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**MAINTAINING THE STATUS QUO:  
THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION  
OF GENDER INEQUALITY IN WORK  
ORGANISATIONS**

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**Abstract**

The literature on creating more equitable and inclusive and therefore more effective organisations focuses on the gendered basis of organisational and management structures, practices and the existence of gendered organisational cultures. This paper uses a post-structuralist discourse perspective to argue that an examination of organisational discourses holds the key to understanding gendered organisational processes that produce unequal employment outcomes for women. The paper draws on data from three organisational case studies to demonstrate the power of discourse analysis in unveiling hitherto difficult to identify and challenge gendered organisational processes that exclude or marginalise women in paid employment.

## MAINTAINING THE STATUS QUO: THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER INEQUALITY IN WORK ORGANISATIONS

### INTRODUCTION

This paper uses a post-structuralist perspective to examine organisational discourses surrounding the implementation and management of equal employment opportunity (EEO) programs for women. The research findings summarised here demonstrate the ways in which organisational discourses constitute and reconstitute workplace gender inequalities in three Victorian public sector organisations. The findings are summarised under two dominant themes identified from the data analysis: the discourse of individualism and the discourse of difference. The two discourses operated across and within the three organisations in ways that defined and limited women's access to equal employment opportunities.

Feminist writers and EEO commentators in Australia have expressed concern about the ability of existing procedure-based legislation to achieve more equitable employment outcomes for women (Thornton, 1990; Burton, 1991, 1996 and 1998; Poiner and Wills, 1991; Council for Equal Opportunity in Employment, 1990; Still, 1992, 1994; Castleman et al, 1993). In Australian organisations, employment inequalities remain firmly entrenched despite a well-established legislative framework designed to deliver equal employment opportunities to Australian women.

Writers point to the gendered outcomes of the day to day activities of organising and managing and argue that underlying structure organisational gender relations operate as a powerful and (often) invisible structuring principle in work (Burton 1991, 1996 and 1998; Cockburn, 1991; Poiner and Wills 1991). In recent publications Cockburn (1991) and Poiner and Wills (1991) highlighted the existence of organisational "disadvantaging processes" that exclude and/or marginalise women in the sphere of paid employment by limiting their access to employment opportunities and rewards. More significantly they point out that disadvantaging processes operate as structured patterns of practice and sets of assumptions that affirm, reinforce and normalise men's interests as the accepted benchmark for organisational participation and activity (see also, Acker, 1992, 1997; Castleman et al, 1995).

However, these studies tend to focus on the outcomes of organisational processes that create gender inequality. The writers do not describe and document the nature and operations of these processes and the task of unpacking and naming the 'congealed dynamics' (Eveline, 1996) of workplace gender relations presents a daunting challenge to researchers. In response to this challenge, a number of writers (see for example Eveline, 1994, 1996; Pringle, 1988, 1993, 1993a and 1994 and Fraser, 1989) argue that post-structuralist accounts of gender and organisations provide an empirical concept, discourse and a powerful analytical framework, discourse analysis to embark on such a task (see also, Acker, 1997; Ferguson, 1984; Peterson and Albrecht, 1999; Fletcher, 1998).

These writers draw on the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault and argue that discourse provides a framework that recognises that gender inequalities are constructed through structures of language resources and practices called discourse. Discourse is defined here as identifiable and inter-connected structures of meanings and practices. They contain within them language resources and practices that are hierarchically structured and categorised as statements (for example, of truth and untruth), terms, beliefs, categories and legitimations that are historically, socially and institutionally specific to various forms of social organisation (Scott, 1994:254).

Organisational analyses of gender relations in work organisations focuses on the ways in which organisational discourses legitimise and maintain men's centrality and dominance in work organisations by limiting women's participation and inclusion in work organisations by (Fletcher, 1998; Burton, 1991, 1995, 1998; Ferguson, 1984; Fraser, 1989; Peterson and Albrecht, 1999). They argue that organisational and management discourses constitute and reconstitute gendered categories and hierarchies of meaning, action and practice that include some members of the organisation, men and exclude others, women. Hence in their various ways these writers have used discourse and discourse analysis as a theory and method for unveiling

and revealing the processes through which the underlying gender order of organisations produce and reproduce workplace gender inequalities.

## RESEARCH METHOD AND DATA ANALYSIS

The interview data for this study were collected in three Victorian public authorities, Utilicorp, Acacia TAFE and Parkview Hospital<sup>1</sup>. At the time of the study<sup>2</sup> the organisations operated as semi-autonomous government business enterprises that provided public goods and services to the public. At this time, the three organisations were all experiencing dramatic changes in their external and internal environments. This meant that the dynamic contexts in which the organisations were located, along with a shared political, legislative and social environment provided a common link between organisations that were otherwise diverse in terms of their workforce profiles, internal organisational cultures and outputs.

The case study design developed for this project draws on a number of similar studies of workplace gender relations in Australia and overseas. The most famous of these is Kanter's groundbreaking study *Men and Women of the Corporation* (1977). Cynthia Cockburn (1991) also conducted a large-scale study of equal employment opportunity by collecting and analysing interview data from four different organisations in the United Kingdom. In Australia, studies of workplace gender inequalities conducted by Game and Pringle (1983) and Pringle (1988) are powerful reminders of the usefulness of qualitative methods for analysing and understanding the complexities of gender relations in work organisations.

The validity and reliability of these studies lies in the breadth and scope of each study. For example, Kanter's study was conducted over five years where she collected data from the "multiple projects" she engaged in. This allowed her to check her data and analyses by referring back to and verifying different accounts of the same event or phenomena (1977: 293-97). Similarly, the depth and breadth of data in Cockburn's case-studies presented *In the Way of Women: Men's Resistance to Sex Equality in Organisations*, (1991) demonstrates the usefulness and validity of the qualitative organisational case-study methods for analysing gendered employment practices within and across a number of quite unrelated work organisations.

A discourse approach to identifying and analysing workplace gender relations relies on the kinds of data collected using case-study methods. In order to document and analyse organisational discourses the researcher must recording a myriad of discursive strategies that operate in work organisations in terms of their context, content, orientation and organisation (Potter, 1996 and Gill, 1996). This means that multiple sources of data collected and compiled through the case study method provides a rich and comprehensive account of the historically and institutionally specific forms of discourse found in each organisation.

This study used various data collecting methods including semi-structured interviews, an examination of historical and current documents, collection and analysis of statistical data, participant observation, the use of a research journal, informal interactions, content and text analysis of interview transcripts and an analysis of organisational documents and public records. This was necessary for ensuring the internal consistency and validity of the research and to ensure that the researcher's interpretation of the data through the discourse analysis was not idiosyncratic. (Marshall and Rossman; 1989:144-53, Punch; 1989:26-28, Yin; 1989:23).

The data analysis was manual. The interview transcripts were organised and categorised firstly according to the organisation and interviewee group (senior managers, middle managers, rank and file). It was then organised and reorganised many times over depending on the themes that emerged, who said what, how it was said and in what context. Eventually, the researcher was able to recognise clear continuities in the themes that emerged. These continuities existed within and across the three organisations and while some were specific to particular levels of the organisation, they could be generally tracked through levels of the organisations as well.

Each case study took 6-8 weeks to complete. The data were collected using semi-structured interviews that contained a set of core questions that were asked of all employees, although the questions altered slightly

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<sup>1</sup> These names are pseudonyms

<sup>2</sup> Mid 1990's

according to the level of the interviewee and the specific context of each organisation. The interview sample was stratified across the various departments of each organisation as well as down through the organisational hierarchy in each organisation. In total the researcher conducted 136 interviews across the three organisations, 83 with women and 53 with men.

The interview data, together with evidence from organisational documents, field-notes, casual conversations, the researcher's own engagement in interviewing employees and notes of unexpected stories from interviewees were rich and complex, promising ample scope for discourse analysis. However, in their complexity and richness the task of analysing the data was painstaking, time consuming and difficult. The data were always precariously balanced between order and disorder, and constantly open to seemingly endless readings and analyses.

The data were analysed and categorised under three recurring discursive themes, the discourse analysis more easily revealed the operations of the discourses of *difference*, *individualism* which are discussed in the next section. A third discursive theme, the discourse of managerialism identified in the data is not discussed in this paper.

## DISCUSSION

At Utilicorp, Acacia College of TAFE and Parkview Hospital the discourses of individualism and difference produced a powerful discursive field that normalised the conditions of men's privilege and centrality to work and the organisation. At the same time the discourses had the effect of problematising and subordinating women's place in this order. The discursive strategies constituted through the discourses at once constituted and adumbrated the operations workplace gender relations by making gender differences seem fixed and immutable by reference to the normal male standard and women's problematic relationship to paid work. In sum, the operations of the two discourses made gender inequalities appear un-challengeable on the grounds that the status quo of workplace gender inequality was the normal order of things.

### The discourse of individualism

The discourse of individualism functioned as a universalising discourse that reconstituted equality of opportunity into employment opportunities based on social and organisational parity with men. The discourse of individualism revealed itself through strategies that liberated men's gender advantage (Eveline, 1994) from the social and workplace relations that produced and sustained this advantage. It was through these discourses that men and men's ways were constructed as the universal standard. At the same time women's gender inequality was inscribed onto their identities as women workers who were 'naturally' different and understandably not the same.

The construction of women as different did not mean that they could never be equal. The discourses of difference and individualism offered women the promise of equality as long as they could meet the already set (male-defined) organisational standards. The view that women could potentially be on par with men was discursively constituted through the idea that 'everyone', 'all' and 'the best person' was a gender-neutral category of persons that could be (potentially) equal. Claims such as 'we are all the same' and 'everyone has equal opportunity' are enable interviewees to constituted themselves and others as inhabitants of a 'level playing field' (the organisation) in which everyone is equal and everyone has equal access to employment opportunities and rewards based on their merits.

The following examples from the data illustrate the discourse of individualism in action. In answer to the question: "What does EEO mean in this organisation?" Interviewees at Acacia offered these accounts:

It means giving everyone, no matter what their background, what their sex, race, religion, or whatever is, an equal opportunity at a particular position. So, selecting the best person for the actual employment position. That's the way I see it (Bill, Senior Manager, Acacia College of TAFE).

The CEO at Acacia indicated that he saw no difference between men's roles and women's roles:

Well I can see women's roles are exactly the same as men roles in this place. We are equals there is no doubt whatsoever, skills that women have got are exactly the same as men have got, they might have skills in different areas... (Michael, Acacia College of TAFE).

The statement 'everyone has equal opportunity' enabled interviewees to engage in discursive strategies that legitimised the view that 'everyone' constituted a group of undifferentiated same persons, universally and similarly affected by employment policies and practices. As such everyone who belongs to this group has a legitimate claim of EEO policies and programs.

The effects of constituting men's ways and values as unchallenged norms of workforce participation through the discourse of individualism dims our view of the discursive activities that operated to maintain men's privileged location in the organisation at the expense of women's equality. Interviewees had recourse to discursive resources that logically defended the 'the individual' as a universalised and gender-neutral category of person whilst leaving unquestioned and unchallenged the gendered normative standard against which the individual is measured.

### **The discourse of difference**

The discourse of difference enabled people to argue that gender was not an issue when talking about women's access to employment opportunities. This undermined organisational policies and practices designed to address women's employment inequalities in the three organisations. This occurred preventing an interrogation of the gendered circumstances under which men and women come to the workplace. This leaves workplace gender inequalities un-remarked, un-articulated and seldom interrogated within an apparently gender-neutral organisational order.

At the same time, the discourse of difference marked and particularised women's ways and women's interests as qualitatively different from the normative (male) standard. This had the effect of constituting women as the "problem" that managers have to deal with (see also Eveline, 1994). The marking and particularising of women's ways occurred through utterances such as 'It's probably easier for the man'; 'Women bring a different perspective'; 'the manager would prefer a full-time person' and 'everybody here is equal'. These utterances have a similar outcomes to the 'everyone' kind of statements that operate through the discourse of individualism.

The discourse of difference, like the discourse of individualism constituted men and men's organisational advantage as unproblematic by disengaging men's gender advantage from the conditions of their participation in work organisations and the relations of inequality permit men's modes of participation. The discourse had the effect of constituting women's access to employment and opportunities in terms of the problems they face overcoming their 'lack of' what is required to reach parity and be like men. In addition to this, women's problematic and frequently unequal status in paid employment was legitimised by reference to a set of apparently legitimate, understandable and by inference 'normative' differences between men's work participation and women's work participation.

Furthermore, the discourse operated by reference to the discourse of individualism and was legitimised by drawing on that discourse's universalising operations. Together the discourses formed an apparently immutable discursive field through which interviewees constituted differentially valued gender roles in the three organisations. The constitution of differentially valued gender roles at Utilicorp, Acacia and Parkview operated as a discursive camouflage that made gendered organisational relations indistinct. Women's roles were evaluated and given lesser value by reference to their problematic status in the organisations and by inference, their greater value in the domestic sphere. Men's roles on the other hand were given greater value and normalised by reference to sets of unchallenged normative organisational standards.

John's account of women's participation at Utilicorp's Riverview training facility demonstrated how the discourse normalises the superior value of men's roles by problematising women's work roles by reference to their domestic responsibilities:

...It's probably easier for the man because the ladies have got other commitments, they've got family commitments and that is why, if they've young families that they need to stay home with their domestic duties...just to be able...their capability of staying overnight is possibly a problem (John, Middle Manager, Utilicorp).

The discourses surrounding EEO enabled interviewees to constitute women as potentially able to comply with the normative standard. However in order to do this they had to be the same as men. Only then could women be equal or more accurately, reach parity.

## CONCLUSION

This paper argued that organisational discourses surrounding the implementation and management of formal equal employment policies and programs and women's access to employment opportunities and rewards operate in ways that maintain the status quo in workplace gender relations.

Naming the organisational themes of individualism and difference found in the data as discourses permits us to account for and identify the multiple and complex ways that organisations are discursively constituted through social practice and ideologies held in place through gendered relations of power. The discourses of individualism and difference constituted discursive fields of meaning and practice within and between the public authorities that participated in this study and produced discursive outcomes that undermined EEO change programs by occluding the gendered basis of managing and organising and being managed and organised.

The discursive practices of categorisation and normalisation constituted through the discourses showed remarkable similarity within and across the three organisations that participated in the study despite considerable differences in the size, type and purpose of each organisation. The similarity in language practices surrounding men's normativeness and women's difference across the organisations point to a continuity in the operations of gendered power relations across and within organisational and management discourses. It is through the discursive field constituted through the discourses of individualism and difference that the underlying gender order in the three organisations was constituted through everyday organisational practices and meanings.

Ultimately, despite the presence of equal employment opportunities and programs and a legal requirement to comply, the status quo of the gender order remained unchanged and unchallenged. Discourses surrounding women's access to employment opportunities and rewards cemented and legitimised men's current position and location in the organisation. At the same time, women's marginal status was normalised and naturalised as an understandable consequence of their traditional gender roles.

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