping mechanisms through which access to authority and strategic roles is mediated (Ibarra, 1993; McDonald & Westphal, 2013). Women's advancement is therefore shaped not only by formal qualifications but by their integration into informal power structures that determine visibility, reputational endorsement, and access to leadership pipelines (Glass & Cook, 2015). Taken

together, these dynamics illustrate how relational inclusion operates as a central mechanism through which structural gender inequality is maintained across organizational hierarchies.

Access to developmental assignments constitutes another key mechanism translating relational dynamics into career outcomes. Exposure to challenging and visible tasks enhances skill development, reputational capital, and promotion readiness (Dragoni et al., 2009). However, allocation of such assignments is often discretionary. Even in organizations that emphasize meritocracy, managers may unconsciously favor men when distributing opportunities and rewards (Castilla & Benard, 2010). Research shows that identical performance evaluations can produce different career consequences depending on gender, particularly when assessments involve judgments of leadership potential (Heilman, 2012; Rivera & Tilcsik, 2019).

Work-family norms further intersect with these mechanisms. The *ideal worker*, characterized by continuous availability, shapes perceptions of commitment (Acker, 2006; Lewis, 2010), while the *motherhood penalty* demonstrates that mothers are evaluated as less competent than equally qualified non-mothers (Correll et al., 2007). Consequently, women may be evaluated as less suitable for demanding assignments (Guillaume & Pochic, 2009).

Taken together, these findings suggest that organizational advancement systems depend not solely on human capital but on relational inclusion, discretionary judgments, and culturally embedded leadership norms. Through cumulative exposure to these mechanisms, small differences in access and evaluation can compound over time, contributing to persistent gender disparities in senior representation (Acker, 2006; Kossek et al., 2017).

2.3 Evaluation, Judgments, and Early-Career Consequences

Among the organizational mechanisms shaping advancement, evaluative processes are central as they translate structural and relational dynamics into concrete career outcomes. Unlike measurable outputs, assessments of leadership potential rely on judgments about future suitability, ambition, and alignment with implicit leadership stereotypes, making them particularly sensitive to gender bias (Dries & Pepermans, 2012; Player et al., 2019). Further, early career stages are characterized by exploration and identity formation, during which formative experiences can influence long-term trajectories (O'Neil & Bilimoria, 2005).

Drawing on Kumra and Vinnicombe, (2008) and Van Vianen and Fischer (2002), organizational climates and career processes are shaped by gendered norms, with many

organizations structured around masculine models of success that influence both career advancement and individuals' fit with organizational cultures.

Research on leadership evaluation further draws on role congruity theory, which holds that leadership is culturally associated with agentic traits such as assertiveness, decisiveness, and dominance, characteristics traditionally coded as masculine (Eagly & Karau, 2002). From this perspective, women displaying such behaviors may face social penalties for violating gender norms, while those conforming to communal expectations risk being perceived as lacking leadership potential (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2012; Rudman & Glick, 2001). Thus, evaluation systems not only assess performance but also reflect gendered expectations that shape how competence and leadership potential are interpreted.

Importantly, these dynamics are amplified early in careers, when limited track records may lead evaluators to rely more heavily on judgments of fit and potential (Rivera, 2012). Early feedback, socialization, and evaluation thus shape perceived fit and adjustment, with lasting implications for career progression (Kammeyer-Mueller & Wanberg, 2003). As a result, initial evaluative encounters can function as gatekeeping mechanisms, directing individuals into divergent opportunity pathways long before formal promotion decisions occur.

2.4 Individual Agency Within Gendered Evaluation Contexts

Although structural and organizational processes constrain opportunities, career development is not fully determined by external systems. Individual agency, expressed through ambition, self-efficacy, and career striving, also shapes career trajectories. Additionally, individual agency develops in interaction with perceived opportunity structures, as individuals adjust aspirations and goals in response to contextual constraints and feedback (Hirschi, 2012; Schoon & Heckhausen, 2019). Longitudinal research further shows that perceived competence and subjective career success contribute to later objective advancement, reinforcing motivation and persistence over time (Abele & Spurk, 2009).

Furthermore, recent research suggests that ambition and career striving are not fixed individual traits but socially shaped orientations toward opportunity and recognition. Schunnesson (2025), highlights how internalized standards of achievement and professional aspiration are constructed through interaction with organizational expectations and cultural norms. From this perspective, ambition itself is interpreted and recalibrated within evaluative environments.

Early-career experiences may therefore influence not only objective opportunities but also how women understand their own aspirations and leadership possibilities.

However, the translation of agency into advancement is socially mediated (Kossek et al., 2017; Tharenou, 1999). Women's expressions of ambition and assertiveness are evaluated within gendered normative frameworks. Research shows that women who negotiate assertively or engage in self-promotion may anticipate and experience backlash for violating prescriptive gender norms (Bowles et al., 2007). Thus, behaviors that signal leadership potential in men may generate ambivalent or negative evaluations when enacted by women.

This dynamic illustrates a critical theoretical tension: while contemporary career theory emphasizes individual resource accumulation, including human, social, psychological, and identity capital (Hirschi, 2012), the returns to these resources are filtered through evaluative systems shaped by gendered expectations. Even when women possess comparable human capital and ambition, unequal access to sponsorship, networks, and developmental assignments may interrupt the self-reinforcing cycle through which subjective confidence translates into objective progression (Tharenou, 1999).

Conclusively, agency therefore operates within structurally conditioned evaluative environments. Understanding gendered career trajectories requires examining not only institutional constraints, but also how individuals interpret, anticipate, and strategically navigate these constraints during formative career stages. By shifting focus from structural patterns to lived evaluative encounters, this study seeks to illuminate how gendered career inequality may be experienced and begin to take shape during the formative entry into professional life, even in contexts where gender equality is institutionally embedded.

2.5 Research Problem and Knowledge Gap

Despite extensive research on gender inequality in careers, gaps remain in understanding how such inequalities begin to take shape at the very start of professional life. While existing research has richly documented macro-level disparities and organizational mechanisms of inequality (e.g. Albrecht et al., 2018; Heilman, 2012; Ibarra et al., 2013; Kauhanen et al., 2011) comparatively less attention has been devoted to how early-career women themselves interpret and negotiate evaluative expectations within formally gender-equal environments (Ellingsæter, 2013; Kossek et al., 2017; Mandel & Semyonov, 2006). In particular, limited research

examines how early-career women perceive and interpret gendered leadership expectations during recruitment and early performance assessments (Heilman, 2012; Kossek et al., 2017), how they negotiate potential tensions between professional ideals and gender norms (Ibarra et al., 2013), and how these early evaluative encounters shape identity construction, confidence, and perceived career possibilities over time (O'Neil & Bilimoria, 2005; Schunnesson, 2025).

While recruitment and early performance assessments have been extensively studied as organizational sorting mechanisms (Acker, 1990; Heilman, 2001; Rivera, 2012), this literature says less about how these processes are experienced and interpreted by the women being evaluated. This study therefore shifts attention from evaluation as a purely organizational mechanism to evaluation also as a lived and interpreted process, examining how early-career women make sense of ambiguous evaluative cues, navigate gendered expectations, and incorporate these experiences into their emerging professional identities and perceived career possibilities.

Since early-career assessments occur before full integration into organizational norms, individuals often encounter unclear or internally inconsistent expectations. At this stage, individuals have not yet fully learned the unwritten rules governing appropriate behavior and performance standards, increasing uncertainty and reliance on subjective interpretations of feedback and interpersonal cues (Yu et al., 2025). Early evaluation contexts could therefore provide a particularly revealing vantage point for examining how gendered signals are interpreted and navigated as they unfold, before patterns of adjustment and self-positioning become stabilized.

Moreover, much gender research relies on comparative designs contrasting women's and men's outcomes, whether at the macro level through gender gap indices (Bureau for Employers' Activities, 2019; World Economic Forum, 2025), through longitudinal studies of diverging career trajectories (Albrecht et al., 2018; Kauhanen & Napari, 2011; Merluzzi & Phillips, 2022), or through experimental and audit designs examining evaluator bias (Bowles et al., 2007; Castilla & Benard, 2010; Correll et al., 2007; Player et al., 2019; Rivera & Tilcsik, 2019). While such designs are essential for documenting the existence and scope of gender disparities, they are less equipped to illuminate specifically how women interpret and navigate the evaluative processes that produce those disparities (Ibarra et al., 2013).

Comparative research nevertheless suggests that women and men are not only evaluated differently in organizational settings but may also come to interpret and navigate those settings differently as a result. Experimental and audit-based studies show that women are more likely than men to face social penalties for assertive self-advocacy and negotiation (Bowles et al., 2007), to be disadvantaged by evaluative standards tied to motherhood and perceived commitment (Correll et al., 2007), and to encounter leadership and promotion assessments in which identical signals are interpreted less favorably when attached to women than to men (Player et al., 2019; Rivera & Tilcsik, 2019). Taken together, this suggests that gendered inequality in evaluation does not only concern differential treatment at the point of judgment, but also the development of different anticipations, self-presentational strategies, and sensemaking processes in response to those judgments.

Although such approaches illuminate disparities, they may obscure women's experiences and limit understanding of how gendered expectations are navigated in practice. There is therefore a need for qualitative, within-group research that explores how early-career women interpret and manage evaluative encounters as they unfold.

Building on scholarship that integrates individual and organizational perspectives on women's career equality (Kossek et al., 2017), this study extends such frameworks by shifting attention from structural outcomes to women's lived experiences of early-career evaluation. By examining interpretation at the point of professional entry, the study seeks to illuminate how subtle gendered expectations may be enacted and internalized in formally gender-equal contexts, thereby contributing to broader understandings of how career inequalities persist.

2.6 Research Aim and Research Question

This thesis aims to explore how early-career women in the field of business and economics in Sweden interpret and navigate gendered expectations embedded in recruitment, onboarding, and early evaluation processes. By shifting focus from structural outcomes and evaluators' behavior to women's own experiences, the study seeks to deepen understanding of how gendered norms are perceived, negotiated, and managed during the formative entry into professional life.

Adopting a qualitative, within-group perspective, the study examines how women make sense of evaluative cues. Rather than assessing whether evaluation systems are objectively biased,

the analysis focuses on how such systems are subjectively experienced and interpreted. From this perspective, the thesis aims to illuminate how early-career evaluation processes function as critical sites where gendered career trajectories may begin to take shape.

Accordingly, the research question guiding this study is:

How do early-career women in the field of business and economics in Sweden interpret and navigate gendered expectations embedded in early-career evaluation processes?

To deepen this inquiry, the study further explores:

- How gendered leadership expectations are interpreted during recruitment and early performance assessments.
- How tensions between professional expectations and gender norms are navigated in practice.
- How early evaluative encounters shape identity construction, confidence, and perceived career possibilities.

2.7 Scope and Delimitations

This study examines early-career women working in the field of business and economics in Sweden. The empirical focus is on early-career evaluation processes, including interview processes, recruitment, onboarding, probationary periods, and early performance assessments, and on how these processes are interpreted and navigated by the women involved. Early-career refers to the first 0-1 years of full-time professional employment following higher education (see Section 4.2 for selection criteria for interviewees).

By situating the study within the Swedish labor market, the thesis explores gendered career dynamics in a context characterized by strong formal commitments to gender equality (World Economic Forum, 2025). Thus, the Swedish setting provides an analytically relevant case for examining how gendered expectations may operate in subtle and context-dependent ways within formally equality-oriented environments.

To ensure analytical focus and feasibility, the study includes several delimitations. First, it adopts a within-group design, focusing exclusively on women's experiences rather than comparing women and men, allowing for a deeper exploration of women's interpretations and

strategies. Second, the study does not examine objective career outcomes such as promotions, compensation, or leadership attainment. Since the aim is to understand how early-career women make sense of evaluative situations and navigate gendered expectations, subjective experiences of evaluation and sensemaking are more analytically relevant than measurable outcomes. Third, the empirical scope is limited to the field of business and economics; the findings are therefore not intended to generalize across sectors but are situated within this professional context. See Appendix 9.1 for key definitions.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts an integrated interpretive framework combining Role Congruity Theory (RCT), Double-Bind Theory (DBT), and Sensemaking Theory (ST) to examine how early-career women experience and interpret organizational evaluation processes. The framework conceptualizes early-career evaluation as a structured yet interpretive process in which gendered expectations shape assessment contexts, behavioral navigation unfolds under tension, and meaning construction influences perceived career possibilities and identity development.

Previous research has applied these perspectives largely in isolation. RCT is often used to explain evaluator bias and prejudice toward female leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2012), DBT to document the behavioral penalties women face for violating prescriptive gender norms (Jamieson, 1995; Rudman & Glick, 2001), and ST to examine how individuals construct meaning in ambiguous organizational contexts (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). By integrating these three perspectives, this study conceptualizes early-career evaluation as a dynamic process interrelating structural expectations, behavioral navigation, and identity construction.

3.1 Role Congruity Theory (RCT): The Evaluative Context

RCT, developed by Eagly & Karau, (2002), explains prejudice toward female leaders as stemming from a perceived incongruity between gender roles and leadership roles. Leadership positions are culturally associated with agentic qualities such as assertiveness, dominance, and decisiveness, whereas women are stereotypically associated with communal traits such as warmth and supportiveness. This perceived mismatch generates a “lack of fit” (Eagly & Karau,

2002, p.579) that shapes evaluative judgments. Importantly, RCT does not assume that attributes such as agency or communality are inherent traits but rather conceptualizes them as socially constructed expectations attached to social categories. Evaluative judgments are therefore not based on objective competence alone but on culturally embedded comparisons between socially ascribed characteristics and role-based gendered criteria (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

The theory identifies two forms of biases arising from this incongruity (Eagly & Karau, 2002). First, women may be evaluated as less suitable for leadership roles due to perceptions that they lack the agentic characteristics required for such positions. This may affect selection, promotion, and opportunity access. Second, when women do display agentic behaviors aligned with leadership expectations, they may face social penalties for violating prescriptive gender norms. Thus, women may be disadvantaged both when conforming to and when deviating from gender stereotypes. This produces a double-bind for women, which is further described in section 3.2. Importantly, these biases often operate implicitly through culturally embedded leadership stereotypes rather than explicit discrimination (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2012).

Building on this foundation, later scholarship clarifies that role incongruity operates through both descriptive norms (beliefs about what women are typically like) and injunctive norms (beliefs about how women should behave), and that bias emerges when these expectations conflict with professional role requirements (del Carmen Triana et al., 2024; Eagly & Karau, 2002). Crucially, role incongruity not only shapes access to formal leadership positions but also everyday evaluations of competence, potential, and effectiveness. Performance appraisals, feedback conversations, and talent identification processes may therefore be embedded within a broader evaluative structure that implicitly compares gendered expectations with role-based criteria (del Carmen Triana et al., 2024).

This broader application is central to this study. In early career stages, where formal leadership contests may not yet occur, employees could nevertheless be assessed against implicit stereotypes of future leadership. RCT thus provides the foundation for examining how early evaluative encounters signal (in)congruity and shape women's interpretations of their competence and career trajectories.

3.2 Double-bind Theory (DBT): Behavioral Navigation Under Tension

While RCT explains the evaluative mechanism that structures bias (Eagly & Karau, 2002), DBT explains the behavioral tension women must navigate within that structure. Building on Carli, (2001) and Jamieson's (1995) interpretation, the concept of the double-bind captures the conflicting expectations placed on women in professional settings. Women are expected to demonstrate competence and assertiveness to be perceived as capable, while at the same time showing warmth and communal qualities to be seen as socially acceptable.

Moreover, agentic behavior in women may increase perceptions of competence but reduce likability, whereas communal behavior may preserve approval but undermine perceptions of leadership potential (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Research further suggests that the prescription for female niceness operates as an implicit norm that penalizes women unless they temper displays of agency with warmth and deference (Carli, 2001; Rudman & Glick, 2001).

Conceptually, RCT identifies the stereotype-based mismatch shaping evaluation and the double-bind captures the lived navigation of that misalignment in everyday interactions (Hopkins et al., 2021; Kubu, 2018; Tremmel & Wahl, 2023). In early-career contexts, such as interviews, feedback conversations, and negotiations, where evaluators often rely more heavily on stereotypes due to limited information, expressions of agency may therefore be evaluated through the lens of gendered norms and expectations (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2012).

3.3 Sensemaking Theory (ST): Interpretation and Identity Construction

While RCT explains the structural evaluative context (Eagly & Karau, 2002) and DBT explains the behavioral tensions that unfold within that context (Carli, 2001; Jamieson, 1995), ST explains how these evaluative experiences are interpreted and integrated into self-understanding (Weick, 1995).

Drawing on Weick's (1995) theory of organizational sensemaking, this study conceptualizes evaluation as an interpretive process. ST refers to how individuals construct meaning in ambiguous situations, particularly when cues are unclear, feedback is indirect, and criteria are implicit. Early-career evaluation often involves considerable ambiguity, as expectations for

advancement may be unstated or unclear, assessments may rely on subtle signals, and judgments of potential may remain implicit.

According to Weick et al. (2005), sensemaking is an ongoing, social process grounded in identity construction that is triggered by ambiguity or disruption. Individuals interpret events retrospectively by extracting cues from their environment and integrating them into plausible, rather than necessarily accurate, narratives that sustain a coherent sense of self. Feedback can therefore be understood not merely as objective performance information, but as a cue that informs judgments about competence, belonging, and future possibilities. Through repeated evaluative encounters, these interpretations may in turn shape professional identity and perceived career trajectories.

Empirical support for the importance of interpretive processes in career development is found in Schunnesson's (2025) doctoral research on professional ambition, which demonstrates that ambition and career striving are constructed through ongoing interpretation of recognition, achievement, and organizational signals. Career self-understanding is therefore not fixed but shaped through evaluative encounters. Applied to early-career contexts, this may suggest that how women interpret encouragement, ambiguity, or subtle discouragement could influence not only immediate confidence but also longer-term perceptions of opportunity.

Furthermore, sensemaking is intersubjective rather than purely cognitive: individuals draw on conversations with colleagues, mentors, and peers, and on culturally available narratives, when interpreting ambiguous situations (Weick, 1995). When participants describe evaluative experiences as 'just how things are,' this signals the depth to which interpretive frameworks have been internalized, not the existence of objective conditions.

This perspective directly addresses the study's research focus on how early-career women interpret organizational evaluations. ST provides the processual bridge between structurally gendered evaluation (RCT) and lived behavioral navigation (DBT). It helps explain how stereotype-shaped assessments and reputational tensions are translated into subjective meaning, influencing confidence, ambition, and perceived attainability of leadership roles.

3.4 Integrated Interpretative Framework of Early Career-Evaluation

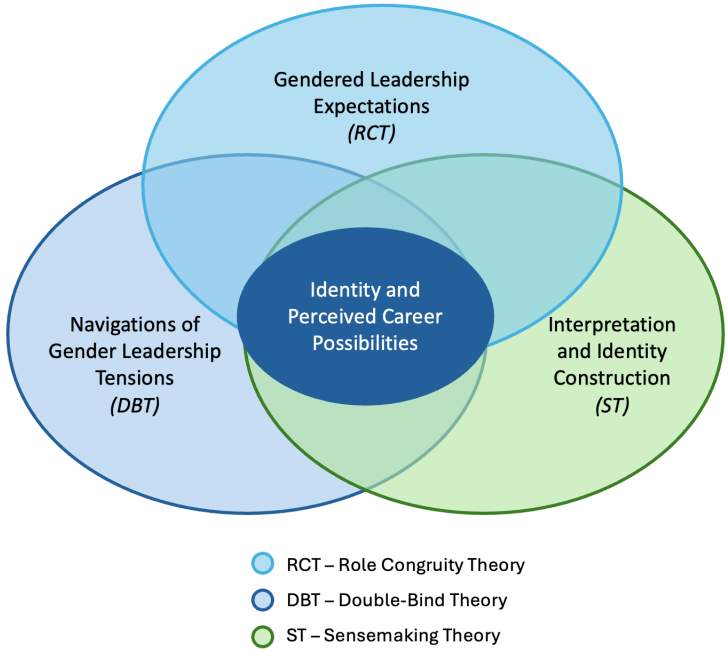
This study adopts an integrated interpretive framework combining RCT, DBT, and ST to examine how early-career women experience and interpret organizational evaluation

processes. The analytical focus of this framework lies not in the stand-alone individual theories, but in their interaction as layered, interrelated levels within a single process. The framework conceptualizes early-career evaluation as a recursive process in which stereotype-based expectations shape evaluation (RCT), behavioral navigation influences interactional outcomes (DBT), and interpretive sensemaking transforms these experiences into identity-relevant career expectations (ST).

In this framework, RCT explains the evaluative context within which women's careers unfold, highlighting how gendered leadership stereotypes may shape perceptions of competence and suitability. Building on this evaluative foundation, DBT illuminates the behavioral tensions women may encounter when navigating expectations that simultaneously reward and penalize agentic conduct, thereby framing evaluation as a site of constrained agency rather than neutral assessment. Complementing these perspectives, ST offers a processual lens through which individuals interpret and assign meaning to evaluative encounters, enabling analysis of how women understand feedback, negotiate identity implications, and construct perceptions of career possibility (for further details, see Appendix 9.2).

While RCT and DBT illuminate how gendered expectations structure evaluative processes and create normative tensions for career women, more recent work suggests that women's responses to such expectations are shaped by contextual cues, individual resources, and identity processes (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016; Ibarra et al., 2013). Building on this work, the present study integrates RCT, DBT, and ST to conceptualize evaluative contexts as sites where gendered norms and identity processes intersect, examining how early-career women interpret, negotiate, and position themselves within these structurally patterned environments.

Figure 1. Integrated Interpretive Framework



While this framework (see Figure 1) does not adopt a dedicated power-theoretical lens, it is important to acknowledge that power relations shape the mechanisms described by RCT, DBT, and ST. The gendered expectations that structure evaluation (RCT), the behavioral penalties that constrain women's conduct (DBT), and the interpretive processes through which these dynamics are internalized (ST) all operate within and reproduce asymmetric power relations (Acker, 1990; Scott, 1986). As Scott (1986) argues, gender is not merely a descriptive category but a primary way of signifying and organizing relations of power. Similarly, Acker (1990) demonstrates that organizational structures that appear gender-neutral in design nevertheless embed and reproduce gendered hierarchies of authority, legitimacy, and opportunity.

Drawing on Lukes' (2005), third dimension of power, this study recognizes that the most consequential forms of power may be those that shape preferences, self-perceptions, and aspirations without being experienced as coercion. When gendered expectations are internalized to the point where they feel natural or self-chosen, power operates not through visible constraint but through the shaping of what individuals perceive as possible, desirable, and appropriate. This power dimension is not treated as a separate analytical layer but as a condition that permeates the entire evaluative process examined in this study.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Philosophy and Design

The purpose of this study is to explore how early-career women in the field of business and economics in Sweden interpret and navigate gendered expectations embedded in early-career evaluation processes. Given the subjective and socially constructed nature of this phenomenon, the thesis adopts a qualitative research design grounded in a constructionist ontology and an interpretivist epistemology (Bell et al., 2022; Saunders et al., 2022). This assumes that meanings, expectations, and realities are produced through social interaction and are therefore best understood through participants' own interpretations rather than through objective measurement.

A qualitative approach is particularly suitable, as experiences of gendered expectations are often nuanced, context-dependent, and implicit, making them difficult to capture using quantitative methods (Bell et al., 2022; Saunders et al., 2022). To further support this, the study employs an abductive research strategy, enabling an iterative movement between empirical material and existing theory rather than relying on fixed hypotheses or purely inductive theory generation (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). This approach is especially appropriate for examining how early-career women interpret and navigate gendered expectations in evaluation processes, where meanings are often ambiguous and shaped by context.

To analyze the empirical material, this study adopts an integrated approach in which findings and theoretical interpretation are presented jointly (in section 5) rather than in separate sections. This reflects the study's abductive and interpretive design, where analysis is an iterative process moving between empirical observations and theory (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). Accordingly, meaning is constructed through continuous engagement with both data and theory, rather than treating data as a neutral input.

4.2 Sampling and Selection Criteria

Participants were selected through a convenience sampling strategy complemented by purposive inclusion criteria (Andrade, 2021). The initial pool was generated through accessible channels such as personal and professional networks and university contacts. Within this pool, purposive criteria were applied to ensure that all interviewees met predefined requirements

related to gender, career stage (0–1 year post-graduation), and recent experience of recruitment or interview processes within the business and economics sector in Sweden. While access to participants was convenience-based, inclusion in the study was guided by theoretically and empirically relevant purposive considerations.

Selection criteria for interviewees

- Self-identify as female
- 0–1 year of full-time work or have recent (0–1 year) experience of at least one recruitment or interview process within business and economics (e.g., internships, graduate/trainee programs, entry-level roles, assessment centers, or job interviews)
- Completed or currently pursuing the last year of a bachelor's degree in the field of business and economics

Participants were drawn from several higher education institutions. While a majority had studied at the Stockholm School of Economics (SSE), others had completed their degrees at other Swedish universities within the business and economics field. No systematic differences in experiential patterns were observed between participants from different institutions, suggesting that the dynamics documented in this study are shaped more by the professional field and career stage than by specific educational affiliation.

In total, fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with early-career women to explore their lived experiences, interpretations, and sensemaking of recruitment and early workplace evaluation. In addition, three interviews were conducted with experienced practitioners in recruitment and executive search, providing contextual insights into the evaluative practices and industry logics shaping these processes (see Appendix 9.3 for interviewee list).

This design enables the study to capture complementary levels of analysis (Zilber & Meyer, 2022). Interviews with early-career women primarily address the micro level, focusing on individual experiences and interpretations, while also offering insight into meso-level dynamics such as organizational practices and group norms. Practitioner interviews complement this by providing a broader perspective on how recruitment frameworks structure early-career assessment.

While gender inequality in recruitment can also be examined at the macro level, this study adopts an actor-centered perspective, focusing on the micro and meso levels through which

broader structures become visible in practice. The macro level is nevertheless captured indirectly, as gendered expectations rooted in socialization, education, and institutionalized leadership ideals emerge in participants' interpretations and responses (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

As a qualitative, non-probability sample, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalizable, but instead aim to provide analytical depth and contextual understanding (Arbale & Mutisya Nzioka, 2024). Limitations related to sampling are discussed further in Section 4.5.2.

4.3 Interview Structure

The interviews were semi-structured, allowing for a high degree of flexibility and confidentiality, and enabling participants to share more personal reflections while also allowing non-verbal cues to be observed (Bell et al., 2022; Saunders et al., 2022). The interview guide questions were inspired by the theoretical framework in Section 3, ensuring that all relevant topics were addressed and that the study's research question was adequately covered. The interview guides were originally developed in English and subsequently translated into Swedish for interviews conducted in Swedish (see Interview Guides in Appendix 9.4).

All interviews were conducted in settings chosen to promote participant comfort and openness, including quiet private spaces and online video meetings, depending on participants' preferences. Prior qualitative research highlights that comfortable, non-threatening settings facilitate richer and more reflective accounts (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The setting of each interview is described in Table 1 in Appendix 9.3. Participants were also informed about GDPR procedures, asked whether they consented to being recorded, and informed that they could withdraw at any time without explanation. These measures aimed to protect participants' integrity.

Interviews were conducted jointly by both authors and, in some cases, by one author. To ensure consistency, both authors aligned on the interview guide and approach before data collection and maintained reflective dialogue throughout. Variations in interview dynamics are further discussed in Section 4.5.2.

4.4 Data Analysis: Coding and Thematic Development

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim using AI-supported transcription software (see Section 9.6). Both authors independently verified that transcriptions accurately reflected the original recordings and that subsequent translations faithfully represented the interviews, enhancing the credibility and dependability of the study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The following subsections describe the analytical process through which the empirical material was transformed into thematic findings. The aim is to make visible the specific decisions, procedures, and reasoning at each stage, in accordance with the principle that transparency in qualitative analysis strengthens both dependability and confirmability (Nowell et al., 2017).

Phase 1: Familiarization and Initial Engagement

Following transcription, both authors engaged in repeated, independent readings of all eighteen transcripts alongside simultaneous interview notes. Consistent with Braun & Clarke's (2006) view of familiarization as the foundation of thematic analysis, this phase remained deliberately open-ended. Rather than approaching the material with a predefined coding framework, the objective was to develop a holistic sense of the dataset, its recurring patterns, emotional dimensions, and areas of convergence and divergence. Both authors independently noted preliminary observations in the margins of transcripts, marking analytically significant passages without yet assigning formal codes.

Phase 2: First-Cycle Coding

In the first coding cycle, both authors reviewed the transcripts line by line, identifying and labelling segments of text relevant to the research question. Codes were generated inductively from the data rather than derived from the theoretical framework, ensuring that the analysis remained grounded in participants' own accounts before theoretical interpretation was applied (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Each coded segment was transferred into an Excel spreadsheet, capturing the participant identifier, original Swedish text, English translation, interview context, and a preliminary code label.

To illustrate, when Interviewee A described uncertainty about whether an "extra laugh" would be read as warmth or unprofessionalism, this was coded as *uncertainty about behavioral boundaries,* and when Interviewee E described feeling like a "performance princess" whose

evaluative framework had collapsed, it was coded as *disorientation from loss of structured evaluation.*

The first coding cycle generated approximately 167 individual codes across the eighteen transcripts. Several codes overlapped or captured closely related phenomena from slightly different angles, for example, *toning down personality at work, being more reserved than usual,* and *not showing full competitiveness,* all described variations of a common behavioral pattern, while *valuing culture over tasks, prioritizing relational quality*, and *culture as decision criterion* captured overlapping orientations toward relational evaluation.

Phase 3: Code Consolidation and Color-Coding

To manage the volume and overlap of first-cycle codes, the authors undertook a systematic consolidation process. Codes capturing conceptually similar phenomena were merged into higher-order categories, supported by color-coding in an Excel spreadsheet, where each category was assigned a distinct color, enabling visual identification of patterns, clusters, and frequency across participants. This type of systematic data organization supports transparent and traceable qualitative analysis (Nowell et al., 2017).

For example, codes including *toning down personality*, *being more reserved*, and *calibrating warmth* were consolidated under *strategic self-moderation*, color-coded in orange; codes around *valuing culture over tasks* and *soft-skill feedback* under *relational evaluative orientation* were color-coded in blue.

This process reduced the 167 initial codes to 34 consolidated categories. The prevalence and frequency of these categories were systematically tracked by recording which interviews contributed relevant data segments and how many each contributed, enabling an assessment of which patterns were broadly shared and which were limited to individual accounts. Table 3 in Appendix 9.5 illustrates this tracking by presenting the ten most prevalent categories across the dataset.

Phase 4: Second-Cycle Coding and Thematic Development

In the second coding cycle, the 34 consolidated categories were examined for higher-order relationships, recurring tensions, and underlying mechanisms. This phase marks the transition from descriptive coding to interpretive coding, consistent with the move from semantic to latent analysis described by Braun & Clarke (2006). The authors moved iteratively between the Excel

overview and full transcripts, testing whether candidate groupings reflected coherent patterns of meaning.

Two analytical questions guided this process: which categories described dimensions of the same underlying phenomenon, and which stood in productive tension with one another. For example, *relational evaluative orientation, soft-skill feedback resonates more,* and *culture as decision criterion* were grouped into a preliminary theme labelled **what candidates actually value**. Further, *strategic self-moderation, calibrating warmth and competence, gendered behavioral awareness,* and *adapting to interviewer/context* were grouped under **self-presentation under pressure**. A third cluster, *feedback vacuum, evaluative ambiguity, self-doubt from lack of information,* and *preference for smaller organizations*, was labelled **making sense of uncertainty**. A fourth, *reciprocity in processes*, *mentorship presence/absence*, *peer competition/guarded sharing,* and *process transparency,* was labelled **the evaluative relationship.**

At this stage, the theoretical framework was introduced as an interpretive lens, in line with the study's abductive strategy (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). The preliminary themes were examined through RCT, DBT, and ST, not to impose theoretical categories onto the data, but to deepen the interpretation of patterns already identified inductively. For example, **what candidates actually value** was enriched by recognizing that participants' relational orientation aligned with communal qualities identified by RCT as gender typical. This connection emerged through the dialogue between data and theory rather than being assumed in advance. Similarly, **self-presentation under pressure** gained depth when interpreted through the double-bind framework, which illuminated why the calibration of warmth and competence was experienced as a specifically gendered tension.

This abductive movement led to the refinement and renaming of preliminary themes into the final thematic structure presented in Section 5. Table 2 below illustrates the progression from code categories to preliminary themes to final themes.

Table 2. Progression from selected code categories through preliminary themes to final thematic structure.

Selected Code Categories	Preliminary Theme	Final Theme
• Relational evaluative orientation • Soft-skill feedback resonates more • Culture as decision criterion • Prioritizing people over tasks	What candidates actually value	What Matters Most: Early-Career Women's Orientation Toward Relational Evaluation (Section 5.1)
• Strategic self-moderation • Calibrating warmth/competence • Gendered behavioral awareness • Adapting to interviewer • Chameleon strategies	Self-presentation under pressure	The Narrow Corridor: Strategic Self-Presentation Under Competing Expectations (Section 5.2)
• Feedback vacuum • Evaluative ambiguity • Self-doubt from lack of information • Preference for smaller organizations • Disorientation from loss of structure	Making sense of uncertainty	From Grades to Grey Zones: Feedback, Uncertainty, and Professional Identity (Section 5.3)
• Reciprocity in processes • Mentorship presence/absence • Peer competition • Process transparency • Relational signals in recruitment	The evaluative relationship	Reciprocity, Mentorship, and the Relational Infrastructure of Early Careers (Section 5.4)

Phase 5: Refinement, Validation, and Saturation

The final phase involved returning to the original transcripts to validate each theme against the full empirical material. Following Braun & Clarke (2006), each candidate theme was assessed against three criteria: internal coherence (do the coded segments describe a unified pattern?), empirical grounding (is the theme supported by sufficient participants to warrant a general claim?), and analytical distinctiveness (does this theme capture something not already captured by another theme?).

This validation led to several refinements. *Preference for smaller organizations* was initially considered a standalone theme. However, upon returning to the transcripts, it was consistently described as a consequence of evaluative experiences, specifically as a sensemaking response to ambiguity, absence of feedback, and the desire for visibility, rather than an independent

orientation. It was therefore incorporated as a subtheme within Section 5.3. Similarly, *gendered behavioral awareness* was integrated into the broader theme of strategic self-presentation (Section 5.2), as participants described this awareness not as an abstract observation but as a driver of specific behavioral adjustments. These decisions illustrate the reflexive, iterative character of the process, in which themes are evolving interpretive constructs continuously tested against the empirical material (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Both authors independently reviewed the final thematic structure against the transcripts. Disagreements were resolved through discussion and by returning to the original data. The final themes represent shared patterns in how participants interpreted and navigated gendered expectations in early-career evaluation, while allowing for variation in individual experiences.

Additionally, the number of interviews was guided by the principle of saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), understood not as a fixed endpoint but as a multidimensional, context-dependent process (Rahimi & Khatooni, 2024). Core categories, such as *strategic self-moderation, relational evaluative orientation, feedback vacuum*, and *evaluative ambiguity*, consistently appeared across transcripts, with later interviews largely confirming rather than extending these patterns. The final early-career and practitioner interviews added illustrative depth but did not generate new themes. As the study aims to interpret lived experiences rather than develop formal theory, saturation was reached when additional data neither produced new themes nor meaningfully deepened existing categories, aligning with Bell et al.'s (2022) definition of theoretical saturation.

4.5 Research Quality

4.5.1 Trustworthiness

This study is guided by Guba et al.'s (2006) framework for trustworthiness. *Credibility* was enhanced using semi-structured interview guides, reflective interview notes, and independent coding by both authors, with discrepancies resolved through discussion (Section 4.4, Phase 2). In addition, prevalence tracking was conducted across all eighteen interviews (Table 3, Appendix 9.5). *Transferability* is supported by contextual descriptions of interviews (Appendix 9.3) alongside the inclusion of verbatim quotations. *Dependability* is addressed through the systematic documentation of a five-phase analytical process, complemented by a color-coded Excel spreadsheet that serves as an audit trail. *Confirmability* is strengthened by the transparent progression from 167 first-cycle codes to 34 categories and ultimately four themes (see Table

2), with key analytical decisions documented in Phase 5 (Section 4.4). Finally, *authenticity* is pursued through nuanced representations of participants' perspectives, further enriched by the inclusion of field practitioner accounts as complementary vantage points.

4.5.2 Method Limitations

The combination of convenience and purposive sampling constrains generalizability to a subpopulation defined by accessibility and selection criteria. While convenience sampling limits inference to readily available individuals, purposive sampling further narrows the sample to those with characteristics relevant to the research objectives. The findings should thus be interpreted as reflecting this bounded group rather than the wider population (Andrade, 2021; Palinkas et al., 2015).

As participants were acquaintances of the authors, reflexivity was carefully considered throughout. This pre-existing relationship may have influenced interview dynamics and data interpretation. At the same time, familiarity likely facilitated greater candor on sensitive topics such as self-doubt, gendered expectations, and professional insecurity, as several participants explicitly noted feeling comfortable sharing experiences they might not have disclosed in a more formal setting. While relational proximity may have enriched the data depth, it also required critical attentiveness to the risk of projecting shared assumptions. Ongoing reflection and discussion between the authors were used to mitigate potential bias, although the precise impact on outcomes remains difficult to determine (Bell et al., 2022).

A further consideration relates to variation between interviewers. While some interviews were conducted by a single author and others jointly, this may have influenced the conversational dynamics, depth of probing, and perceived power balance. Prior research suggests that the presence and interaction style of the interviewer(s) can shape participants' responses, as meaning is co-constructed in the interview context (Roberts, 2020). While single-interviewer settings may facilitate a more intimate and open dialogue, joint interviews can enable richer probing and shared interpretation in real time. To address this, both authors reviewed all transcripts regardless of who conducted the interview, coding was applied uniformly, and the interview guide ensured thematic consistency. Variations in dynamics were treated as a source of analytical richness rather than a threat to dependability, provided interpretations remained grounded in what participants themselves said.

Finally, as most interviews were conducted in Swedish but analyzed and reported in English, translation may have introduced subtle shifts in meaning (Vula & Tyfekçi, 2024). Both authors independently reviewed translations of quotations used in the empirical analysis, discussing alternative renderings where Swedish connotations were difficult to capture in English. Careful transcription, collaborative review, and reflexive discussion were used to minimize misinterpretation.

5. Empirical Analysis

This section presents, interprets, and analyzes the empirical findings derived from eighteen semi-structured interviews, fifteen with early-career women in the business and economics sector and three with experienced executive search field practitioners (see Table 1 in Appendix 9.3). The analysis addresses the study's research question, how early-career women in the field of business and economics in Sweden interpret and navigate gendered expectations embedded in early-career evaluation processes, by examining how evaluative expectations are perceived, how tensions between competing demands are navigated, and how these experiences shape identity construction and perceived career possibilities.

The findings are organized around four themes that emerged from the empirics: (1) early-career women's orientation toward relational and cultural dimensions of evaluation, (2) the strategic navigation of contradictory expectations in professional self-presentation, (3) the interpretive processes through which evaluative ambiguity and feedback shape identity and career beliefs, and (4) the role of reciprocity, mentorship, and peer networks in the evaluative relationship. Within each theme, the analysis moves between empirical patterns, verbatim quotations, and theoretical interpretation, demonstrating how structural expectations (RCT), behavioral tensions (DBT), and sensemaking processes (ST) operate as interrelated dimensions of a single evaluative experience. Thus, the integrated framework presented in Section 3.4 serves as the foundation for the empirical analysis.

5.1 What Matters Most: Early-Career Women's Orientation Toward Relational Evaluation

One of the most consistent patterns across interviews was participants' orientation toward relational and cultural dimensions. Rather than prioritizing technical performance or formal competence markers, participants described gravitating toward organizations where they felt personally seen and culturally aligned, an orientation that emerged from their own sensemaking rather than being imposed by evaluators.

Culture Over Competence: What Early-Career Women Value

Across nearly all interviews, participants identified organizational culture and relational dynamics, rather than technical skills, as the most decisive factor in their evaluation of potential employers. Across interviews, technical skills are primarily understood as case-solving ability, quantitative reasoning, and the production of structured outputs such as Excel analyses and presentations. This was a consistent pattern: participants who had been through multiple recruitment processes described learning, often through repeated experience, that what mattered most to them was the quality of human connection they felt during the process itself.

Interviewee I articulated this orientation. When asked what had shaped her decision to accept her job offer, she described how the relational character of the recruitment process outweighed every formal criterion:

> What was important for me isn't the job description or the tasks. That became completely secondary. What really mattered was: What kind of people will I work with? [. . .] Versus: will I manage the tasks? Because that's, maybe a bit cocky, but tasks, you know you can handle them. But can you manage working with people who can't behave? (Interviewee I)

Interviewee I's account reveals a deliberate inversion of conventional evaluative priorities: formal competence is taken for granted ("you know you can handle [the tasks]"), while the relational dimension becomes the actual decision criterion. This orientation was shared broadly. Interviewee B, working in an international role, described a similar logic:

> I'm drawn to places where there's good culture. I'm not really interested in working at places where people hate each other and feel bad. [. . .] Whether you laugh during interviews, whether you have a good time. (Interviewee B)

Interviewee F expressed a parallel realization through her recruitment experiences:

> I realize during these processes that I like smaller companies, where you lift each other up, where every individual plays a big role, rather than the typical up-or-out. (Interviewee F)

This orientation toward relational quality carries significant analytical implications when examined through the integrated theoretical framework. From a role congruity perspective, participants' emphasis on warmth, connection, and cultural fit aligns closely with communal values culturally associated with femininity, being caring, relational, and attuned to social dynamics (Eagly & Karau, 2002). What is analytically important here is that this alignment is not imposed by evaluators but rather brought into the evaluative encounter by the participants themselves. They are not being told that culture matters more than competence; in contrast, they are arriving at this conclusion through their own sensemaking, drawing on their accumulated experience of what feels meaningful and affirming in professional contexts.

When Recognition Lands: The Differential Weight of Soft-Skill Feedback

A closely related sub-pattern concerned the type of feedback participants received and how they experienced it. Across interviews, participants consistently reported that positive feedback on soft skills, personality, energy, warmth, and enthusiasm carried greater personal significance than recognition of hard skills or technical competence. This was not a matter of frequency alone; it was a qualitative difference in how deeply the recognition resonated.

Interviewee B described this dynamic:

> It feels like it weighs more, or you become happier, when someone says 'I really love your energy' than when someone says 'you're really good at Word.' (Interviewee B)

Interviewee I echoed this distinction:

> If someone says I'm really great at PowerPoint, that feels fine. But when it's about soft skills – like, 'we really love your energy' – that feedback, it feels better. It does more for me. I become happier, maybe. (Interviewee I)

Interviewee G, reflecting on the feedback she received across processes, noted that the vast majority was soft-skill oriented:

> I would say ninety percent has been soft skills. That you feel a hunger to start working at this workplace or company. That you're curious, that you have thoughtful and sharp questions that really show you're prepared and that you want this. [. . .] Not so much hard skills at all, I think. (Interviewee G)

This creates a consequential feedback loop. Organizations disproportionately recognize women for communal qualities, while women internalize precisely that feedback most deeply. Over time, this may progressively anchor professional identity in relational competence rather than agentic capability, not because agentic qualities are absent, but because the evaluative environment provides less affirming feedback in those dimensions.

Field Practitioner Perspectives: The Irreducibility of Relational Judgment

The interviews with executive search field practitioners provided a complementary vantage point that confirmed the centrality of relational evaluation across career levels, while also highlighting its structural implications.

Interviewee Q was explicit about the limitations of standardized assessment:

> The disadvantage is that you don't get the opportunity to show who you are. It doesn't really matter how good someone is at the tests if you then don't fit culturally. [. . .] In my thirty years, I've never placed a CFO where the client calls back and says 'that CFO couldn't count.' It never happens. But they do call and say, 'this isn't working culturally, they're fighting.' (Interviewee Q, first interview)

This is also substantiated by Interviewee O, who emphasizes that "it is a very important to meet the person and get a sense of the individual behind the CV, what values they hold," and that "values and culture also become an important part" of the evaluation. These accounts confirm that relational and cultural judgment operate as a decisive evaluative mechanism. But

Interviewee Q also identified a more directly gendered asymmetry in how evaluative criteria are applied, a pattern she termed the "potential dilemma":

> Men are often ascribed potential. 'This person hasn't done this, but I see great potential that he'll manage it.' Women are assessed on track record. 'Why is she interesting? Well, we think she has potential. But she hasn't done it. This man is interesting. He hasn't done it either, but he has great potential.' (Interviewee Q, first interview)

While this observation reflects one practitioner's professional experience and cannot be generalized without further empirical support, it resonates with experimental research suggesting that evaluations of potential are not gender-neutral, as signals such as passion are more readily translated into expectations of future performance for men than for women (He et al., 2024). If this pattern operates as described, potential functions as a taken-for-granted evaluative category whose application may be shaped by implicit gendered assumptions about who 'looks like' a future leader. This opacity is analytically noteworthy: when the criteria for potential remain unarticulated, they may become resistant to scrutiny and correction, operating as what Lukes (2005) terms a form of invisible power that shapes outcomes without being recognized as a mechanism of selection.

This asymmetry may carry particular consequences at the early career stage, where no one yet has a substantial track record. Under such conditions, women would enter evaluation with the one criterion that counts for them essentially empty, while men would benefit from a forward-looking assessment that grants the benefit of the doubt. Further research could explore whether early-career women's orientation toward relational criteria and communal self-presentation could be understood not only as shaped by gendered socialization, but also as a response to an evaluative system that places the burden of proof on demonstrated competence rather than assumed potential. At the same time, these adaptive strategies may inadvertently contribute to the reproduction of the very gendered evaluative dynamics that make such strategies necessary, as relational alignment and communal presentation become reinforced as central criteria of evaluation.

What the early-career women's accounts add to this pattern identified by field practitioners is a subjective dimension, showing that it is not only evaluators who apply different criteria, but also candidates themselves who orient toward relational and cultural dimensions as the most meaningful markers of professional belonging. This convergence is significant because when

both evaluators and candidates privilege relational fit over technical competence, and when women are simultaneously held to a higher evidentiary standard for agentic capability, the evaluative system may appear merit-based and gender-neutral on the surface while systematically channeling women toward communal career identities. This orientation is shaped by gendered socialization, reinforced by the evaluative environment, and compounded by asymmetries in how potential is ascribed.

5.2 The Narrow Corridor: Strategic Self-Presentation Under Competing Expectations

Across interviews, participants described strategic, often conscious, adjustments to their self-presentation, not as mere professionalism, but as responses to perceived tensions between authenticity and evaluative success. These tensions map onto the double-bind dynamic in which women face competing demands for agency and communality.

Toning Down and Taking Up Space: The Navigation of Visibility

A closely related pattern concerned the management of visibility and assertiveness. Multiple participants described deliberately 'toning down' their personality, competitiveness, or expressiveness in professional settings, not because they were explicitly instructed to do so, but because they perceived implicit expectations that early-career women should occupy a more reserved, deferential position.

Interviewee J provided an illustrative account. At her workplace, there was a ping-pong table in the office:

> I'm very, very competitive in a way that isn't very pleasant. So I had to really rein myself in. […] During the lunch break, they [the other women in the office] sat and chatted and drank coffee. While all the guys got an outlet for their energy, and played ping-pong. I love playing ping-pong, so I played with the guys. […] But I still wasn't really myself. I was still very much trying to fit in. (Interviewee J)

Interviewee J's account reveals multiple layers of double-bind navigation occurring simultaneously. She describes crossing a gender-typical behavioral boundary (playing ping-pong with the men rather than socializing with the women) yet simultaneously constraining her

competitiveness to avoid being perceived as too different from the other women. The result is a carefully calibrated performance: enough agency to signal engagement and energy, but not so much as to violate prescriptive expectations regarding femininity. When asked why she felt the need to restrain herself, she was explicit:

> There are norms that women should maybe be a little more reserved. [. . .] If I'm the kind of person who takes a lot of space in a room and is dominant, people might think it's a bit strange if you're a young woman. That has to do with norms in society, absolutely. (Interviewee J)

She added a crucial observation about the uncertainty of consequences of not adhering to perceived norms:

> It's not that you know the consequences. […] But it's also like, I think this is how it works in society in all contexts. […] You try to find your place by carefully navigating your way forward. (Interviewee J)

Interviewee F described a similar dynamic through the lens of competitive activities at a company event:

> We played bowling as an activity. And then I was also like, okay, I can't be too competitive. [. . .] I know that in my role, I'm expected to keep my emotions in check. That's important, I know at my workplace. (Interviewee F)

When asked how she knew this was expected, she pointed to personality tests administered during recruitment:

> In all those personality tests, they want to see that you're not a person who gets too stressed or acts too much on your emotions. You should be thoughtful and not let stress get to you. (Interviewee F)

Here, the double-bind is mediated by formal assessment instruments where personality tests implicitly prescribe emotional regulation as a valued trait, which participants internalize as a behavioral norm. For women, who are already navigating expectations of communal warmth, the additional constraint to suppress competitive or emotional expression might further constrain the range of perceived acceptable behavior.

What emerges across these accounts is not a single moment of penalty but a pervasive anticipatory constraint. Participants described not so much being punished for assertiveness as anticipating the possibility of penalty, and preemptively adjusting their behavior to avoid it. This anticipatory double-bind dimension shapes behavior before any evaluative encounter occurs, operating as an internalized self-regulatory mechanism that narrows women's behavioral repertoire without requiring any external enforcement. This aligns with Foucault's (1982) insight that power operates not through external coercion but by structuring the field of possible action, leading individuals to regulate themselves in line with internalized norms.

The Chameleon Strategy: Adaptive Self-Presentation Across Contexts

The most widespread behavioral response to these perceived tensions was what several participants described as adaptive self-presentation, adjusting demeanor, communication style, and visibility to match the perceived expectations of each specific evaluative encounter. Interviewee C used the metaphor of a chameleon:

> I'm a person who adapts a lot depending on the context I end up in. [. . .] There I'm probably a bit like a chameleon. I think that's also the case in professional contexts. (Interviewee C)

Interviewee L described a more deliberate version of this strategy:

> I always try to look up who I'm going to meet. And then I try to figure out this person, how can I best meet them? Based on the little I know. [. . .] If I know that in certain situations I'm a bit quiet, but in this role, I need to be extroverted, then I really push on that – okay, now you need to be even more extroverted. (Interviewee L)

When asked why she engaged in this calibration, she offered an explanation:

> It's because you want to move forward in the process. And maybe it's not always that you one hundred percent want this job, but you still want to feel that you're moving forward and feel, I guess, that they want you. It sounds sad, but it's probably a little like that. (Interviewee L)

These chameleon strategies represent a behavioral response to the evaluative ambiguity identified throughout the interviews. When criteria are implicit and relational rather than formal

and measurable, participants do not prepare in a conventional sense but instead develop contextual reading skills and behavioral flexibility. This adaptive self-presentation can also be understood in light of Schunnesson's (2025) argument that young professionals are embedded in an "ethos of optimization", where the present role is rarely sufficient and future opportunities remain salient. In this context, self-presentation is not only about the immediate interaction but also about maintaining viability for future roles.

Schunnesson (2025) further suggests that contemporary professionals are less inclined to adopt a fixed "corporate identity" (p. 56), instead orienting toward more fluid and individualized career trajectories. This may help explain why participants engage in continuous behavioral calibration across contexts. Rather than committing to a stable professional self, they maintain adaptive flexibility to navigate shifting expectations.

While such adaptability is a general feature of professional life, the data suggest it carries a distinct gendered dimension for early-career women: the perceived range of acceptable behavior is narrower, and the cognitive demands of constant adjustment are higher. The field practitioner interviews provide indirect support for this pattern. Interviewee O, when asked whether competence and leadership potential are perceived differently based on gender, responded that evaluation is ultimately grounded in "capacity and personality" rather than gender.

Similarly, Interviewee Q highlighted a gap between perceived and actual evaluation:

> I would take that very positively. [. . .] You should dare to take up space and show that you dare certain things. Because that's the only way you develop. (Interviewee Q, second interview)

This suggests that the anticipatory constraints described by participants may be more restrictive than the evaluative environment itself. The perceived narrow corridor appears partly shaped by internalized gendered expectations rather than actual evaluator preferences. However, this does not diminish its impact: when behavior is constrained by anticipated rather than enacted penalties, the consequences for visibility and career development are still real.

5.3 From Grades to Grey Zones: Feedback, Uncertainty, and the Professional Identity

Sensemaking processes emerged as the mechanism through which structural expectations and lived tensions become internalized as identity-relevant conclusions about competence, belonging, and future trajectories. This section examines how participants interpreted their evaluative experiences, constructed professional identities, and formed beliefs about their career possibilities.

The Transition from Structured to Ambiguous Evaluation

One of the most consistent patterns across interviews was the disorientation participants experienced when transitioning from the structured, criteria-transparent evaluation systems of higher education to the ambiguous, implicit evaluation of professional life. This transition functioned as a sensemaking trigger, an encounter with ambiguity that demanded active interpretation.

Interviewee A described the transition and its consequences:

> In school, you've gone through the whole thing with very clear instructions and clear expectations. A lot of clarity in everything. And now comes a situation where it was unclear. And that made me insecure. And then I think my ability also deteriorated because of that. I felt worse. Or I became worse. I didn't know what to do because it was so unclear. (Interviewee A)

What Interviewee A describes is not merely confusion but a self-reinforcing cycle: unclear expectations produce insecurity, insecurity degrades perceived performance, and degraded performance confirms the sense of inadequacy. The ambiguity is not experienced as a neutral absence of information, but as a signal of failing to meet standards that remain invisible. Interviewee E articulated the underlying mechanism through a phrase that captured something shared across several accounts:

> I think it's very much a fundamental feeling. In school, when you've always been a bit of a 'performance princess', everything is based on when you get a grade. You know that if you've done something well, then you get a good grade. That's how you're wired. [. . .] And when you start at a new place, you don't

> know – what are the requirements? What exactly is expected? Even if it can be written in black and white on paper, there are always a lot of grey zones around it. (Interviewee E)

The phrase "performance princess" captures a specific intersection of gendered socialization and achievement orientation: participants who have succeeded in highly structured educational environments have internalized a model of evaluation based on clear criteria and measurable outcomes. In line with Schunnesson's (2025) argument, this should not be understood as a stable individual configuration, but as a contextually shaped orientation in which performance and identity become tightly coupled under conditions of evaluative uncertainty. In the absence of clear evaluative signals, these women rely on their own anxious self-assessments as the primary interpretive resource. As the following section documents, this dynamic is compounded when organizations fail to provide the feedback that could anchor a more constructive interpretation.

The Feedback Vacuum and Its Identity Consequences

The absence of meaningful feedback emerged as one of the most emotionally charged themes across interviews. Participants consistently described a feedback vacuum in recruitment and evaluation processes, such as generic rejection emails, unexplained decisions, and evaluations that provided no actionable information. This absence is not only experienced as a lack of information, but as a lack of interpretive clarity.

As illustrated by interviewee N and H, feedback was often indirect (a manager redoing work without comment), vague ("you would make a great consultant, but not for this position"), or absent, with no response from firms at all. In such instances, silence itself becomes a form of feedback, yet one that offers no clear basis for interpretation. This vacuum was not experienced as merely frustrating; it functioned as an interpretive void that participants filled with self-doubt.

Interviewee N, who had experienced multiple rejections from large firms before securing a position at a smaller management company, described the cumulative effect:

> Applying to all these positions and feeling like I'm a great fit and still getting the rejection – it just does something to the motivation, of course. [. . .] It's a

> kind of constant stress not having a job and you feel like you're missing deadlines, running out of time, and it's exhausting. (Interviewee N)

When asked whether this had affected how she saw herself professionally, she answered:

> It made me kind of doubt myself and feel like, okay, I am not good enough for this job. (Interviewee N)

This account reveals how the absence of feedback triggers identity-threatening sensemaking. Without external information about why decisions were made, participants construct their own explanations, which could be more damaging than any actual criticism would be. The sensemaking process transforms a structural failure (organizations' inadequate feedback practices) into a personal inadequacy ("I am not good enough").

In sharp contrast, participants who received concrete, personal feedback, even in the context of rejection, described profoundly different sensemaking outcomes. Interviewee D recounted an experience that she described as "invaluable":

> The HR person wrote to me afterward and said, 'Hey, can I call you?' And then she spoke to me for fifteen minutes and just said, 'Look, I think this will work out for you. You're going to get a great job. But it was X, Y, Z. So for future interviews, I would focus on X, Y, Z.' And that was just invaluable. I got a confidence boost and a really good impression of the company. (Interviewee D)

Thus, what matters is not merely whether the outcome is positive or negative, but whether the evaluative process provides interpretive resources that participants can use to construct coherent narratives about their competence and trajectory.

The Pull Toward Smaller Organizations

One of the most analytically significant sensemaking patterns was participants' progressive gravitation toward smaller organizations, a preference that intensified through repeated evaluative experiences and that could shape long-term career trajectories.

Interviewee J described this shift:

> In the beginning, I applied a lot to more established companies, bigger companies, where it feels maybe more prestigious. But the more jobs I've applied for [...] I've kind of understood that I think I fit better at a small company

> where I'm one of twenty rather than one of a hundred. Because then I feel seen in a different way and can contribute and change more. (Interviewee J)

Interviewee J continues:

> I think that many of these bigger companies with hierarchies, there you just need IQ and you don't need EQ. […] Whereas in these flat organizations, it's like everyone knows everyone. It's very relational. And I can only speak for myself, but all my female friends – that's where they've gravitated toward. (Interviewee J)

Interviewee E, drawing on her contrasting experiences at a large and a small company, identified the underlying mechanism:

> At [the large company], I felt much more that you should take a junior role. You shouldn't take up the most space. [. . .] Whereas now at a smaller company, it's expected – even as a junior, you should share your knowledge. (Interviewee E)

This preference for smaller organizations constitutes a sensemaking response to the evaluative dynamics documented in the preceding sections. In larger, more hierarchical organizations, early-career women perceive that the evaluative structure rewards deference, invisibility, and conformity to junior-role expectations, a posture that conflicts with both their ambition and their desire for recognition. Smaller organizations, by contrast, are perceived as offering evaluative environments where visibility, autonomy, and relational proximity to decision-makers allow participants to feel 'seen' and valued in ways that affirm their professional self and identity.

However, what participants labeled as "small" was not primarily a function of headcount. Organizations described as small ranged from firms with around fifteen employees to multinational organizations operating across more than forty countries with over two hundred employees in Sweden. Rather, smallness referred to culture: flat hierarchies, proximity to decision-makers, and a tangible sense of visibility and recognition. Conversely, "large" organizations were associated with hierarchical distance, anonymity, and up-or-out dynamics, regardless of actual size. This suggests the observed preference is better understood as an orientation toward relational organizational cultures rather than toward scale per se. Analytically, this distinction is significant because it indicates that culture, rather than

organizational size alone, shapes the evaluative dynamics influencing early-career women's self-selection.

5.4 Reciprocity, Mentorship, and the Relational Infrastructure of Early Careers

Participants consistently evaluated recruitment processes, feedback practices, and organizational culture through the lens of whether the relationship felt "two-sided". When organizations treated candidates as interchangeable inputs, participants reported diminished self-confidence; when they felt treated as individuals, even in rejection, they described lasting positive impressions and restored motivation.

Interviewee I articulated this:

> They also have a responsibility to sell themselves to me. It's a two-way street here, and this is a relationship and I can't do everything for that relationship. It takes two. (Interviewee I)

She described how early relational signals shaped her entire perception of the organization:

> From the very first second in that interaction, you feel valued, seen. [. . .] Treated as a human being, because you've been in so many processes where you're just one of a billion. (Interviewee I)

Interviewee G highlighted the same logic, distinguishing scripted questioning from genuine engagement:

> When the interest is mutual, you feel they're not asking because it's their script, but because they actually want to know what you think. [. . .] Then you feel really seen. […] People forget – it's a process two parties go through together, not something I push through on my own. (Interviewee G)

The significance of this reciprocity pattern extends beyond recruitment satisfaction. When evaluative encounters are experienced as one-directional, organizations extracting time, energy, and self-presentation without providing feedback or relational engagement in return, participants interpret this asymmetry through sensemaking processes that may amplify

gendered self-doubt. The feedback vacuum described in Section 5.3 is experienced not merely as an informational deficit but as a relational rejection. For women already navigating expectations about warmth and relational competence, this absence of reciprocity is particularly destabilizing, as it threatens the interpersonal domain in which they have been trained to seek affirmation. Conversely, when organizations demonstrated relational investment, participants described enhanced self-confidence and career optimism.

Mentorship as a Relational Anchor

Several participants described mentorship, or its absence, as a decisive factor in how they navigated early career uncertainty. Interviewee G's account of having a dedicated contact person throughout her recruitment process illustrates the impact:

> I had a person I could link arms with, who the day before my case interview called and just said, 'How are you feeling about tomorrow? Are you excited? Have any new questions come up?' [. . .] It was a very unique thing to have someone guide you through the recruitment process. (Interviewee G)

Having someone invested in her progress transformed the evaluative experience from a one-directional assessment into a relational process, reducing the isolation and self-doubt that characterized her other experiences. The contrast with Interviewee N was stark; she described a manager who "was often talking about herself and not really focusing on me," leaving her feeling "anxious" and "uncertain of what is expected of me," precisely the interpretive void that Interviewee G's process had filled.

The field practitioner interviews corroborated mentorship's importance. Interviewee Q offered a concrete illustration, the deliberate act of creating space for a junior woman to demonstrate her capabilities:

> I had someone here who was really sharp. She was very tough, she took initiative. […] I said quite quickly, 'You take this one.' When we sat with a client, she did it brilliantly. […] And then I was going to an external meeting with a senior listed-company CEO. I said, 'Come with me.' And she came along, and she got to take up space in that meeting. […] That's what you want. And that's also what makes her say, 'I'll be able to do this.' (Interviewee Q, second interview)

This demonstrates how mentorship can directly counteract the anticipatory constraint documented in Section 5.2. Where participants described holding back and waiting for permission to be visible, this mentor actively altered the evaluative context itself, expanding the behavioral corridor by creating situations in which agentic behavior was not merely permitted but expected. The field practitioner interviews suggest that the actual evaluative environment may be more receptive to agentic behavior than anticipated. The gap between internalized constraint and actual opportunity represents a space in which organizational interventions, particularly mentorship that actively creates situations for agentic behavior, could be especially effective.

Peer Networks: Support, Competition, and the Limits of Shared Knowledge

Alongside mentorship, peer networks emerged as a significant but ambivalent factor. Peers provided emotional support and normalized difficulty. Interviewee N described how sharing frustrations with equally struggling friends shifted the frame from "there's something wrong with me" to "the market is difficult." Yet an undercurrent of competition constrained how openly strategic knowledge circulated. Interviewee D described this tension:

> We were quite open. We practiced cases together, gave each other feedback, helped each other. [. . .] But people didn't really tell you which jobs they were applying to. There was still a lot of competition. [. . .] If you know that you and I are applying for the same job, you are my competition. Why would I help you become king at cases? (Interviewee D)

Crucially, she observed that this guarded dynamic was not equally distributed across gender:

> And there I've actually noticed quite a big difference between girls and guys. Guys are much more open and help each other with cases and things like that. (Interviewee D)

If male peers share strategic knowledge more freely while female peers withhold information under competitive pressure, networks may generate asymmetric advantages. Men accumulate shared strategic capital, while women enter evaluative contexts with less access to knowledge that reduces uncertainty and builds confidence. This suggests that early-career women may be less strategically prepared, not due to lower capability, but because relational dynamics constrain knowledge circulation in ways their male counterparts do not experience.

At the same time, these accounts highlight a tension within peer networks: they function as key sensemaking resources, normalizing difficulty, providing guidance, and buffering isolation, yet do not distribute these benefits equally. This asymmetry in peer knowledge-sharing echoes the homosocial dynamics documented in the literature (Lipman-Blumen, 1976), suggesting that similar mechanisms operate at the peer level.

6. Discussion

6.1 The Impossible Equation

This study set out to examine how early-career women in the field of business and economics in Sweden interpret and navigate gendered expectations embedded in early-career evaluation processes. The empirical findings reveal that these women do not encounter gendered evaluation as a single identifiable barrier but as an ambient condition, a diffuse, self-reinforcing system in which the evaluative criteria they value most, the behavioral adjustments they make, and the career narratives they construct converge to produce systematically different starting points. What emerges from the data is not a story of overt discrimination but something more elusive, namely, an *impossible equation* in which there seems to be no individually optimal solution within a structurally constrained system.

The women in this study are not passive recipients of gendered structures; they are active interpreters of their evaluative environments, strategic navigators of competing expectations, and deliberate architects of their professional identities. Yet their agency operates within a corridor shaped by implicit norms, absent feedback, and evaluative criteria that reward communal orientation while demanding agentic proof. The equation is impossible not because these women lack capability or awareness, but because they perceive that evaluative system presents mutually incompatible demands: be warm but not too warm; be assertive but not dominant; be yourself but perform the right version of yourself; be ambitious but prove it through demonstrated achievement while your male peers are credited with potential.

6.2 Theoretical Contributions

6.2.1 Role Congruity as Co-Constructed Orientation, Not Imposed Bias

RCT, as formulated by Eagly & Karau (2002), posits that prejudice toward female leaders stems from a perceived incongruity between communal qualities associated with women and agentic qualities associated with leadership. In its classical formulation, role incongruity operates primarily as an evaluator-side mechanism where decision-makers perceive women as lacking agentic traits and penalize them accordingly (del Carmen Triana et al., 2024; Heilman, 2012).

The present findings suggest a more nuanced dynamic. As documented in Section 5.1, participants oriented themselves toward relational and cultural evaluative criteria as the dimensions that mattered most. They valued organizations where they felt personally seen, prioritized cultural fit over technical expertise or challenge, and experienced soft-skill recognition as more identity-affirming than hard-skill acknowledgment. Importantly, this orientation emerged through their own sensemaking rather than through evaluator imposition.

This finding extends RCT by suggesting that role congruity in early career contexts operates not only through evaluator-imposed bias but through a co-constructive process in which women themselves gravitate toward evaluative frames that align with communal expectations. The alignment is not experienced as constraining; it feels authentic and meaningful. Yet it constitutes a subtle sorting mechanism in which anchoring professional identity in relational competence may gradually channel early-career women into trajectories where communal qualities are valued over agentic achievement. The "lack of fit" (Eagly & Karau, 2002, p. 579), is therefore not simply a judgment imposed on women but also a frame that women themselves adopt as they make sense of what the evaluative environment rewards.

The field practitioner interviews suggest a structural pattern, though the evidence is limited. As Interviewee Q (first interview) noted, men may be assessed on potential, while women are judged on proven track records. While this cannot be confirmed from a single account, it aligns with research showing that evaluations of potential are not gender-neutral: signals like passion are more often interpreted as future performance for men than for women (He et al., 2024). In early-career contexts, where track records are minimal, this implies that role congruity may develop within an asymmetric evaluative landscape, where the criteria for demonstrating capability differ by gender despite appearing formally identical.

6.2.2 The Anticipatory Double-Bind: Constraint Before Penalty

DBT, drawing on Carli (2001) and Jamieson (1995), explains the behavioral tension women face when agentic behavior increases perceptions of competence but reduces likability, while communal behavior preserves social approval but undermines perceived leadership capacity. The classical formulation emphasizes penalty: women who display agentic behavior are sanctioned for violating prescriptive gender norms (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Rudman & Glick, 2001). Unlike men, for whom agentic behavior aligns with leadership stereotypes, women face penalties in both directions, where neither agentic nor communal behavior comes without cost.

Extending this framework, the analysis identifies what this study terms the anticipatory double-bind. Participants described anticipating punishment and preemptively adjusting their behavior; the penalty was imagined, not experienced, yet its effects were real. While prior research documents similar dynamics in specific domains, such as reduced self-advocacy due to anticipated backlash (Amanatullah & Morris, 2010; Rudman & Phelan, 2008), the present study shows that anticipatory constraint operates as a pervasive, cross-situational mechanism shaping the entire evaluative landscape.

Field practitioner accounts suggest that this anticipatory constraint may exceed what the evaluative environment demands. They expressed surprise at how consistently early-career women described holding back, emphasizing instead that organizations value individuals who take up space. This reveals a central paradox: while gendered norms persist, the magnitude of anticipated penalty often exceeds that of actual penalty, producing an overcorrection that suppresses the very agentic behavior required for advancement.

This points to a temporal lag between structural progress and internalized constraint. While Sweden has made substantial advances in gender equality, earlier norms appear to persist as internalized dispositions shaping behavior. The women in this study are thus responding not only to present conditions but also to inherited expectations of appropriate self-presentation. The anticipatory double-bind can therefore be understood as both a response to current environments and a residue of past ones. Its effects remain consequential, as holding back may limit the agentic exposure necessary for leadership progression.

Finally, the findings suggest that in early-career contexts, where identities are still forming and track records are limited, the default response is vulnerability rather than resilience. As

experience accumulates, this constraint may loosen, as reflected in participants' accounts of increased authenticity over time. This temporal dimension warrants further investigation.

6.2.3 Sensemaking as the Mechanism Linking Structure to Trajectory

Drawing on Weick's (1995) concept of enactment, this study argues that gendered evaluative structures are not passively received but actively brought into being through action, such as speech, silence, behavioral adjustment, and self-presentation. When an early-career woman decides to tone down her competitiveness, she is not merely interpreting a gendered norm; she is enacting it, giving it material reality through her behavioral choices. This positions participants as active, if constrained, co-producers of the evaluative environments in which their careers unfold. The empirical findings document three specific sensemaking mechanisms through which early-career evaluative encounters shape career trajectories.

First, the transition from structured academic evaluation to ambiguous professional assessment functions as a sensemaking trigger (Weick et al., 2005), a disruption that demands active interpretation. Without the evaluative anchors on which their self-understanding had been built (clear criteria, measurable outcomes, timely feedback), participants fell back on anxious self-assessment. The "performance princess" identity captured by Interviewee E illustrates this: an achievement-oriented self-understanding built through years of grade-based evaluation that collapses upon contact with professional ambiguity.

Second, the feedback vacuum creates an interpretive void that interviewees fill with self-doubt. The sensemaking process transforms a structural failure (inadequate feedback practices) into a personal inadequacy narrative. This aligns with Weick's (1995) observation that sensemaking is driven by plausibility rather than accuracy, and for women navigating perceived gendered expectations, the most plausible account of unexplained rejection is often one of personal shortcoming.

Third, and most consequentially, the progressive gravitation toward smaller organizations represents a sensemaking output with structural implications. Participants constructed a narrative about where they belonged, namely, in organizations small enough to see them, flat enough to hear them, and warm enough to value communal qualities. This is rational sensemaking, but it carries a structural consequence. If early-career women disproportionately self-select into smaller organizations, they may channel themselves away from the large

corporations where senior leadership positions are most visible and influential for broader gender representation.

This connects to Kossek et al.'s (2017) framework of career equality as a multilevel phenomenon. What appears at the individual level as a preference is, at the structural level, a sorting mechanism reinforcing occupational segregation (Ellingsæter, 2013; Tanhua, 2018). Early-career evaluation may thus function as a trajectory-shaping process in which structural inequality is reproduced through the accumulation of individually interpretive choices.

6.3 The Feedback Paradox

In line with Schunnesson (2025), the patterns identified in the empirical material reflect a broader shift in which work is organized around continuous self-optimization rather than clearly defined performance metrics. This helps explain a feedback paradox that emerged across the material: although participants expressed a desire for clearer feedback, they simultaneously oriented toward qualitative and relational signals, such as subtle affirmation, cultural fit, and a sense of being appreciated, as the feedback that mattered most.

Feedback thus becomes less a matter of information than of interpretation. It is often indirect, fragmented, and seemingly superficial, yet highly consequential because it serves as a key basis for ongoing self-calibration. In this sense, the feedback participants valued most was also the kind least compatible with the transparency they sought. In contexts where gendered expectations operate implicitly, this paradox becomes especially consequential: the most identity-affirming feedback is often recognition tied to warmth, fit, and interpersonal energy, precisely the dimensions most saturated with communal expectations. This reinforces the co-constructed feedback loop identified in Section 5.1, while also underscoring the central role of sensemaking in early careers, where evaluation is not absent when formal criteria are lacking, but instead internalized through individuals' interpretations of social and relational cues.

This suggests that the feedback vacuum may be particularly consequential in early careers, when internal evaluative standards are still fragile, and the absence of feedback is more likely to be filled with self-doubt than indifference.

6.4 From Individual Preference to Organizational Context

While the preceding analysis has focused on how early-career women navigate gendered expectations, these experiences are shaped by organizational context. Acker's (2006) concept of *inequality regimes* highlights how formally equal policies can produce unequal outcomes depending on how they are enacted. The empirical material supports this: evaluative dynamics vary across contexts and are reproduced through everyday interactions between individuals, peers, and organizational practices such as opaque evaluation and limited feedback. Gendered evaluations are thus sustained through the alignment of individual behavior, relational dynamics, and organizational systems.

This variation is evident in participants' gravitation toward smaller organizations. Rather than reflecting stable generational preferences, this pattern aligns with Schunnesson's (2025) argument that career orientations are shaped by contemporary work conditions. In this study, preferences for smaller firms emerged not as an abstract desire for non-linear careers, but as a response to ambiguity, limited feedback, and constrained visibility in larger, hierarchical organizations.

Thus, career orientations cannot be understood independently of organizational context. Instead, they are formed through ongoing interaction with evaluative structures that shape what is recognized, rewarded, and made possible, ultimately influencing both experiences and perceived career trajectories.

6.5 The Swedish Paradox Revisited

The findings speak to the *welfare state paradox* (Ellingsæter, 2013; Mandel & Semyonov, 2006). Sweden's formal equality infrastructure makes overt discrimination culturally unacceptable, rendering it an analytically revealing case for examining how gendered dynamics persist where they are formally prohibited. The question is not whether gender equality policies exist, but how gendered dynamics persist when they are formally prohibited.

The present findings suggest that in contexts where equality is formally institutionalized, gendered evaluation goes underground, becoming implicit, ambient, and self-reinforcing. No participant described encountering overt sexism. What they described instead was a pervasive sense that the evaluative terrain was shaped by expectations they could not fully articulate, and

norms were experienced as professional rather than gendered. It was only in retrospective sensemaking that some participants began to recognize the gendered dimensions of their experiences. Where formal equality is assumed, the burden of identifying gendered dynamics shifts from the institution to the individual. Organizations can point to equality policies, but individuals must navigate implicit expectations without adequate interpretive resources. In a context where 'gender should not matter,' those who sense that it does may default to self-blame.

This is not merely an emotional response; it could carry longitudinal career consequences. Abele & Spurk (2009), in a ten-year prospective study of professionals across multiple fields, demonstrate that subjective career success at career entry has a strong positive influence on the growth of objective success over time, an effect larger than that of education, gender, or field of employment. How competent individuals perceive themselves to be in the early stages of their careers predicts their actual income and advancement years later. Applied to the present findings, this suggests a consequential link: if formally equal contexts produce evaluative ambiguity that leads early-career women to doubt their competence, then that self-doubt is not a transient state but the starting point of a trajectory in which subjective uncertainty translates into objective disadvantage. The feedback vacuum, the absence of hard-skill recognition, and the internalization of structural failures as personal shortcomings may set in motion precisely the divergence that Abele & Spurk's (2009) data captures, one that begins not with differences in capability but with differences in how capability is perceived.

This extends Ellingsæter's (2013) analysis by documenting the micro-level mechanisms through which structural segregation is reproduced in everyday evaluative practice. The evaluative infrastructure, such as implicit criteria, relational feedback, absent hard-skill recognition, and opaque advancement processes, creates conditions under which women's own sensemaking produces communal career orientations. The paradox is not that equality policies fail, but that they succeed at the formal level while the informal evaluative foundation continues to operate according to gendered logics beyond the reach of such policies.

6.6 Practical Implications

Three areas of practical implication emerge from the findings. First, the absence of organizational feedback. The feedback vacuum represents an organizational design failure with potential gendered consequences. When organizations fail to provide concrete, timely, and

personalized feedback, they create interpretive voids that early-career women fill with self-doubt. The cost of providing meaningful feedback should be low; the cost of withholding it, measured in lost motivation, eroded confidence, and negative employer branding, is seemingly high. Organizations that invest in structured feedback at every stage of the evaluative process, including after rejection, may directly reduce the gendered sensemaking dynamics documented in this study.

Second, mentorship as a structural intervention. The field practitioner interviews illustrate how mentorship can function not merely as career advice but as a structural intervention that alters the evaluative context itself. By creating situations where agentic behavior is not merely permitted but expected, mentors can counteract the anticipatory constraint that leads women to tone down and hold back. Formalizing mentorship and sponsorship programs for early-career women means restructuring the evaluative environment in which gendered self-limitation may occur.

Third, recruitment process design. Recruitment processes are not neutral sorting mechanisms, but consequential relational encounters that may shape how candidates perceive organizations, themselves, and their career possibilities. Processes characterized by transparency, responsiveness, and relational investment, which participants described as feeling "two-sided", buffer against gendered self-doubt by providing interpretive resources and affirmation. Recruitment design is therefore not merely an operational concern but a potential gender equality intervention.

6.7 Directions for Future Research

Several findings point toward productive future research directions. First, the field practitioner interviews suggest that role congruity may be less explicitly pronounced at the entry level, with gendered expectations operating subtly and implicitly, but that these dynamics intensify as careers progress. In the early stages, men and women appear to have relatively similar opportunities to build their careers, whereas the divergence associated with the glass ceiling emerges more clearly at later stages. Longitudinal research tracing when and why role congruity becomes more salient across career stages would contribute significantly to understanding why women do not reach senior positions to the same extent as men.

Second, the documented preference for smaller organizations raises a structural question. If women disproportionately self-select into smaller firms, this may partly explain why fewer

women occupy leadership positions in large and influential corporations. Future research could examine whether this early-career sorting pattern constitutes a measurable mechanism contributing to vertical segregation, and whether organizational interventions at larger firms can counteract the dynamics driving this self-selection.

Third, the documented asymmetry in peer knowledge-sharing, male peers sharing strategic information more freely while female peers withhold it under competitive pressure, warrants further investigation as a potential mechanism disadvantaging women in evaluative preparation.

Finally, comparative work across national contexts with varying formal equality infrastructure would further clarify whether the anticipatory double-bind operates differently where such norms are weaker or stronger. Further, although this study deliberately adopted a within-group design, the absence of a comparative male sample limits the ability to determine which dynamics are specifically gendered and which reflect universal early-career challenges. Comparative research examining how early-career men experience the same evaluative processes would enable more precise identification of gender-specific mechanisms.

6.8 Limitations

The within-group design, while enabling depth, limits comparative claims about gender differences. The gendered character of the documented patterns is supported by participants' own explicit gendering of their experiences, by the field practitioners' structural observations, and by alignment with established theoretical frameworks. However, the absence of a male comparison group means that the specifically gendered dimension remains an inference rather than a demonstrated finding. While including male participants could allow more precise identification of gender-specific mechanisms, the present design prioritizes depth over comparative breadth, consistent with the study's epistemological commitments.

Additionally, the sample's concentration within business and economics in Sweden, and participants' shared educational background at leading institutions, means that the findings reflect a specific professional and cultural context. The analytical insights are intended to illuminate mechanisms and dynamics rather than establish generalizable patterns, and their transferability to other contexts should be assessed in light of the contextual detail provided.

7. Conclusion

This study asked how early-career women in business and economics in Sweden interpret and navigate gendered expectations embedded in early-career evaluation processes. The findings reveal three interrelated mechanisms that together form what this thesis refers to as *the impossible equation*.

First, early-career women co-construct the gendered evaluative criteria they encounter. Participants oriented toward relational and cultural dimensions as what mattered most, reinforced by an asymmetric feedback structure where organizations recognized women predominantly for soft skills, and women internalized that feedback most deeply. This creates a self-reinforcing loop between communal expectations and professional self-understanding.

Second, participants navigated a narrow corridor of acceptable conduct shaped by anticipatory constraint. They adjusted behavior based on imagined rather than experienced penalties, suppressing competitiveness and adopting "chameleon strategies" because the range of acceptable behavior felt narrower. Field practitioners suggested this overcorrection often exceeds what evaluative environments demand. Women read gendered norms accurately but constrain themselves beyond what is required, forfeiting the agentic visibility that builds career momentum.

Third, these dynamics were internalized through sensemaking. The transition from structured academic evaluation to professional ambiguity left participants without clear interpretive anchors. In the absence of meaningful feedback, they filled this gap with self-doubt, turning organizational failures into narratives of personal inadequacy. This drove a pull toward smaller, more relational organizations: individually rational, but potentially channeling women away from where senior leadership positions are most consequential.

These mechanisms are recursive. Communal recognition reinforces communal self-presentation, while anticipated constraints shape behavior even before explicit penalties occur. Additionally, ambiguity in evaluation may be internalized as self-blame. The expectations placed on individuals are often difficult to reconcile, requiring them to be warm but not overly so, assertive but not dominant, and authentic while remaining strategically calibrated. In the Swedish context, where formal equality may render such dynamics less visible, the responsibility for navigating them tends to fall on the individual. Addressing these dynamics

requires organizational interventions at early stages, particularly in feedback practices, mentorship, and the design of evaluative processes.

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9. Appendix

9.1 Key Definitions

For conceptual clarity, several key terms are defined.

Early-career refers to the first 0–1 year of full-time professional employment following higher education.

Evaluation processes encompass both formal performance appraisals and informal feedback, judgments, and signals, through which individuals' competence, performance, and leadership potential are assessed. This study explores how women interpret and navigate these evaluations during the early stages of their careers, spanning recruitment and onboarding to probationary periods and initial performance assessments.

Evaluative cues refer to both explicit and implicit signals through which individuals infer expectations and judgments. These may include direct feedback, tone and style of communication, expectations regarding availability and self-promotion, as well as subtle patterns of inclusion, recognition, or exclusion in everyday work interaction.

Fit refers to perceived alignment between an individual's behavior, values, and interpersonal style and the implicit norms and expectations governing a particular organizational context.

Gendered leadership expectations refer to culturally embedded assumptions about the traits, behaviors, and career orientations considered appropriate or legitimate for leaders, which may reflect and reproduce gendered norms.

Leadership potential refers to evaluative judgments concerning an individual's perceived future suitability for leadership roles, often based on subjective assessments of traits, interpersonal style, and alignment with organizational stereotypes rather than solely on demonstrated performance.

The field of business and economics refers to the professional domain entered by graduates of business and economics programs at the higher education level. It is defined by educational background rather than by specific industry or sector, encompassing the range of roles and organizations that such graduates typically enter upon completing their degrees.

Terms such as **experience**, **interpret**, **navigate**, **negotiate**, **perceive**, **manage**, and **make sense of** are used to capture how participants engage with evaluative processes. Consistent with a sensemaking perspective, these are treated as ongoing, socially situated processes rather than fixed cognitive states.

9.2 Application of the Integrated Interpretive Framework

The integrated framework, drawing on RCT, DBT, and ST, serves as an analytical tool for examining early-career evaluation processes across contexts. It directs attention to three interrelated dimensions:

- **Gendered leadership expectations (RCT):** How are prevailing norms about leadership and gender perceived, interpreted, and experienced by individuals undergoing early-career evaluation?
- **Navigations of gender leadership tensions (DBT):** How do individuals respond to, manage, or experience tensions embedded in these expectations?
- **Interpretation and identity construction (ST):** How are evaluation experiences interpreted, and how do these interpretations shape identity and perceived career possibilities?

Applied together, these dimensions enable structured analysis of what is happening within evaluation encounters and why certain consequences emerge. The framework is not intended as a prescriptive model of how evaluation processes operate in practice, but rather as an analytical tool for interpreting concrete situations and explaining why particular outcomes and experiences emerge.

9.3 Interviewees

Table 1. Interviewees (in chronological order)

Interviewee Q participated in two separate interview sessions due to scheduling constraints, as limited availability necessitated splitting the interview across two occasions.

Interviewee	Category	Education/Background	Date	Length (minutes)	Language	Setting
A	Early career woman	Master within Business field	10-03-2026	60	Swedish	Online
B	Early career woman	Master within Business field	10-03-2026	45	Swedish	Online
C	Early career woman	Master within Business field	10-03-2026	46	Swedish	Online
D	Early career woman	Master within Business field	10-03-2026	51	Swedish	Online
E	Early career woman	Master within Business field	11-03-2026	52	Swedish	In-person
F	Early career woman	Master within Business field	11-03-2026	47	Swedish	Online
G	Early career woman	Master within Business field	11-03-2026	52	Swedish	Online
H	Early career woman	Bachelor within Business field	11-03-2026	56	Swedish	In-person
I	Early career woman	Master within Business field	11-03-2026	44	Swedish	In-person
J	Early career woman	Master within Business field	11-03-2026	46	Swedish	In-person
K	Early career woman	Master within Business field	12-03-2026	42	English	In-person
L	Early career woman	Master within Business field	13-03-2026	54	Swedish	Online
M	Early career woman	Master within Business field	13-03-2026	43	Swedish	Online
N	Early career woman	Master within Business field	17-03-2026	56	English	In-person
O	Founder & Partner at Executive Search Firm 1	20+ years experience within executive search	17-03-2026	52	Swedish	In-person
P	Early career woman	Master within Business field	18-03-2026	46	Swedish	In-person
Q	Partner at Executive Search Firm 2	25+ years experience within executive search	18-03-2026	37	Swedish	In-person
Q	Partner at Executive Search Firm 2	25+ years experience within executive search	20-03-2026	36	Swedish	In-person

9.4 Interview Guides (English and Swedish

	Interview Guide Early Career Women *(English)*
Theme/Section	**Questions**
Section 1 Career entry and early experiences	• Can you tell me about your transition from your studies to where you are now professionally? • What expectations did you have going into working life – and how have they held up? • If you think back to your early experiences – job searching, interviews, starting a job – is there a situation that stands out as particularly memorable? – *What made that situation stand out?* – *How did it make you feel at the time?* – *Has your interpretation of that experience changed since?* • You have been through different recruitment processes – can you describe one that felt good, even if it did not lead to a job? • And one that did not feel good? What was different? • When you are in a process and it feels right – what is it that gives you that feeling? • How important is it to you how you are treated during the process, compared to the actual job description? – *Did you feel the process was transparent? Did you know what was coming next?* – *Did you have a contact person or someone guiding you through it?* – *How did the company communicate with you between stages?*
Section 2 Experiences of evaluation and feedback	• Have you received feedback during a recruitment process? What did that look like? • Can you recall a specific moment when you got feedback, positive or negative, that really stayed with you? • What was it about that feedback that made it meaningful? • What happens when you do not get any feedback at all? – *How did you interpret the lack of feedback at the time?* – *Did it affect how you see yourself professionally?* – *Did it change what kind of jobs you looked for afterward?*
Section 3 Expectations and behavioral navigation *(DBT)*	• When you walk into an interview or onto a new workplace – do you think about how you present yourself? What do you pay attention to? • Is there a difference between how you are at work or in an interview versus how you are with friends? • Can you describe a specific situation where you felt you had to think carefully about how you came across? • Have you ever felt that you held yourself back in a professional situation? What happened? – *Why did you make that choice?* – *How did it feel afterward?* – *Do you think others in the same situation would have done the same thing?*
Section 4 Perceptions of competence, potential, and opportunity *(RCT)*	• In your experience, at work or in processes, how is competence or potential recognized? • Have there been moments where you felt particularly seen or valued? Or the opposite – overlooked? • What do you think makes someone be perceived as having leadership potential? • Do you think evaluative criteria are applied consistently, or does it vary? – *What led you to that conclusion?* – *How clear are the criteria for advancement where you work or have worked?*
Section 5 Sensemaking and career implications *(ST)*	• When you think about all the feedback and evaluation you have experienced so far – what has it meant for you? • Has it shaped how you see your future career possibilities? • Has it affected your confidence or motivation? • Who do you talk to about these experiences?
Section 6 Broader reflections	• Looking back, what has been most helpful for your development? And what has been most challenging? • If you could change one thing about how evaluation or feedback works in early careers, what would it be? • Is there anything we haven't talked about that you think is important?

	Interview Guide Early Career Women *(Swedish)*
Theme/Section	**Questions**
Section 1 Career entry and early experiences	• Kan du berätta om din övergång från studier till där du befinner dig professionellt idag? • Vilka förväntningar hade du på arbetslivet – och hur har de motsvarats i verkligheten? • Om du tänker tillbaka på dina tidiga erfarenheter – jobbsökande, intervjuer, att börja på ett arbete – finns det någon situation som särskilt sticker ut som minnesvärd? – *Vad var det som gjorde att den situationen stack ut?* – *Hur kände du i den stunden?* – *Har din tolkning av den upplevelsen förändrats i efterhand?* • Du har gått igenom olika rekryteringsprocesser – kan du beskriva en som kändes bra, även om den inte ledde till ett jobb? • Och en som inte kändes bra? Vad var annorlunda där? • När du är i en process som känns rätt – vad är det som ger dig den känslan? • Hur viktigt är det för dig hur du blir bemött under processen, jämfört med själva arbetsbeskrivningen? – *Upplevde du att processen var transparent? Visste du vad som skulle hända härnäst?* – *Hade du en kontaktperson eller någon som guidade dig genom processen?* – *Hur kommunicerade företaget med dig mellan de olika stegen?*
Section 2 Experiences of evaluation and feedback	• Har du fått feedback under en rekryteringsprocess? Hur såg den ut? • Kan du minnas ett specifikt tillfälle då du fick feedback, positiv eller negativ, som verkligen fastnade hos dig? • Vad var det med den feedbacken som gjorde den betydelsefull? • Vad händer när du inte får någon feedback alls? – *Hur tolkade du avsaknaden av feedback i stunden?* – *Påverkade det hur du ser på dig själv professionellt?* – *Påverkade det vilken typ av jobb du sökte efteråt?*
Section 3 Expectations and behavioral navigation *(DBT)*	• När du går in i en intervju eller börjar på en ny arbetsplats – tänker du på hur du presenterar dig själv? Vad lägger du särskilt märke till? • Finns det en skillnad mellan hur du är på jobbet eller i en intervju jämfört med hur du är med vänner? • Kan du beskriva en specifik situation där du kände att du behövde tänka noga på hur du uppfattades? • Har du någon gång känt att du höll tillbaka dig själv i en professionell situation? Vad hände då? – V*arför gjorde du det valet?* – *Hur kändes det efteråt?* – *Tror du att andra i samma situation hade gjort likadant?*
Section 4 Perceptions of competence, potential, and opportunity *(RCT)*	• Utifrån din erfarenhet, i arbetet eller i olika processer – hur uppmärksammas kompetens eller potential? • Har det funnits tillfällen då du kände dig särskilt sedd eller uppskattad? Eller tvärtom – förbisedd? • Vad tror du gör att någon uppfattas ha ledarskapspotential? • Upplever du att bedömningskriterier tillämpas konsekvent, eller varierar det? – *Vad har fått dig att dra den slutsatsen?* – *Hur tydliga är kriterierna för avancemang där du arbetar eller har arbetat?*
Section 5 Sensemaking and career implications *(ST)*	• När du tänker på all feedback och alla bedömningar du har fått hittills – vad har det betytt för dig? • Har det påverkat hur du ser på dina framtida karriärmöjligheter? • Har det påverkat ditt självförtroende eller din motivation? • Vem pratar du med om sådana här erfarenheter?
Section 6 Broader reflections	• När du ser tillbaka, vad har varit mest hjälpsamt för din utveckling? Och vad har varit mest utmanande? • Om du kunde förändra en sak i hur bedömning eller feedback fungerar i början av karriären, vad skulle det vara? • Är det något vi inte har pratat om som du tycker är viktigt?

	Interview Guide Field Practitioners *(English)*
Theme/Section	**Questions**
Section 1 Professional Background and Perspective	• Can you briefly describe your professional role and how it relates to recruitment or evaluation? • From your perspective, what characterizes early-career development in business and economics today? • Have you noticed any shifts in how early-career evaluation works compared to, say, ten or twenty years ago? – *What do you think is driving those changes?*
Section 2 Early-Career Evaluation Processes	• How are early-career employees typically evaluated in the contexts you work with? • What criteria are used – formally and informally? • How much room is there for subjective judgment or 'gut feeling' in these assessments? • What signals that someone has leadership potential? How do you pick up on that? – *Are these criteria always made explicit to the candidates?* – *How do you assess cultural fit – and how has that changed?* – *Where does the balance fall between test results and personal impression?*
Section 3 Gendered Expectations in Evaluation *(RCT)*	• When you look across the candidates you have worked with, are there patterns in how different people are evaluated? • Have you observed situations where similar qualifications or behaviors led to different outcomes? • In your experience, does the way someone presents themselves in an interview or process affect how their competence is perceived? – *Can you give an example?* – *Do you see different patterns for women and men in this regard?* – *Are these dynamics something that gets discussed openly within organizations?*
Section 4 Behavioral Navigation and Double-Bind Dynamics *(DBT)*	• From what you have observed, do early-career candidates, particularly women, face particular tensions in how they present themselves? • Have you noticed situations where candidates seem to be managing competing expectations? • How do organizations or hiring managers typically respond to women who display strong ambition or assertiveness early in their careers?
Section 5 Interpretation and Career Development *(ST)*	• In your experience, do early evaluative encounters shape long-term confidence or career aspirations? • Have you seen cases where early-career experiences set someone on a particular trajectory – positively or negatively? – *Do people internalize evaluation outcomes differently depending on who they are?* – *What role does mentorship play in this?*
Section 6 Organizational Responsibility and Structural Implications	• What responsibility do organizations have in how they evaluate early-career employees? • What would you change about how evaluation works in early careers? • What are the most subtle mechanisms shaping how people's careers develop differently in these early stages? • Is there anything we have not discussed that you think is important for understanding how early-career women navigate these processes?

	Interview Guide Field Practitioners *(Swedish)*
Theme/Section	**Questions**
Section 1 Professional Background and Perspective	• Kan du kort beskriva din yrkesroll och hur den relaterar till rekrytering eller assessment? • Ur ditt perspektiv, vad kännetecknar tidig karriärutveckling inom business och ekonomi idag? • Har du märkt några förändringar i hur bedömning i tidiga karriärskeden fungerar nu jämfört med för till exempel tio eller tjugo år sedan? – *Vad tror du driver de förändringarna?*
Section 2 Early-Career Evaluation Processes	• Hur utvärderas medarbetare i början av karriären vanligtvis i de sammanhang du arbetar i? • Vilka kriterier används – både formellt och informellt? • Hur stort utrymme finns det för subjektiva bedömningar eller "magkänsla" i dessa utvärderingar? • Vilka signaler tyder på att någon har ledarskapspotential? Hur uppfattar ni det? – *Är dessa kriterier alltid tydligt kommunicerade till kandidaterna?* – *Hur bedömer ni kulturell passform – och hur har det förändrats över tid?* – *Var ligger balansen mellan testresultat och personligt intryck?*
Section 3 Gendered Expectations in Evaluation *(RCT)*	• När du ser över de kandidater du har arbetat med, finns det mönster i hur olika personer bedöms? • Har du observerat situationer där liknande kvalifikationer eller beteenden har lett till olika utfall? • Enligt din erfarenhet, påverkar hur någon presenterar sig i en intervju eller process hur deras kompetens uppfattas? – *Kan du ge ett exempel?* – *Ser du olika mönster för kvinnor och män i detta avseende?* – *Är detta något som diskuteras öppet inom organisationer?*
Section 4 Behavioral Navigation and Double-Bind Dynamics *(DBT)*	• Utifrån dina observationer, möter kandidater i början av karriären – särskilt kvinnor – särskilda spänningar i hur de presenterar sig själva? • Har du lagt märke till situationer där kandidater verkar hantera motstridiga förväntningar? • Hur reagerar organisationer eller rekryterande chefer vanligtvis på kvinnor som visar stark ambition eller tydlig drivkraft tidigt i karriären?
Section 5 Interpretation and Career Development *(ST)*	• Enligt din erfarenhet, påverkar tidiga bedömningstillfällen långsiktigt självförtroende eller karriärambitioner? • Har du sett exempel på där tidiga erfarenheter i karriären har satt någon på en viss bana – positivt eller negativt? – *Internaliserar människor utfall av bedömningar olika beroende på vem de är?* – *Vilken roll spelar mentorskap i detta?*
Section 6 Organizational Responsibility and Structural Implications	• Vilket ansvar har organisationer för hur de utvärderar medarbetare i början av karriären? • Vad skulle du vilja förändra i hur bedömning fungerar i tidiga karriärskeden? • Vilka är de mest subtila mekanismerna som påverkar hur människors karriärer utvecklas olika i dessa tidiga skeden? • Är det något vi inte har berört som du tycker är viktigt för att förstå hur kvinnor i början av karriären navigerar dessa processer?

9.5 Prevalence Tracking

Table 3. Prevalence of selected code categories across all eighteen interviews. Interviewee Q participated in two separate interview sessions due to scheduling constraints, as limited availability necessitated splitting the interview across two occasions. Prevalence is counted per interview. Table 3 presents the ten most prevalent categories.

Code Category	Prevalence (in interviews)	Contributing Interviewees
Strategic self-moderation	15 of 18	A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L, O, P, Q2
Relational evaluative orientation	17 of 18	A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L, M, N, P, Q1, Q2
Feedback vacuum	13 of 18	A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, J, L, N, O, P
Evaluative ambiguity/loss of structure	12 of 18	A, B, C, D, E, G, H, I, J, L, M, P
Preference for smaller organizations	8 of 18	E, F, H, I, J, L, M, N
Gendered behavioral awareness	10 of 18	A, D, F, G, J, L, O, P, Q1, Q2
Peer competition/guarded sharing	6 of 18	C, D, G, J, L, N
Mentorship presence/ absence	7 of 18	E, G, L, M, N, P, Q2
Reciprocity in processes	16 of 18	A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L, N, O, P, Q2
Soft-skill feedback resonates more	9 of 18	A, B, E, F, G, I, J, K, L

9.6 Explanation of AI Usage

This thesis was developed through independent research, analysis, and writing by the authors. AI tools, specifically ChatGPT (OpenAI, GPT-5.4) and Claude (Anthropic), accessed during Spring 2026, were used in a supportive capacity throughout the writing process. AI tools were not used to generate empirical data, conduct analysis, interpret interview material, or produce original theoretical arguments. All analytical reasoning, literature selection, theoretical framing, methodological decisions, and interpretation of findings were developed independently by the authors, who take full responsibility for the content, analysis, and conclusions presented in this thesis.

Specifically, AI-based language models were used to:

- Improve sentence structure and linguistic clarity in drafted text
- Refine transitions and logical flow between sections
- Generate alternative phrasings to enhance readability
- Discuss and refine interview guide questions prior to data collection
- Translate interview quotations from Swedish to English

Examples of prompts used include: “Can you help improve the flow between these two paragraphs?,” “Suggest three alternative ways to phrase this sentence,” “How could this interview question be made more open-ended?,” and “Translate this quote into fluent English while preserving the speaker’s tone.”

All AI-generated suggestions were critically evaluated and edited by both authors, and no content was included without careful verification. The use of AI-assisted language tools may introduce subtle biases in phrasing or tone. To mitigate this, all outputs were critically assessed and aligned with the authors’ intended meaning and academic voice. All cited sources were independently identified, read, and assessed by the authors. While AI tools supported the translation of interview excerpts, all translations were reviewed and adjusted by the authors to ensure conceptual accuracy and preservation of meaning.

All interviews were transcribed using Klang, a Sweden-based AI transcription platform operating under GDPR. Klang processes and stores all data within the EU, with end-to-end encryption and no use of customer data for model training (Klang, 2025). To further enhance confidentiality, all interview material was anonymized before uploading, with personally identifiable information removed from the files. Both authors manually reviewed and corrected each transcript against the original recordings to ensure accuracy and preserve the nuance of participants’ accounts. Before participation, all interviewees were asked whether they consented to being recorded and informed that their interviews would be transcribed using digital transcription tools. Informed consent was obtained for all interviews.