

CHAPTER 3

The Gendering of Organisations

In this and the next chapter I am intending to explore some of the theoretical underpinning to my inquiry, the thinking that underlies my practice. I am intending to do so not as a distanced academic exercise, but as a permission, to myself, to articulate a set of analytic and critical ideas that I have long held as a central part of my perspective on the world. So, reader, please see these two chapters as a the equivalent of a clearing of the throat prior to speaking: a setting of intellectual territory before I begin the experiential accounts in Chapter 5. This chapter is concerned with organisations, the ‘micro’ or near context in which I work; Chapter 4 is concerned with business and business education, the larger, ‘macro’, more distant ideational system within which organisations are located.

In order to do this, I am selecting an academic voice - I am highlighting one sort of knowledge and silencing, for the moment, my other voices. These are chapters based in propositional knowing, and I am aware of the reification involved: I am doing here what academics do. I am bracketing, putting to one side, an awareness of the paradox of using this voice to explain and explore a set of propositions which potentially deconstruct the voice itself. I get some sense of why some postmodern writers use “non-sensical” punctuation and deliberately unfamiliar grammar. Nevertheless, in order to carry out the task, I feel I must step inside the frame.

I would like to say something about the literature I am drawing on. I have chosen, where possible, to work with feminist perspectives and literature written by women. In many cases, I am aware that some of the same substantive points are made by others, particularly in the ecology movement, and those working with a participative world view. Where appropriate I have indicated other sources, but have also chosen in places not to make use of work with which I am familiar because it does not add anything, and moves outside my feminist framing. This has not been difficult to do in this chapter,

on the gendering of organisations - where the bulk of the literature is written by feminist writers anyway - but in the sections on globalisation I found the masculine voice dominates. One of the writers I have drawn on comments “The protagonists in globalisation debates are disproportionately urban, white, middle class, Judaeo-Christian, English speaking men resident in the North (especially the USA and the UK). Perforce, I can do little in my own writing (short of remaining silent) to counter ...these shortcomings”(Scholte, 2000: 40)

Grounding feminist awareness in my experience

I came to an awareness of the role of gender in social life, and the feminist critique of society, when I was in my mid-twenties and undertaking a social work qualification. Perhaps surprisingly I had taken a first degree in sociology and philosophy without ever having really encountered this form of social science critique, or having been in any way engaged with the women’s movement. I don’t think the curriculum I followed - in the mid 1970s - ever formally introduced me to feminist literature, as opposed to sociological literature about gender, sex stereotyping, sexual divisions of labour, nature/nurture debates and so on, as one form of social stratification alongside those of class and race.

As a student social worker, however, I became increasingly aware of some of the issues faced by women in desperate social circumstances, and of the discriminatory nature of much welfare state provision, including the benefits system. I became a volunteer with a welfare rights organisation, acting on behalf of claimants in appeals procedures against the (as it was then) Department of Health and Social Security, and began to understand the gendered assumptions behind social security legislation of that time. I began to see gender as a dimension of systematic inequality which seemed to act alongside and at times independently from class and race oppression. I became very aware of the material hardships faced by women with young children, the barriers that prevented them from being able to get work that paid enough for them and their families to live on, and their immense vulnerability in having to rely, financially and emotionally, on often unreliable male partners or poverty-level state benefits. The unfairness and injustice of their situations distressed me, and I

began to understand much more about the campaigns associated with the women's movement - for easier access to birth control, for women's rights to choose abortion, for refuges to help those who endured domestic violence, for an end to discrimination in employment.

At around the same time I experienced my first, and to date only, episode of direct sexual discrimination. I became pregnant, and went to my (young, family-oriented) social work tutor to re-negotiate some arrangements for the final practical placement of the course. He responded to my news by saying he thought it was a waste of money for young women like me to study, if all we were going to do was to have babies, and was unwilling to make the changes I had asked for. I was shocked and angry, and went to the course director to ask for a change of tutor. The course staff treated this dispute as a clash of personalities, but I saw it as a clear expression of gender politics, and evidence that this tutor would be likely to treat me unfairly over the remaining months of the course. Nevertheless, I accepted the proposal to deal with it as an interpersonal matter, feeling I had little power to do otherwise. I determined that my pregnancy would make no difference at all to my performance during the last placement, successfully completing the course three weeks before the baby was born. I was concerned to prove my equality, rather than to assert my particular needs at that time.

In subsequent years, while my children were very young, I worked first as a volunteer and then as a sessional paid worker with a young people's counselling and advice organisation, initially as a counsellor and subsequently as a trainer and facilitator. I became involved in, and interested by, organisational development and policy implementation, and took with me my interest in women's issues. In the early 1980s I was part of a group of women trainers, working from a base in a university department of applied social policy, delivering assertiveness training and management effectiveness workshops for women working in public sector organisations, and worked with several local authorities on the implementation of their equal opportunity policies. Even while undertaking this work, I – and the others I was working with – had an uneasy sense of the double-edged sword we seemed to be wielding. 'Women' were being targeted with specific resources and help to enable

them to participate better in the workplace, and at the same time, this problematised them as somehow deficit employees.

I have hesitated over using the term “feminist” to label my theoretical position. There is now a widely expressed view that feminism - an intellectual and political movement to understand the unequal treatment of women based on their gender, and through understanding to work to overcome it - is a response to an outdated worldview. Popular newspapers maintain that this is an age of ‘post-feminism’, where the ‘battle between the sexes’ has been superseded, where girls may even be ‘on top’ in the competitive race through society. In some academic fields, it is suggested, as analyses of society become more oriented towards *postmodernism*, the idea of feminism is a backwards reference, to a divisive and confrontational politics which under-estimates and undervalues the myriad identities of the present. Postmodernity may suggest that social groupings are fluid, negotiated, and in process, and that concepts based on fixed attributions of race, class and gender may have had relevance in times of more stable social structuration. But now they over-generalise to the point of unhelpfulness, as individuals build identities across boundaries of culture and space (Ridderstråle and Nordström, 2000).

So part of my task here is to give an account of my current understanding of feminisms, and in particular feminisms that speak about organisations, and to indicate what I believe the relevance of such frameworks of thinking are to the business education arena in which I move. The perspectives which feminisms afford me are both affirming, a part of my day-to-day, lived identity, and dis-comforting because they continually seek to dig underneath the surface of a mainstream view of ‘how the world is’.

In order to do this, I will draw on a conceptual framework devised by a team, of which I was a part, involved in an action-research project on gender and organisational change¹. The framework builds in particular on the work of Calás and Smircich (1996) and Acker (1990) and was constructed - as we all sat around one of the team member's kitchen table - as a way of explaining our thinking to people in the organisations where we were conducting the current phase of the action-research (Figure 1). It sets out 4 “frames” or ways in which we might think about gender and organisations, each of which builds on, and encompasses, the previous ones.

	Gender Equity int	Problem Formul	Intervention
Frame One: “Equip the woman”	Minimise differences b men and women	Women lack skills, don the ‘rules of the game’	Skills development, me programmes
Frame Two: “Create Equal Opportu	Create level playing fie eliminate structural and procedural bias	Gender segregation: se hire in own image Biased recruitment and promotion	Revised recruitment an promotion policies; fle working; work and fan benefits
Frame Three: “Value Difference”	Recognise and value di stemming from socialis role segregation	Women at disadvantag skills not recognised or	Diversity training, consciousness-raising f women, reward differe behaviours

¹ See linked articles by Meyerson and Kolb, Coleman and Rippin, and Ely and Meyerson, Organization, November 2000, Vol. 7 for a full account

<p>Frame Four: “Resisting and Revisioning Dominant Discourse”</p>	<p>Integration of masculine and feminine: legitimate multiple ways of being</p>	<p>Work cultures and practices seem neutral have different impact on men and women</p>	<p>Co-inquiry to reveal deep assumptions; experiment with work practices, promote reflection and new narratives</p>
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Figure 1: Four Frames of Gender in Organisations

Frame One: “Equip the Woman”

The first, and still most widespread, way of thinking about gender in formal organisations could be called an “Equip the Woman” framework (Meyerson and Kolb, 2000). It stemmed from a concern with who was where in organisations, searching for an explanation for the vertical segregation of women in employment, and their relative absence from senior positions. Much of the organisational literature considering gender since the 1960s fits within this frame (Hennig and Jardim 1977; Powell 1987): it is concerned with liberal notions of equity and civil rights, and forms the basis for most legislation and most organisational initiatives designed to address gender inequality. Gender is seen as equivalent to biological sex, and the disparity between men’s and women’s advancement in workplaces is attributed largely to sex-role socialisation processes, particularly those which render women less assertive, outgoing and competitive than men.

Recognising that there are differences between men and women’s preparedness for and expectations of the workplace, initiatives drawing on this perspective aim to minimise such differences so that men and women can compete on an equal basis in the labour market and within organisations. This includes educational initiatives, skills training, executive and leadership development and so on. Those concerned with women’s under-representation in senior management roles have coined the phrase “glass ceiling” to describe a situation in which women may see the top of the organisational pyramid, but as they move upwards towards it they become pressed against an “invisible” barrier which prevents them from ascending any further.

Steps aimed at “shattering the glass ceiling” (Davidson and Cooper 1992, Adler and Izraeli 1988) within this frame include helping women acquire the right skills and experiences early in their careers, developing career counselling aimed at raising women’s expectations and awareness of their own skills, offering appropriate training programmes as gateways to more senior organisational positions, and helping them acquire mentors, networks and support systems which can counter the “old boy networks” (Clarke and Coleman, 1990). The thrust of such a perspective is to minimise the

practical differences - from an employer's perspective - between workers in male bodies and workers in female bodies.

I felt, when I was involved in delivering some of the training intended to help women progress into management positions, that buried beneath the managerial commitment to support such programmes was the assumption that women - irrespective of their race, background, age, and multiple desires - were somehow deficit workers, in need of special assistance in order to succeed. Attending women-only management skills courses, however positive the experience in itself, carried the suggestion that these people were in need of special help in order to meet the organisation's expectations. All the accommodation and change seemed to be on behalf of the women concerned, as they struggled to become more compatible with, skilled at expressing themselves to, and hence accepted by, their male counterparts.

Frame Two: "Create Equal Opportunity"

Recognising the inadequacies of such an individualised approach, a second perspective on gender and organisations includes a consideration of social-structural barriers which prevent equality of opportunity. For instance, Kanter, in her well-known work, *Men and Women of the Corporation*, (1977) suggested that women were at a disadvantage not because of lack of skill, ability, or experience, but because of structures of opportunity which are differentiated according to gender. Women's minority status meant they were unable to gain access to the sources of power which would enable them to progress better, and as minority "other" they also were systematically excluded by senior men in organisations, who sought to surround themselves with people reflecting their own image. She judged that the critical level for representation was around 15% - and that once that barrier had been surpassed, such difficulties would be easier to overcome. Initiatives for changing according to this perspective involve overcoming gender biases in recruitment, selection and job evaluation procedures; providing opportunities for flexi-working and career breaks to accommodate child-rearing responsibilities (Bailyn, 1993), encouraging the use of numerical "targets" to overcome structural inequality (in the US this has included affirmative or positive action employment programmes).

Both the first and second frames suggest ways of promoting more gender equitable workplaces without challenging the purpose of work, the way it is organised and demarcated from non-work life, and the desirability of the goal of reaching the top of the organisation. The kinds of initiatives that follow are technical; it lies within the capability of organisations as they are currently constituted to put them into practice. They may induce some discomfort in men at work, because they are initiatives on the whole aimed at women, but they do not take steps to change the way work is done other than to get more women into top jobs. Nor do they address the constraints and pressures placed on men, which in turn impacts on their capacities to be active parents and supportive partners. Getting more women into the right organisational positions becomes a question of good “human resource management”, enabling employers to use the resources at their disposal more effectively and less expensively. Mainstream organisations, like Opportunity Now in the UK, press employers to carry out these sorts of programmes on the grounds of improving their productivity. At the same time it is assumed that a ‘trickle-down effect’ will operate: ensuring women are better represented in senior positions will in turn somehow benefit women at the bottom of the organisational hierarchy.

Both these approaches turn gender inequality in organisations into a problem associated with women, so that it seems to make sense to talk about what “women” want or need. But the use of the category “women” masks many different identities and positions. It is an aspect of these perspectives to conflate differences under an assumed unity of purpose - predominantly that identified by white middle class women who want to achieve success by acquiring senior management jobs. Those women who feel their voice is inadequately heard within this approach have strongly criticised it. “Women’s liberation, from this perspective, became synonymous with women obtaining the right to fully participate in the very system they identified as oppressive” bell hooks commented in 1982, “today, feminism offers women not liberation, but the right to act as surrogate men” (1982: 192).

Neither of these frames offers the opportunity for radical change, because they confine themselves to such narrow critiques. Both are consistent with a Western organisational forms as they are currently constructed - the structure of careers, the definitions of success, the patterns of remuneration. They do not explain why in most of the Western world, 20 years of equal opportunity employment

legislation and the removal of almost all legal forms of sex discrimination has done little to alter the gendered distribution of organisational and institutional power in significant ways. At the end of the twentieth century, despite the fact that in both countries women now constitute around half the working population, in the US just 10% of company board positions are held by women, and in the UK an unbelievable 4% - and since many women directors hold more than one directorship, even this over-represents the number of such senior women (Institute of Directors, 1999). It remains the case, if numbers are a good indicator, that businesses are run overwhelmingly by men.

Frame Three: "Value Difference"

The third frame we identified encompasses a very different perspective on gender in organisations. It is an organisational response to the feminist standpoint epistemology (see Chapter 1), according to which our civilisation's understanding of both its past and its present is predominantly based on the lives of men; the well-known thinkers, philosophers and writers, in all parts of the world, are mostly men. The leaders of nations have predominantly been men, the instigators and fighters of war have been men, the pioneers of science have been men, and the creators of publicly exchangeable "wealth" have been men. Men's lives, implicitly if not explicitly, are the "normal", against which women, both inside and outside organisations, are assessed.

Far from trying to minimise any discrepancies between the capabilities and expertise of men and women and search for ways to equalise the treatment of both groups in organisations, this perspective suggests that women are likely to flourish if they recognise, value and celebrate their difference from men. The third frame takes an assertion of that which is distinctively female into the workplace, identifying formal organisations as man-made constructs, which privilege values and ways of behaving (rationality, order, separation) traditionally associated with men, and put women constantly in the position of not-normal (Ferguson, 1984). Initiatives to overcome such inequality involve recognising and revaluing "female" skills and capacities. Fletcher (1998, 1994), for instance, identifies a "growth-in-connection" model of work, based on connection, interdependency and mutuality, which stands as a feminist alternative to the 'normal' model of growth and productivity

based on separation, independence and individualism. Underlying growth-in-connection she identifies “relational practices” such as assessing and paying attention to emotional data, mutual empowerment by assuming that the need for help is just part of being human, achieving goals by working with and through others, and creating teams. Recognising and valuing such work, she argues, holds the potential for creating radical transformation in workplaces.

Some writers have suggested that focusing on what women do well offers an alternative and more humane organisational environment, which would benefit both men and women - a way of operating which is precisely what the emerging organisational forms of the globalised and digital age demand (Helgesen 1990, Loden 1985, Rosener 1990). Helgesen, for example, argues that the flatter, dispersed, flexible organisations of the future (see Chapter 4) need precisely what women are good at - the ability to manage through “webs” rather than hierarchies, to juggle competing demands, to glue groups together through building interpersonal relationships, rather than relying on impersonal command-and-control mechanisms. Women, it is argued, are less reliant than men on the trappings of status, so can handle flatter organisations better, and are more likely to thrive in less predictable environments.

In some ways I, like other women and many men I know, respond positively to such upbeat calls for the advent of a more relationship-based way of running organisations. This perspective suggests a different sort of approach to management practice, one that looks for opportunities to honour the many different kinds of contribution women make in the workplace, which recognises teamwork and collaboration, and tries to make visible the considerable ‘relational work’ done by people at work so that workplaces run smoothly, and which seeks to reward these. This might involve setting up collaborative structures, encouraging participatory decision-making, recognising the commitment people have to work even when they are not in the workplace, respecting their roles as carers, and the skills this enables them to bring to work.

But, there are limitations to this way of thinking. One is that it runs the risk of becoming essentialist - associating the category “woman” with caring, teamworking, emotional sensitivity. These traits can become seen as “natural” in women, hence not valuable, not the result of effort, practice, and attention. Fletcher (1998) points to the fact that mainstream organisational thinking cannot register relational work. In her words, this kind of work gets “disappeared”. Instead of being seen as something new - an alternative way of working, based on a “growth-in-connection” model - it gets reconstructed as something familiar - private-sphere (personal) activity, based on warmth, liking, un-business-like attitudes, inappropriately applied to the public (work) sphere. A “normal” growth-through-individuation perspective retains a polarisation between task-centred activity and relational activity - valuing the former as work and the latter as non-work - so that using relational skills in order to achieve a task is non-sensical. As Fletcher points out, drawing attention to a woman’s use of relational practice, therefore, can serve to stereotype rather than empower. At the same time, women who do not demonstrate they have such skills, become seen as deficient, not appropriately female. Like the first and second frames above, this can become a device for masking diversity, reducing nearly half the working population to a category of people seen as “naturally” caring.

Another risk is that the traits which are so celebrated and apparently desirable in the workplace of the future become equally desirable for men - and since men are seen as having to work to acquire them, rather than them coming “naturally”, they are rewarded for them in a way that women are not. There is some evidence of this ‘feminisation’ of management taking place – a point to which I will return in the next chapter.

An Interlude: Power and Post-modernity

Let me pause at this point: there is something problematic about this analysis, and the proposal of these “frames”, neatly elaborated in boxes, as I have offered them. I am recognising a need to explain these ideas on gender and organisations, in a way where I can distinguish between them, and trace their implications. But my sense of the false orderliness of this process is getting in the way.

Let me try another tack - and think about the concept of power in these perspectives, and as a basis for moving into the fourth frame.

The first frame, with its focus on individuals, is built on the assumption of a liberal, pluralist notion of power. Lukes (1974), in his work on 'three faces of power', would term this the first face, that which underlies liberal democracy. Feminists working from the perspective suggest that women's rights are contravened by their exclusion from positions of organisational power, and that they are entitled to additional measures to enable them to participate in organisational life on an equal basis. This is a view of the organisational process as transparent; it is possible to understand the way power is operating by seeing who is where, and to change it by taking agreed and visible measures - using the legal powers of the state, where necessary, to override the objections of individuals or individual organisations. It includes the idea that for healthy democracy there should be countervailing powers, checks and balances, and that it is in everyone's interests for those who are relatively powerless - in this case "women" - to be helped to participate in this process.

The second frame carries a view of power that corresponds to Luke's 'second face': it might be termed 'liberal structuralist'. It recognises that there are some elements in the structure of opportunity available to individuals which make their organisational participation on an equal basis impossible. As Lukes says, quoting Schnattscheider "some interests are organised into politics, some are organised out". This view acknowledges the fact that those who already have positions of power are able to fix agendas, decide what will get decided and what will not. Accordingly, those already in positions of organisational power are able to define the criteria by which new entrants are judged - and as Kanter (1977) notes, in times of organisational uncertainty, there is evidence that those at the top of organisations show a tendency to recruit in their own image. This is still, however, a liberal perspective, because its intention is to get the conditions of the playing field right, to 'level the playing field', to quote a current cliché. The rules of the game themselves, as it were, are not open to scrutiny.

In effect, then, both these perspectives on gender and organisations limit the extent of the critiques they offer to the organisational arena, and the functioning of gender-as-women within it. They are not critiques of modern organisations in themselves.

The third face identified by Lukes is that in which power is exercised not to overcome a recognisable conflict of interests, but to determine people's perceptions of their interests. The ultimate use of power, he suggests, occurs when there is no apparent conflict despite the fact that social arrangements favour some groups over others. Lukes maintains that it is possible to develop an idea of people's 'real interests', which is independent of their own ability to recognise them or exercise them. Their interests are what they would choose and prefer, if they were able to do so. He refers to this as a situation of 'latent conflict':

“conflict is latent in the sense that it is assumed that there would be a conflict of wants or preferences between those exercising power and those subject to it, were the latter to become aware of their interests” (1974: 25)

Indeed, the process whereby suppressed interests begin to be recognised is part of the process of overcoming oppression. Gaining access to appropriate language, and the ability to name a position in opposition to dominant groups, is an important step.

Standpoint feminism includes a range of different voices, but in asserting a distinctive “women's position” which is at odds with that of the male-dominated construction of those interests, it echoes these ideas in some ways. Much of the work from this position has been concerned with identifying, articulating and celebrating a distinctive women's interest, which is shared at some level by all women and different from men's interests. Betty Friedan, in her book *The Feminine Mystique*, which was influential in the women's movement among white middle class women in the United States, said:

“It has barely begun, the search for women for themselves. But the time is at hand when the voice of the feminine mystique can no longer drown out the inner voice that is driving women on to become complete” (1953: 331)

Friedan suggested that the whole notion of femininity, and the mystique surrounding it in suburban US society, was a mask which robbed women of the capacity to know what they were capable of, or the language to articulate their issues. She called it “the problem that has no name”. Bringing this into an organisational setting, Fletcher’s (1998) research suggested that women themselves did not have language to describe the relational work they were doing in order to complete their work tasks: in order to articulate their practice they had to use language relating to personality attributes and character, even though the behaviour they describing consisted of deliberate, intentional acts.

Standpoint, radical and socialist feminists have had relatively little to say about organisational management, partly because these are seen as aspects of an exploitative patriarchal system of production, and hence inherently inimical to women’s interests. Unlike the ‘women in management’ literature, there is little interest in adjusting the system so that women compete better within it. Organisations are critiqued, and ideas developed on how to build non-hierarchical, co-operative organisations. Ferguson’s *The Feminist Case Against Bureaucracy*, for instance begins by asserting:

“The feminist project is to seek grounds for an alternative mode of discourse, and to articulate an alternative vision of society, that can both comprehend bureaucracy and allow us to go beyond it” (1984: 6)

She goes on to say:

“feminism is not compatible with bureaucracy, and like all forms of opposition it is endangered by too-close contact with bureaucratic linguistic and institutional forms” (1984:180)

The third frame, “Value Difference”, begins to make connections which lead into new conceptual territory. In order for distinctiveness to be valued, it must be somehow articulated, and Luke’s point was to connect the conditions that prevent that articulation with the exercise of power. Strategies for challenging the exercise of such power, it follows, would include ones which enable new discourse to be built, through which oppressed groups might name their experience, and hence their interests,

differently. Both Ferguson and Fletcher, although resonating with some of the ‘Value Difference’ framing, also address issues of the interplay between gendered power, discourse, experience and change. Power comes to be seen less as the structural forces of the dominators which are to be struggled with and overthrown, and more as the ability to influence the rules within which language, practices and values are acted out, and therefore more processual.

Foucault’s (1977, 1980) conception of power is helpful here. He saw the operation of power as a set of techniques and disciplinary procedures within a set of more or less stable or shifting networks of alliances, paying particular attention to the ongoing processes required in order for systems of power to keep their place:

“The things which seem most evident to us are always found in the confluence of encounters and change, during the course of a precarious and fragile history...and since these things have been made, they can be unmade, as long as we know how it was that they were made” (in Smart, 1988: 140)

Linking together the concepts of power and knowledge, Foucault saw the establishment of ‘regimes of truth’ as playing a critical role – establishing both rules and procedures for doing things as well as discourse which legitimate such activities with reasons and principles (Smart, 1988). All knowledge is an expression of a specific configuration of power, and forms of knowledge also constitute the social reality which they describe and analyse:

“Power and knowledge directly imply one another....there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations” (1977: 27)

Disciplinary practices are a form of knowledge not just in texts, but in definite linguistic, institutional and organisational practices – so called ‘discursive practices’. Foucault was particularly concerned with the underside or “micro-physics” of power, the tiny acts by individuals which

together hold “regimes of truth” in place. He traced the development of the techniques of the exercise of power through the 17th and 18th Century in Western societies, elaborating the “capillary” form of power, which through disciplinary techniques came to “reach in to the very grain of individuals” (1980:39). He articulated the way that the discourse/discursive practices of modernity produce “obedient bodies”. In effect, we take on the process of disciplining ourselves through our participation in these practices, even though, as he also stressed, wherever there is power there is resistance. He was not describing an ‘oversocialised’ automaton, but a society of active individuals who struggle and resist, and participate and make choices – but generally make them in accordance with the truth-rules that surround them. We discipline ourselves:

“our reflexive gaze takes over the disciplinary role as we take on the accounts and vocabularies of meaning and motive that are available to us as certain forms of account get marginalised or simply eased out of currency” (in Clegg, 1994: 159)

Foucault was not a pro-feminist writer, and has been criticised for his lack of attention to gender issues (McNay, 1992). But his conceptualisation of power has been widely drawn on by feminist theorists. Ferguson uses it to build her critique of bureaucracy, pointing to his idea that resistance is ‘present everywhere in the power network’ to advocate for strategies of localised resistance, revealing the partiality of universal claims for truth within bureaucracy. “Both our institutions and our speech must be transformed”, she says “because it is the relation between them that defines them” (1984: 155) – and Foucault suggests that possibility is ever present, in all situations. Ferguson continues:

“Because the relationship of theory to practice is not contingent or instrumental but conceptual and constitutive, the act of changing the way we think about the world is a way of changing the world, since it is a world partly constituted by people’s beliefs about it, and about themselves” (1984: 196)

I experience myself as constrained by the organisations within which I function, and I believe that the men with whom I work are also constrained, even though the constraints may mean different

things for them than for me. I am seldom constrained by individuals who coerce me: it is rather the case that my participation in a culture, of which an organisation is one expression, enmeshes me in a set of assumptions, expectations, opportunities, reward structures, values, and purposes. Within these, I make choices and exercise my autonomy, and in so doing participate in the continuation of the processes within which I am enmeshed. Underlying these many micro-processes is the assumption that organisations are peopled by male bodies - that normal is male, and female is other. Just as the feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith said that women have no alternative but to experience male-dominated society through the structures and devices offered to them by men, so this perspective suggests that women experience organisations through their structures and processes as devised by men.

Frame Four: Resisting and Revisioning Dominant Discourse

This is the theoretical territory on which the fourth frame of the typology introduced above is standing – one based on processual power. Organisational policies and practices, it suggests, do not operate neutrally, having the same affect on men and women. For instance, a policy which requires that junior staff wanting to move into management positions spend a certain amount of time working in a range of different departments, or different offices in different locations, will mean one thing for a young man, but something completely different for a young woman, who may have to find a way of fulfilling this requirement whilst juggling periods of maternity leave, or postpones having children and bears social costs for this². The costs for the woman, the barrier it represents to her advancement, are higher. Similarly, an accepted practice, such as allowing meetings during the day to progressively over-run, so that staff involved have to either stay late in the office or take work home to get it finished, will impact differently on men and women, in ways that often have far reaching effects for how their level of commitment is seen by senior staff. Ferguson comments:

“Women’s experience constitutes a submerged voice within the overall discourse of bureaucratic capitalism...the powerful and the powerless both use the dominant language, but they stand in very different relations to it” (1984: 154)

² See my journal entry from March 1993 at the start of Chapter 1 for an example

These kind of circumstances suggest that inequalities which are not created inside the workplace nevertheless get amplified by many “normal” practices, without anyone concerned deliberately trying to do so. No-one involved, including the people who are disadvantaged by such practices, is likely to identify this as an example of structural inequality. The young woman who stays up half the night to finish work she has had to bring home, after leaving the office promptly to collect her child from the childminder, sees this as something she just has to do if she wants to get on - she privatises the experience, taking it into the domestic realm as something which has to be solved there. This privatisation involves her in work, effort, management - and this work is invisible. (This is what I was doing, all those years ago when I managed my pregnancy in such a way that it had no impact on the last months of my social work course.)

This fourth frame, then, conceives of organisation as places where ‘gendering’, as a process applying to both men and women, takes place and therefore organisations are in themselves ‘gendered’. This is to suggest that “underlying both academic theories and practical guides for managers is a gendered substructure that is reproduced daily in the practical work activities” (Acker 1990).

Acker identifies five processes which carry out such active gendering work:

- Formal practices and policies that affect men and women differently, like being required to take assignments in different part of the country, or world, in order to qualify for promotion, or being expected to follow a distinct and progressive ‘career path’ (Marshall, 1989)³
- Informal work practices which affect men and women differently, like making oneself available to work overtime at short notice or socialising after work hours

³ I was once an observer at a university committee tasked with recruiting a senior academic. The professor dominating the proceedings judged CVs against what publications and advancement he expected the candidates should “if they were any good” have achieved by a certain age. The two women candidates failed to ‘reach the mark’, having spent some of their adult lives in childrearing.

- Symbols and images expressing gender divisions, such as the dark business suit representing managerial men, managers being expected to be ‘authoritative’ and decisive in masculine ways, images of young, blonde women as being sexually available and empty-headed
- Everyday interactions enacting patterns of dominance and submission, such as the relative deferral contained in women’s speech patterns, the tendency for men to speak more, and interrupt more, in public settings (Tannen, 1990)
- Ways people internalise and act out gender identities, such as women taking on relational work in the workplace, and not applying for jobs that don’t sit well with their images of what men and women do

The fourth frame, then, does not address itself to the obvious areas in which discrimination and exclusion on the basis of gender take place, and does not focus exclusively on women. Instead, it considers the way in which everyday organisational life operates a ‘regime of truth’ in which gender is in a continuous process of creation and reinforcement. Like Luke’s move from apparent to ‘latent’ conflict between the second and third face of power, this frame involves in effect thinking about ‘latent’ gendering, and ways in which strategies of change might then focus on processes of disruption and resistance. This frame advocates inquiry into deep assumptions, experimentation, and attention to the building of new discourse as approaches to change. In practice a major problem of trying to work from within this perspective lies in the fact that it no longer seems to be about gender at all, but about processes of organising which are taken-for-granted. Putting gender into the situation involves somehow disrupting deep assumptions underlying organisational life, and holding on to a concept of gender as present in a situation where it does not seem to exist (Ely and Meyerson, 2000). Acker (1990) suggests that since organisations are seen, according to mainstream discourse, as gender-neutral, naming gendered attitudes and behaviour where they are thought not to exist is likely to be seen as contamination, “creating” differences, and therefore subject to resistance.

This is the frame that speaks to me, in which I best locate my thinking. It gives me a way of understanding how I, as a relatively powerful organisational actor, still at times feel voiceless,

grappling to name something elusive. It suggests that modern organisations are one of the places in which relationships between men and women, and our understandings of what it is to be male and female, are built. Further, since organisational form has developed, through male-centred history, in a way which expresses traits we associate with the masculine, its opposite, the feminine, is in constant position of “denied other” in formal organisations – which impacts on both men and women. Collinson and Hearn, exploring this phenomenon from the perspective of masculinities, comment:

“Masculine discourses are ...embedded in conventional managerial language, which is frequently gendered, for example, both in terms of highly (hetero)sexualised talk about ‘penetrating markets’ and ‘getting into bed with suppliers/customers/competitors’ and in the extensive use of sporting metaphors and sexual jokes in making sense of rationalising managerial decisions and practices” (1996: 4)

Modern organisations, then, are an expression of some kinds of masculinity (and a suppression of others). Gherardi calls this an “endless process of the difference and deferral of the meaning of male and female.”(1995: 106)

Gherardi names this processual theoretical orientation, with which she identifies, as “positionality”. Focusing her own work on the gendered symbolic orders which are co-created and maintained by organisations, she suggest that:

“positionality presupposes a discursive order where gender relations are the outcome of discourse practice; that is, they derive from the way in which people actively produce social and psychological realities.... (it is) a postmodern project in the sense that it aims to problematize knowledge, to delegitimize all beliefs concerning truth, power, the self, language and everything that is taken for granted....seeks to deconstruct subjectivity into a plurality of variously positioned selves” (1995: 103)

Dilemmas of Feminism and Post-Modernity

This form of feminist thinking, then, enters the territory of postmodernity. Lather describes postmodernism as:

“the code name for the crisis of confidence in Western conceptual systems. It is borne out of the uprising of the ex-centrics, the revolution in communication technology, the fissures of a global multinational hyper-capitalism, our sense of the limits of Enlightenment rationality, all creating a conjunction that shifts our sense of who we are and what is possible” (1991: 159)

Postmodern thinking:

- draws attention to the constructed nature of social reality, particularly seeking to uncover that which is denied and suppressed through modernist binary thinking, with its intolerance of ambiguity. Gherardi describes modernist (she calls it “univocal”) science as being in flight from ambiguity. Its “aversion to the ambiguity of reality and language has led to systematic undervaluation of the conceptual ambiguity of the terms used by modern science in constructing its models” (1995: 28)
- re-conceptualises structures as processes, as in process, so that the focus for exploration is on the *doing* of bureaucracy (Ferguson 1984) or of gender (Acker 1990), noticing particularly the micro-processes involved
- shows connections between power and knowledge, so that all knowledge becomes situated within discursive practices and therefore political. Postmodern thinking rejects the possibility of meta-narratives of truth, the universal firm foundation of knowledge which is the basis of modernist epistemology, and seeks to locate all knowing in its historical and cultural context. It denies certainty, therefore, introducing contingency into all claims for truth
- draws attention to the connection between language and power/knowledge, and the role of discursive practices more generally. Jacques describes discourse as “what can be said, as

opposed to what is said” (Fletcher, 1998). I take it that the branch of postmodern thinking that is concerned with issues of language and discourse is usually referred to as poststructuralism⁴.

- points to possible sites of resistance as an ever-present facet of the exercise of power; the deconstruction of discourse is a favoured strategy of destabilisation
- challenges the notion of the separate and unchanging “I”, the essential self which experiences the world around it and is the author of its own destiny. For some postmodern thinkers, the idea of a self is a modernist mistake, a delusion from which we find it difficult to free ourselves (McNay, 1992), but for others the self is complex, shifting, in process (Griffiths, 1995). Foucault describes it as a ‘radically contingent’ phenomenon, constructed through social practice but still able to act on the world to “create ourselves as a work of art” (McNay, 1992: 171).

A feminist postmodern/poststructuralist approach to organisations, then, is concerned with the processual discursive practices which hold gender positions in place, the micro-processes and symbolisms which maintain one sort of organisational reality over multiple possible others. As Gherardi says

“gender is...an organising principle and an organisational outcome. Gender characteristics are pre-supposed, imposed on people, and exploited for productive ends...however, the belief that there is one sole culture of gender or that there are only male and female organisations is simplistic...” (1995: 186)

However, there are some difficulties in this, both epistemological and practical. Analyses of “doing gender” are one thing, feminism is perhaps another. Griffiths (1995) discusses the uneasy relationship between postmodern and standpoint feminist epistemologies, the former placing the idea of ‘women’s experience’ in much more equivocal and contested territory than the latter. The

⁴ Lather, indicating the difficulties of semantics here, says: “In terms of definition...I sometimes use *postmodern* to mean the larger cultural shifts of a post-industrial, post-colonial era, and *poststructural* to mean the working out of those shifts within the arenas of academic theory. I also, however, use the terms interchangeably.” (1991: 4)

differences between these two are strongly argued, although Griffiths suggests there remains common ground: a concern with the subjective consciousness of the individual, a concern with the devaluation and silencing of girls and women, an assertion of the significance of theory, or at least sense-making processes, and a recognition that there is no such thing as stable, unchanging knowledge. However, the uneasiness does not stop there. The feminist 'project' (itself a modernist term) is concerned with justice, with progression, with understanding how gender works in order to create a better society. If all judgements are contextualised and localised, the direction in which deconstructive postmodernity leads, where does the voice of outrage lie (Spretnak, 1997)? How can judgements of right and wrong, justice and injustice, be made? As McNay says, "feminist politics is, at a fundamental level, posited on a modernist meta-narrative of personal emancipation" (1992: 123) and "the overstressing of the particular leads to an equivalence of all biases and particularities and reduces the feminist ethic to just one of many equally valid viewpoints" (1992: 127). This dilemma has been extensively debated by feminists (Nicholson, 1990).

Lather (1991), however, maintains that postmodernism also offers 'those with liberatory intentions', including feminists, an opportunity, in which:

"our empirical and pedagogical work can be less toward positioning ourselves as masters of truth and justice, and more toward creating a space where those directly involved can act and speak on their own behalf" (1991: 163)

Feminism, she suggests, rather than being undermined by postmodernism, is "the paradigmatic political discourse of postmodernism", for three reasons. First, it is a body of thinking in which the theory/practice nexus is being most creatively worked on; second, it questions the impotence of the postmodern 'fractured subject', drawing instead on ideas of difference and the non-universalized 'woman' to suggest that all subjects are constructed and that agency and subjectivity are nevertheless always present in transformative struggle; and third, its well-established tendency toward reflexivity means that problematising firm assumptions is not an alien practice, and that even so the challenge is to 'take a stand' (1991: 29).

In summary, then, feminist thinking, as it applies to organisations, is concerned with bringing about change towards a reconceptualisation of 'gender equity'. Such strategies have been important in their own right, and have made some significant improvements to the ability of women to participate in organisations, but have predominantly been conducted within the first and second of the frames I have been describing above. Some women have progressed higher up the organisational hierarchies, and there are clearly more positive images of the female now available to young women in many countries, and in some circumstances more practical help to assist them in taking paid jobs if they choose to do so.

But, much has not changed – and the postmodern, processual perspective, I believe, helps begin to identify where the important struggles continue to be. To ask questions from a postmodern feminist perspective is to ask questions about the world as we have created it, and imagine the world as it might be. It is a way of making problematic that which seems normal, and giving expression to the “denied other”, the unexpressed shadow that haunts masculinist organisational forms - recognising that the 'other' may be constructed as female but is not necessarily found only in female bodies. It is a way of de-stabilising assumptions, changing practices, and trying to think the un-thinkable (cf. Jacques, outside what 'can be thought')

And the goal? (and here, having suggested a postmodern approach, I, ironically, need to engage my modernist, purposive voice. Spivak (quoted in Lather, 1991: 29) urges feminists to “take the risk of essence in order to increase the substantive efficacy of feminist resistance” – suggesting sometimes you need, strategically, to engage from that place. It is to evolve a way of living that recognises human participation in the world, honours it and sustains it – in connection with the larger ecosystem (about which I will say more in the next chapter). Feminism has something to say about this. This is not about replacing male power with female, but about transforming our human way of conceptualising and exercising our power: I am calling it here 'mother consciousness'. The form of women's liberation I am evoking is also men's liberation. I am making direct connections here

between masculine organisational forms that deny difference, prioritise individualism, hunger for control, promote the cult of rationality, engage in calculative self-interest, and a wider crisis of modernity. I want to rail against the “man-made world” - against its injustice, cruelty and futility. And I want to do work which takes steps towards changing it, that deconstructs rather than constructs it. Can I do that from within business education?

This is where I will turn next.

Post Script

I have been trying, in this chapter, to identify and explicate a body of theoretical work: feminist comment on organisations. I wanted to lay it out, as it were, like a palette of colours from which I might choose as I progress through this inquiry. In order to do this, I have used an explanatory device, a four-stage typology, which, like all such devices, suggests a clarity amongst and demarcation between these issues which over-simplifies the situation. I notice how easy it would be to be taken in by my own trick, to reproduce this clarity in how I talk about these issues from here on. This ‘flight from ambiguity’ is, of course, an enduring feature of modernist discourse – my discourse.

Finally, I want to mention here something I might call ‘feminist attention’. At the start of this chapter I said that feminist frameworks were, for me, both affirming and discomfoting. To move within a business-education organisation, or for that matter any common-sense mainstream milieu, whilst carrying a set of imperatives and voices concerned with feminism, is to live some kind of double life. I don’t wish to over-dramatise this – although this was a factor in the distress I expressed at the outset of this study. But this involves having multiplicity playing in my mind most of the time to a greater or lesser extent – a mainstream/male-stream ‘reality’, and an alternative, minority, feminist ‘reality’. The postmodern concept of multiple worlds, then, is not difficult to embrace from this position: alternative constructions of a situation are part of my daily attention, and involve

moment-by-moment choices about what to notice in particular, and how to act in the face of unclarity. Lather describes her form of feminism as “attempting to incorporate the work of the fathers, and take it where they cannot go” (1991: 20), which for me capture something of this situation. I raise this here as a postscript to the thoughts above about the postmodernity/modernity of feminism, noticing I feel no great need to achieve closure on this dilemma here. I will explore these issues further in my action inquiries in Chapter 5 onwards.