'A Blinding Lack of Progress': Management Rhetoric and Affirmative Action

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In this study we explore how versions of organizational reality and gender are constructed in management discourse and whether such patterns change over time. Specifically, we examine management explanations and accounts of the gendered nature of their organizations through their commentaries on their affirmative action programmes. In Australia private sector organizations with 100 or more employees are required to report to government on their affirmative action programmes for women. In these documents, management representatives outline objectives for the coming year and report on their progress in reducing employment-related barriers for women. In doing so they account for the 'problem' of gender-based discrimination that affirmative action is designed to address, justify their actions (or lack of action) and reproduce versions of gendered identity. Thus we use affirmative action reporting as cases of management rhetoric to explore how aspects of gender and organization are constructed, taken for granted, challenged or problematized. Comparing reports from the hospitality sector over a 14-year period, we explore whether there is any evidence of discursive change in management accounts of the gendered nature of their organizations.

Keywords: gender, equality, management, affirmation action, rhetoric

Introduction

Since its inception in 1986, Australia's equal employment opportunity (EEO) legislation has precipitated considerable discussion and analysis. The rationale underpinning the legislation was based on the disadvantaged position of women in the workforce, primarily because of systemic

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discrimination (Ostenfeld and Strachan, 1999). Indeed, the then Prime Minister, Bob Hawke, stated that 'sustained economic recovery requires a skilled and flexible workforce.... To date, women's skills and talents have not been utilised in our workforce to the fullest extent possible' (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet 1984, vol. 1, foreword cited in Ostenfeld and Strachan, 1999, p. 21). The principles of EEO encompass the understanding that women's potential and working capacity has been needlessly hindered by social, structural and systemic impediments. Hence, the purpose of EEO legislation was to remove the impediments that confronted women in employment.

Research examining EEO in Australian workplaces has focused largely on analysing whether women's employment opportunities have expanded or improved as a result of the EEO legislation (for example, French and Strachan, 2007; Sheridan, 1998; Strachan, 1987; Strachan and Burgess, 2000). Typically, the findings regarding women's progress have been disappointing: women's employment opportunities and outcomes have not improved significantly, despite the existence of EEO legislation (French and Strachan, 2007; Ostenfeld and Strachan, 1999; Preston and Burgess, 2003; Sheridan, 1998; Strachan and Burgess, 2000). To understand why so little progress has been made, Probert (2002, p. 9) argues that we need more 'evidence about the way people have ... experienced these changes, and the sense they have made of them'.

This study seeks to explore this phenomenon by examining employers' explanations regarding women's slow progress in the workplace and how they account for gendered workforce differences. That is to say, we seek to explore the question of how employers and managers understand and make sense of EEO as a concept and whether this has changed over time. To date, researchers have neglected to examine employers' understanding of EEO in the Australian work context and we suggest that this could contribute to a critical evaluation of equal opportunity interventions.

After reviewing current literature on EEO in Australia we discuss the contribution discursive approaches have made to understanding the perpetuation of gender inequality. We then outline how we conducted the empirical research. Using management reports from the hospitality sector submitted to government in 1990 and 2004, our results and discussion focus on the extent to which we can detect any changes in the discursive patterns in management rhetoric over this 14-year period. Based on this analysis we argue that little has changed in management accounts of affirmative action, their understanding of EEO and their constructions of gender.

EEO and affirmative action in Australia

Much of the Australian literature on EEO focuses on its legislative content and its impact (for example, Bacchi, 2000; Maddox, 1999; Ostenfeld and

Strachan, 1999; Strachan and Burgess, 2000). In Australia at a federal level, efforts to ensure equal opportunity for women and to promote affirmative action are codified in the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Act 1999, which replaced the affirmative action (Equal Opportunity for Women) Act 1986. The 1986 Act defined affirmative action programmes as

> appropriate action [that] is taken to eliminate discrimination by the relevant employer against women in relation to employment matters … [and] … measures [that] are taken by the relevant employer to promote equal opportunity for women in relation to employment matters. (cited in Strachan and Burgess, 2000, p. 47)

While the legislation draws on formal equality (or equality of treatment) as well as difference concepts, that is, that women require different treatment and remedial measures to promote equality in outcomes (see Guerrina, 2001, Liff and Cameron, 1997 and also Scott, 1988), the notion of merit has been particularly central to legislative and policy interventions in Australia. This notion assumes that men and women are fundamentally the same and that equality is best achieved by evaluating individuals 'on their particular merits against the same standards' (Liff and Dickens, 2000, p. 87).

Under the 1999 Act (and the preceding Act) all privately owned firms, community organizations, higher education institutions, group training schemes, trade unions and non-government schools with at least 100 employees are required to submit an annual report detailing their affirmative action programme to the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency (EOWA). The report encourages employers to analyse the position of women in their firm by examining employment statistics and human resource management policies and practices, which can involve consultation with trade unions and female employees. Based upon this analysis, employers must devise a programme to address problems identified and to set targets against which their future progress can be assessed (Strachan, 1987; Strachan and Burgess, 2000). This mechanism is underpinned by the notion that 'the barriers in the workplace which restrict employment and promotion opportunities for women have to be systematically eliminated' (Affirmative Action Agency, 1990, p. 1). However, authors such as Sheridan (1998) argue that the most common workplace programmes fail to address the complexity of the underlying causes of inequality such as women's greater family and caring responsibilities, which may restrict their labour market opportunities, as well as the disadvantages that stem from being judged against a male norm in organizations. Similarly, Strachan and Burgess (2000) reported that between 1994 and 1996 many industries did not progress far or actually went backwards. Further to this, the authors suggested that approximately one-quarter of employers complied with the law by submitting a report but in reality they did little or nothing to advance EEO (Strachan and Burgess, 2000).

An analysis of 106 workplace programmes in the finance industry in 2003 revealed that most employers (over 90 per cent) were doing no more than merely meeting the minimum requirements of the Act (French and Strachan, 2007). Moreover, French and Strachan (2007) argue that most of the workplace policies do not display any understanding of EEO issues. A similar analysis of workplace programmes in a small sample of retail organizations in 2003 produced consistent results (Burgess *et al.*, 2005). While employers acknowledged gender-based differences in pay and occupations, few developed comprehensive programmes to address these issues. One firm was attempting to increase the number of women in management and in non-traditional occupations. Another offered 2 weeks' paid maternity leave, which is not required by law (Burgess *et al.*, 2005).

Based on such findings, it is perhaps unsurprising that the gender wage gap (at an aggregate level) has remained relatively unchanged in Australia. In 1984 the ratio of total earnings of women to men was 77.7 per cent, by mid 2003 the ratio was 81 per cent (Preston and Burgess, 2003). At the same time, there has been very little change in the level of occupational segregation, with women disproportionately employed in certain jobs, mainly clerical, sales and service occupations (Preston and Burgess, 2003).

Numerous academics (French and Strachan, 2007; Ostenfeld and Strachan, 1999; Strachan and Burgess, 2000; Strachan *et al.*, 2007; Thornton, 2001) argue that women's situation is unlikely to improve because of the legislative amendments that occurred in 1999. As part of this legislative review the terms of reference stated that the legislation should be retained, providing that the benefits to the community as a whole outweighed the costs. Critics have suggested that this simultaneously reduced the costs to business and made workplace monitoring more difficult with respect to EEO and affirmative action (French and Strachan, 2007; Ostenfeld and Strachan, 1999; Strachan and Burgess, 2000; Strachan *et al.*, 2007). In a similar vein, Bacchi (2000) suggests that the power to enforce affirmative action in the workplace is being eroded as regulation makes way for volunteerism. At the same time, she believes that affirmative action is being substituted by a growth in the implementation of workplace diversity initiatives, which require 'a good deal less of employers' (Bacchi, 2000, p. 64). Moreover, workplace diversity programmes tend to shift our focus to individual differences and away from equity for groups such as women. According to Bacchi (2000), these two developments are intertwined and are designed by the government to free up competition and reduce regulatory intervention as well as government scrutiny of management policies and practices. More controversially, Thornton (2001) suggests that 'the minimalist interpretations [of EEO and affirmative action] currently in vogue in official discourses are designed to instantiate inequality for women at work' (p. 78).

Perpetuating inequality: discourse and the gendered subtext of organizations

Such trends are not confined to Australia. Similar assessments have been made about the lack of progress on equal opportunity in European countries (Benschop and Doorewaard, 1998), the problematic nature of a shift from affirmative action to diversity (Cox, 1994) and the need for a more critical examination as well as a 'subtler understanding' (Liff and Wacjman, 1996, p. 92) of equal opportunity theory and practice (Guerrina, 2001; Liff and Cameron, 1997). Such understanding could be enhanced by more research that explores how gender divisions are maintained and reproduced in organizations (Gherardi, 1994) not just through overt practices of gender discrimination but through the gender subtext (Benschop and Doorewaard, 1998), the implicit power processes (Stobbe, 2005) expressed in, for example, commonsense statements or taken-for-granted organizational arrangements that function to perpetuate gender inequality.

Such implicit power processes include gender blindness and gender suppression. Wilson (1996) has argued that gender blindness has been endemic in organizational theory and in her historical review she shows how the major schools of thought have assumed a male norm and that gender has remained largely invisible. She further argues that this gender blindness is responsible for an absence of recognition that women's work experience may differ from that of men's (largely due to differential power relations) so that women as employees are perceived as indistinguishable from men in all respects at work. This 'blindness' has meant that gender divisions have been invisible, contributing to the formidable barriers preventing the advancement of women (as well as the alleged shortcomings of the organizational theory/ organizational behaviour). However, in his response to Wilson, Linstead (2000, p. 302) has argued that it is gender suppression rather than gender blindness that has been more prevalent in organizational theory. Moreover, he contends that gender blindness is 'just a phase we went through' and no longer an option. In other words, it is no longer possible for people to be unaware of gender (that is, gender blind) although they may actively work to suppress their awareness of gender difference. Accordingly, Linstead (2000) argues that gender suppression involves an awareness of gender coupled with '*active suppression* of gender difference' (p. 300). He contends that

> [i]ts very awareness of the *messiness* of organizational reality creates the need to suppress those variables — individual characteristics, collective consciousness, uneven distribution of task knowledge, and gender — that contribute to this messiness, and to impose the principles that control and regulate it (Linstead, 2000, pp. 298–99).

In addition, other writers have argued that contemporary norms about gender and ethnic/racial discrimination have merely driven bias further

underground and that those involved in researching and practicing diversity management have not taken sufficient notice of the 'white male backlash' (Dick and Cassell, 2002, p. 954; Prasad and Mills, 1997). People may now be more reluctant to make discriminatory remarks and risk being seen as sexist or racist but that does not mean that dominant ideologies have changed. This phenomenon has been explored by studies in discursive psychology that show how people can both voice support for equality and explain or justify continued inequality. Benschop and Doorewaard (1998, p. 800) refer to this as the duality of gender: 'the simultaneous existence of the practices of gender inequality and the impression of equality'.

For example, in an important early study, Wetherell *et al.* (1987) explored final year university students' explanations of inequality, including their conceptualization of the process of social change. They found that accounts of equality were characterized by contradictions that functioned to perpetuate the *status quo*, even when respondents were presenting themselves as being in favour of gender equality in employment. Equal opportunities were broadly understood by respondents as denoting liberal values, such as freedom of individual choice and egalitarianism. However this ideal of equality coincided with contradictory explanations of the practical constraints of employing women that drew on notions of women's greater 'risk' of reproduction and their 'natural' role of women in child rearing.

In addition, the respondents relied on explanations of gender inequality that emphasized individual differences; that is, differences in achievement and career success were attributed to differences in individuals' abilities, potential and personal qualities (such as their aspirations), rather than on social or structural factors. Conceptions of social change conformed to a simple ideal of inevitable and gradual progression in gender equality; explanations which Wetherell *et al.* (1987) argue functioned to rationalize inaction and avoid responsibility.

The findings of this earlier study have been confirmed and extended through subsequent discursive studies of gender inequality and affirmative action. For example, Gill (1993) examined how radio broadcasters justified the lack of women presenters using a range of contradictory and flexible explanations. Riley's (2002) study of professional men's talk about gender inequality found individualizing explanations of merit particularly central, with women being required to 'prove themselves' to be as worthy as men, whereas social and structural explanations of gender-based discrimination were largely absent. Men's discourse failed to acknowledge differences in men's and women's historical positions and the subsequent privileges held by men and the disadvantages faced by women.

Individualizing explanations of merit have also been central to studies of accounts of inequality in diverse industrial contexts such as banking (Benschop and Doorewaard, 1998; Benschop *et al.*, 2001) and the auto parts industry in Argentina (Stobbe, 2005). In the context of explicit organizational

support for gender equality, respondents in the banking industry accounted for the 'gender inequality that cannot be' (Benschop and Doorewaard, 1998, p. 802) by attributing it to other causes such as the history of the industry, the greater qualifications of men, women's lesser career ambition and sheer coincidence. In a very different context, Stobbe (2005) found that denials of gender discrimination and claims of gender neutrality occurred alongside recurring rationalizations for the continued exclusion of women from the auto parts industry in Argentina: women were not suited to the work because of their different 'natural' characteristics, they were not as freely available to work as men and they were more emotional than men as well as competitive with other women.

Other studies have shown how gender inequality persists even in workplace programmes, organizational statements and policies that seek to address and alleviate gender discrimination. For example, using deconstruction to study organizational policy and statements about worker's pregnancy and maternity leave, Martin (1990) and Peterson and Albrecht (1999) reveal how more subtle forms of discrimination against women are manifested. Based on her analysis of a chief executive officer's speech about an employee's pregnancy, Martin (1990) demonstrates how 'myths of harmony, unity and caring … conceal the opposite' (p. 340). Organizational power is manifested as corporate paternalism that seeks to control maternity and the organizational taboos associated with pregnancy, including the visible swollen belly, intimacy, intercourse and nurturing. These 'private' concepts are alien to the male-dominated public domain. As such, Martin (1990) argues that family-related issues confronted by 'working mothers are defined as private problems that must be solved individually; the corporation is not responsible' (p. 344). The creation of a public/private dichotomy is therefore the linchpin supporting discrimination against women.

Building on Martin's (1990) work, Peterson and Albrecht (1999) also explore the ideology that operates in an organization's maternity leave policy. The policy text constructs an 'unsettledness' with maternity leave as the female body is problematized and women's reproduction is subjected to organizational control (Peterson and Albrecht, 1999). The policy reveals a distinct division in which oppositional traits of female/male, disability/ability and affected/unaffected subordinate and disempower female employees. Notably, there is an absence of reference in the policy to the child and the father as they belong in the private sphere. According to Peterson and Albrecht (1999), this dichotomy between public and private spheres sustains the sexual division of labour in procreation (in the private sphere) and production (in the public sphere). Both of these studies demonstrate how suppressed assumptions about gender perpetuate discrimination and inequality through discourse even at the same time as they are explicitly directed at 'helping' women.

These illustrative studies of affirmative action and equality show how discursive approaches can help to identify and unpack the gendered subtext

of organizations, particularly the ways in which discrimination can persist covertly while being denied overtly. We seek to contribute to this body of research by focusing on managers' understandings and explanations of affirmation action, EEO and gender equality in Australia, and whether these have changed over time. We regard accounts and explanations as resources for understanding how managers make sense of gender and employment and thus how gender ideology operates in particular discursive contexts: in explaining organizational practice, managers will also be constructing versions of the gendered identity of their workforce. As such accounts and explanations provide a

> starting point for understanding how social relations are conceived, and therefore — because understanding how they are conceived means understanding how they work — how institutions are organized, how relations of production are experienced, and how collective identity is established. (Scott, 1988, p. 34)

Examining arguments, explanations and accounts provides one way of understanding the construction of gender as well as the ways in which people make sense of their social environment including the fairness of existing arrangements (Gherardi, 1994) and hence the need for change. In particular, they allow researchers to explore how people make sense of the contradictions and ideological dilemmas (Benschop *et al.*, 2001; Billig *et al.*, 1988) surrounding their experience of inequality and affirmative action. Specifically we aim to explore whether and how the lack of substantive progress on EEO and affirmative action for women is reflected in managers' sense-making and rhetoric. In the following section we outline how we undertook the research before presenting our findings.

Methods

The research was undertaken from a critical discursive perspective as we were focusing on the 'role of discourse in the production and reproduction of power abuse or domination' (van Dijk, 2001, p. 96) in relation to gender. Our methodological approach can be characterized as rhetorical criticism which involves exploring the interaction between a text and its context as it attempts to act upon its audience's understandings of the social world (Gill and Whedbee, 1997). Rhetoric was an appropriate way of studying managers' understandings of EEO and affirmative action at different points in time, because their rhetoric both reflects and frames their understandings: 'the way …. we talk about the world affects how we understand or "see" it' (Gill and Whedbee, 1997, p. 159). We were particularly interested in their argumentation schemes (van Eemeren *et al.*, 1997), that is to say, whether we could identify any patterns or trends in their claims, reasoning, justifications and

conclusions in relation to their own organization's progress (or lack of progress) with affirmative action for women and what that indicated in terms of how they viewed women. As Wodak (2001) has shown, arguments for and against discrimination explicitly and implicitly rely on discursive strategies that construct and label social actors and in relation to our study, we were interested in identifying how the managers' understandings of EEO and affirmative action also reflected their characterizations of women.

Our data consisted of employer reports on affirmative action lodged with the federal government. Hence the texts are directed at a particular audience and attempt to influence their understanding of the organization's actions, that is to say, to persuade the relevant government agency that the organization was taking measures to improve the position of their female employees. The first year in which firms covered by affirmative action legislation were required to submit reports was 1990 and requirements for annual reporting have continued since that time.[1] The template report contains a range of specific questions while also enabling the respondent to include as much detail about their programmes as they elect to provide. Subsequently, the reports provide descriptions of workplace programmes and evaluation processes, as well as the associated managerial accounts and explanations of the firm's activity and progress.

These explanations provide us with a rich source of data for examining managers' sense-making and understanding regarding affirmative action and EEO. More importantly, the longitudinal nature of the reporting requirements allows us to analyse potential changes in managers' explanations and arguments. By analysing managers' rhetoric, reasoning and explanations regarding affirmative action and EEO across time periods (1990 and 2004) we can assess whether their understanding of gender equality has changed. We acknowledge that the affirmative action reports are not necessarily the work of a single author and that managers may have engaged the services of external consultants and EEO 'experts' in compiling the reports. However, at the same time, the reports bear the imprimatur of particular managers as authorized representatives of their organizations who are responsible for the veracity of the report. Thus we would expect that at the very least, these managers gave the reports their approval before officially signing off and submitting them to the agency.

The focus of this study is restricted to analysing affirmative action reports from workplaces in the accommodation, café and restaurant (hospitality) sector. The hospitality sector is classified as a mixed-gender industry, as opposed to being female-dominated (such as the community services industry) or male-dominated (such as the road, rail and air travel industry) (Affirmative Action Agency, 1998). As such, the hospitality sector provides a suitable context for examining employers' efforts to promote affirmative action in a segment of the labour market that has experienced tremendous growth since the early 1980s. Moreover, there is good reason to expect that

affirmative action policies and programmes would be especially pertinent in this industry because of persistent gender segregation in its workforce. In all sectors in the hospitality industry, male employees are more likely than women to be employed in permanent full-time work (ABS, 2001, 2005a, 2005b). In the accommodation sector, for instance, male employees are predominantly working on a permanent full-time basis (52.9 per cent) whereas women are more likely to be employed on a temporary or part-time basis (64.8 per cent) (ABS, 2005a). These patterns are partly explained by gendered occupational divisions common in the industry (Barnes and Fieldes, 2000). While women dominate in semi-skilled and unskilled areas, such as cleaning and waitressing, men are employed in skilled areas, working as managers and chefs, (Timo, 1999). Thus, we could expect that organizations in the hospitality industry would at the very least have to explain and account for their progress in addressing the gendered divisions in their workforce.

Our sampling of affirmative action reports consisted of all workplaces within the hospitality sector with over 400 employees. These larger workplaces were selected in order to control for the impact of size and to examine affirmative action policies in firms that were inclined to be the most progressive in Australia. The reports were sampled at two specific time periods, namely 1990 and 2004. These years correspond with the first and most recent reporting periods respectively at the time of writing, thereby enabling us to analyse the extent of change in managers' argumentation schemes since the inception of EEO legislation. The sample of reports consists of 43 for 1990 and 41 for 2004. Obviously, this is not an entirely matched sample, however 11 reports were matched. The remainder can be accounted for by firm closures, changes in name or ownership and the establishment of new firms. Matched observations are not essential for the purposes of this research since we seek to examine managers' understanding of affirmative action and EEO as it existed in firms at that point in time.

Our process of analysis drew on the multidimensional approaches of Gill and Whedbee (1997), Wodak (2001), and van Dijk (2001). Firstly we identified the topics or macro-propositions contained in the texts as well as the rhetorical strategies used by managers to assert their explanation or account of their organization's progress on affirmative action. Secondly, we examined these accounts and arguments for the characteristics and traits that managers attributed to women and thirdly, we analysed how the arguments and characterizations of women were discursively realized in the text, for example, through syntax and word choice.

On the basis of our initial reading of the reports we discovered that much of the management commentary involved explaining why women had not made more progress to senior management levels or into non-traditional areas of employment and justifying why the organization should not be held responsible for this lack of progress. We then coded the reports for the range of reasons or arguments used to justify or account for the organization's

record in affirmative action. On this basis we were able to identify the reasons or arguments most frequently used in 1990 and 2004. These were then compared and contrasted in order to determine whether the dominant patterns of sense-making had altered between 1990 and 2004 and what functions such accounts served in relation to the specific context of the reporting.

Results and analysis

Much of the management commentary related to explaining why the organization had not made more progress in breaking down gender segregation in their workforces. In particular, in commenting on statistical data about their workforces, they were involved in explaining why women had not made more progress to senior management levels and into non-traditional areas of employment. Comparing the findings in 1990 and 2004 we found similar explanations justifying this situation that deflected responsibility away from the organization. In both 1990 and 2004 the most frequent explanations positioned the organizations as blameless because they had gender-neutral employment practices and EEO policies in place. For example, in the commentary sections accompanying the statistics, managers explicitly stated that there was equal access to employment opportunities and information about opportunities, in other words, all employees, regardless of gender, were able to apply for jobs, promotion and transfer, training and development and so on and decisions were based on merit and qualifications. The explanations stressed that there was a lack of gender or sex bias in job-related criteria (such as job advertisments, job descriptions, selection and promotion criteria). In 1990 managers cited their monitoring of women's progress through statistical analysis of employment data and implementation of career development opportunities as additional justifications for why the organization was not to blame for a lack of progress. In 2004 the second and third most frequent justifications featured references to organizational compliance with legislative requirements and the availability of flexible working arrangements to explain why a lack of progress in affirmative action was not the fault of the organization.

Our analysis also revealed a consistent discursive pattern in the management accounts of the 1990 and 2004 reports. Firstly, employers argued that gender was an irrelevant or insignificant factor; in other words, being a man or a woman did not make any difference in their organizations. There was both similarity and variation in the form this discursive pattern took in 1990 and 2004 and we discuss each in turn, using selected quotations from the reports to illustrate broader patterns in argumentation.

Management accounts in the 1990 reports consistently denied that gender was a relevant or significant factor in employment. In the context of EOWA reporting, such denial of gender served the rhetorical function of challenging

the relevance of affirmative action, at least for their own organization. Managers constructed their employment policies and practices as merit-based and 'gender blind' by arguing that they were already being applied equally and that there was no difference in the treatment of male and female staff: 'we do not treat female employees any differently to males'. They cited the absence of reference to sex or gender in employment criteria as evidence of this gender neutrality; for example: 'policy firmly states the selection of staff external or internal be exempt from criteria of sex'. Such gender-blindness in employment was represented positively as a form of inclusiveness, indicated by the repetition of the phrases 'all employees', 'all staff', 'all employees, including women'. Such inclusion and equality was implicitly contrasted with affirmative action, which was associated with differential treatment for women that risked disadvantaging men: 'As this is our first report we will find it much easier to report in the coming year. My major concern is not to discriminate against men'.

However, this denial of the significance of gender coexisted with other accounts that reconstructed versions of gendered difference, and thus the significance of gender, as a way of explaining organizational reality. The characteristics attributed to female employees were consistent with the maintenance of current employment arrangements. Women were constructed as being 'happy' with their current jobs and work arrangements, which inhibited the ability of the organization to 'make progress' with affirmative action initiatives: 'With regard to any problems, if it could be classified as such, is that a vast majority of women personnel are quite happy in the positions presently'. Management cited the absence of complaints from female staff and unions as evidence of female satisfaction. Where there was a lack of progress in improving women's representation at management and supervisory levels and non-traditional employment, managers frequently deployed externalizing explanations that protected the organization from taking responsibility. On the one hand, barriers to women's progress in this area were attributed to broader social and labour market causes such as the apprenticeship system, which 'appeared to discriminate against women' and the 'natural' affinity of women and men to different types of jobs:

> women are encouraged to take up non-traditional roles in areas such as kitchens, security, engineering and top executive roles…. [However], men have traditionally been given these roles due to the at times heavy lifting and strenuous nature of the work

and '[o]ur traditionally predominantly female workforce obviates the need for efforts to increase women workers in any way other than the natural demands of our business'. References to 'tradition' and 'nature' were used as commonsense reasons for gender-based occupational segregation that did not appear to warrant any further explanation or justification in the management accounts.

The availability of female labour was also cited as a factor explaining the high representation of women in the service sector, but it was an availability that was constrained by women's families: 'There are a high number of female casual employees [due to the] restrictions placed on [married women] by family commitments'. The concentration of women in casual jobs was thus attributed to external issues of labour supply and care responsibilities, which fell within the private domain, absolving the organization of responsibility for resolution.

On the other hand, explanations for continued gender-based occupational segregation attributed the causes as originating in women themselves. Women lacked the appropriate initiative, ambition, skills and qualifications needed to progress to non-traditional and management roles, for example, a 'large number [of women] are not interested in permanent positions or higher duties'. Women who were considered appropriate for promotion or career development were singled out by the addition of qualifying adjectives — 'interested women', 'promotable women' and 'suitably qualified women' — suggesting that women in general were not interested in or suitable for careers. Consistent with this construction of general female deficit, organizations favoured training and development and skills-based initiatives targeted at women in their affirmative action plans.

More fundamentally, management explanations and accounts conceptualized attaining equal opportunity as the responsibility of women, rather than that of the organization: 'women especially are urged to look for ways to create equal opportunity' and 'we encourage [female] staff to strive to attain management supervisory positions in the hotel'. However, on the basis of the constructions of gendered difference in management rhetoric, such achievement was unlikely: women were constructed as satisfied, compliant, lacking initiative, non-ambitious and family oriented. Their 'sensitive issues' needed to be discussed in private among female personnel in contrast to the 'open door' approach of masculine management:

> the majority of our human resource development management are females thus allowing consultation over potentially sensitive issues easier for our female employees. We encourage *all* our management to adopt an 'open door' policy to encourage employees to discuss and consult management on any employment issues, particularly in the area of equal opportunities.

Thus the dominant construction of gendered difference in the 1990 EOWA reports has an implicit circularity — women were constructed as responsible for achieving equality, yet unlikely to affect such change because of their 'feminine' characteristics.

Gender blindness and lack of gender bias also featured in the management accounts of the 2004 EOWA reports. There were similar assertions that gender was not relevant in employment-related decisions, for example, '[g]ender is not a selection criteria [sic]. Promotions and transfer are based on

competency and performance'. There was also a similar stress on inclusiveness, which extended to all employees, as opposed to the divisiveness of affirmative action measures just aimed at women '[a]ll training and development opportunities are offered to all employees and selection is not gender based' and that promotion was based on merit and personal characteristics, rather than social category: 'All employees progress according to aspiration, aptitude and the real acquisition of knowledge and skill'.

Explanations of gender-based occupational segregation in the 2004 reports were also broadly consistent with those in 1990. After denying the relevance of gender in employment, women were depicted as being satisfied with the *status quo*, because of their 'other commitments' in the private sphere: 'There is a high proportion of female staff working in casual positions and as a result of family and other commitments are happy to continue in this arrangement'. They were constructed as uninterested in entering male-dominated occupations or working the unsociable hours that are part of the 'reality' of the hospitality industry: '24-hour shift work remains the major reason why many women leave our organization'. Accounts also appealed to commonsense understandings of gender norms that reduced the responsibility of management for the concentration of women in certain occupations:

> There is no deliberate typecasting or gendercasting for employment positions. However by the nature of women's maturity developing at an earlier point than males, young women are primarily positioned as sales staff.

Similarly, management continued to use the concepts of tradition and lack of female interest as a rationale for gender-based occupational segregation that required no further explanation: 'All secretarial positions are occupied by female employees … traditionally these roles are occupied by women'; 'Female : male ratio is low in the kitchen, engineering, safety and security and purchasing departments however, the number of applicants applying for these jobs is predominantly male'. Women were considered suitable to take on management roles but not in a way that was equivalent to their male counterparts. For example, one report indicated that two women would be taking over the management job done by one previous man: 'The two managers we have in mind to replace him are females and they are twins. It is a possibility they may share the role'.

However, there were some features of the management accounts in the 2004 EOWA reports that diverged from the patterns identified earlier. The relevance of affirmative action was disputed not only by asserting the gender neutrality of employment practices and the absence of discrimination-related complaints but by the avoidance and deferral of reference to gender and affirmative action. Accounts in the 2004 reports devoted considerable space to discussion of the business imperatives of the organizations, even in response to questions that specifically referred to affirmative action. For example, one report devoted three paragraphs to discussing the business before

mentioning gender. Another began by mentioning women in the workplace but then shifted to stressing that all employees, not just women, could discuss issues with management; issues that would lead to business-related improvements, rather than gender equality:

There are several issues for women in the workplace that is often highlighted through communication and our workplace profile. The [hotel name] is committed to the philosophy of an Open Door Policy whereby all employees are invited to discuss any matter with the senior management in regards to improving customer service, job satisfaction and productivity issues.

Such business rhetoric functioned to undermine the significance of affirmative action by placing it in the background, even when it was designed to be the focus of the report.

The other key difference between the reports from the two time periods was the commentary on pregnancy and maternity. To some extent this was a result of a change in the reporting requirements — additional questions were included that required management to comment directly on provisions for pregnancy, maternity leave, flexible work arrangements, childcare and breastfeeding. Such issues challenged the gender blindness of employment as they call for special measures to accommodate the physical process of pregnancy and child rearing. In management rhetoric in the 2004 reports, maternity intruded into the organization in ways that were not evident in earlier accounts. Consistent with the 1990 accounts, there were the existing mothers who were content with casual and part-time employment but there were also other female employees and female managers in the process of child bearing. Senior managers were singled out for specific comment: 'We currently have two very senior managers on maternity leave'; 'In light of more senior employees taking maternity leave, we are exploring the option of a compressed working week'; 'Pregnancy is on the rise particularly in senior management positions'. Pregnancy and maternity were thus constructed as more visible and noteworthy when experienced by 'senior employees' and 'senior managers'. In the last example, an agentless passive form of sentence construction was used (see Fowler, 1991) with the effect that the female person was completely absent: pregnancy was the subject or topic of the sentence but, instead of women who were pregnant, it was 'senior management positions' that were experiencing this increase in pregnancy. This sentence structure functioned to emphasize the impact of pregnancy on senior management.

In these explanations, managers were forced to consider the female procreating body at work. Maternal bodies create problems for organizations — managers have difficulties 'fitting return to work mothers into the workplace' after they have been stretched by pregnancy. Breastfeeding was depicted as presenting particular challenges to the operations of hotels and restaurants. In

one account the reasons given for not providing breastfeeding facilities related to problems of 'food hygiene requirements'. In another, while the report asked about breastfeeding facilities for employees, the account only discussed the possibility that guests or customers may breastfeed, a possibility about which employees needed to be forewarned: 'Employees are advised that guests may choose to breastfeed in public and to try and accommodate the guest wherever possible'. Children were rarely mentioned in these accounts, thus the object of breastfeeding (or reason for breastfeeding) was never present — breastfeeding thus became a 'choice' made by women that was separated from its purpose. 'Mothers can leave work to go to the child-care centre to breastfeed without interrupting their work'. Where children do appear, they were constructed as problematic: 'Counselling is offered including dealing with children with learning or behavioural difficulties'.

Discussion and conclusion

Given the legislative and policy measures directed to affirmative action over the period 1990–2004, the characterization of women in management rhetoric remained remarkably constant. When we compared management accounts in the 1990 and 2004 EOWA reports we found that little had changed in how women were conceptualized. In both periods the same general pattern was evident: after initially denying that gender was relevant or significant in explaining organizational reality, managers reconstructed versions of gendered difference to account for the lack of progress in the representation of women among male-dominated occupations.

On closer analysis we found there were both similarities and variations in these patterns between the two time periods. The dominant construction of women in the 1990 reports was of a passive, compliant, satisfied employee who combined work with family commitments and was content with the *status quo*. This was also a construction of feminine 'deficit', as these women lacked the ambition, interest, initiative, skills and knowledge associated with career progression (cf. Riley, 2002). In this respect, they can also be considered to be lacking merit, a view that disempowers women (Peterson and Albrecht, 1999). As affirmative action in Australia is based on the merit principle these discursive constructions of working women were also implicit explanations for women's lack of progress that allowed managers and organizations to avoid responsibility for EEO. Thus the implicit circularity in management reasoning about affirmative action and EEO that allowed them to avoid taking responsibility was based on the versions of gendered identity apparent in their commentary in the reports.

This construction was also present in the 2004 reports; however it occurred alongside another construction of working women as ambitious, career-oriented managers who were in the process of having children. Unlike the

'unambitious', compliant, satisfied female employee, this other feminine construction included characteristics consistent with merit: she worked full-time, and was a career-oriented, 'high potential/high-flyer', highly visible, white-collar, professional or senior manager. However she also actively took up opportunities for flexible work and maternity leave, which created problems for management to fit her in to the workplace (cf. Martin, 1990; Peterson and Albrecht, 1999). She required more tailored work circumstances to suit her 'particular situation' and her maternity intruded in ways that created more risk and complexity for the organization (cf. Wetherell *et al.*, 1987). Discursively, she required management to engage in more explanatory work and accordingly, in the 2004 reports there were a greater number and diversity of types of explanations.

Discursive constructions of affirmative action and EEO in the reports were connected with constructions of working women and organizations in significant ways. In the 1990 reports, affirmative action was constructed as preferential treatment for women (cf. Bacchi, 2004) and potentially divisive and discriminatory. This was contrasted with a more positive inclusiveness of organizational policies that apply uniformly to all employees regardless of gender. The organization's role in relation to affirmative action and EEO was obscured by management explanations that cast women as those responsible for achieving equality. Similarly, women's satisfaction with the *status quo* was one of the reasons given for the organizations' lack of progress with affirmative action. Implicitly, women's advancement was their own responsibility. In the 2004 reports affirmative action was positioned clearly in the background: organizations prefaced reporting on EEO with discussion of their 'business concerns', even where this appeared to be irrelevant to the questions. Rhetorically, this pattern constructed affirmative action as having minor or lesser significance, with business priorities being given informational prominence. Thus we identified a shift in rhetorical patterns between the 1990 and 2004 reports: rather than overtly disputing the relevance of affirmative action and EEO to their organization as some had done in 1990, in 2004 this was discursively realized through the choice and order of topics in management commentary.

Our findings also suggest that perhaps Linstead's (2000) assertion that gender blindness is no longer an option is somewhat premature. Assertions of the neutrality of organizational policies and systems and selection and promotion on merit frequently drew on gender blindness as a justification and defence of organizations' lack of progress in affirmative action. However, in making this comment, we need to acknowledge the different meanings that Wilson (1996) and Linstead (2000) attach to this term. Whereas Wilson (1996) views gender blindness as stemming from the unstated male norm operating in organizations, Linstead (2000) sees it as a lack of awareness of gender. Given the nature and structure of the reports we studied, it would be difficult for managers to maintain a position of gender blindness in the sense of being

unaware of gender (cf. Linstead, 2000). However, if we take Wilson's (1996) view of gender blindness as the perpetuation of an unstated male norm, both gender blindness and gender suppression seemed to be operating in management rhetoric. Managers seemed to be selectively engaging in both gender blindness and suppression in different contexts and for different reasons. While gender blindness tended to be associated with managers' efforts to portray the organization as fair and equitable, gender suppression was drawn on by managers to argue that the organization was not to blame for persistent gender inequalities. Managers first recognized gender differences, then suppressed their significance by arguing that it was not problematic — women were 'happy' with their difference situations, which were based on 'tradition' and 'natural' differences. In doing this, managers absolved themselves of responsibility for taking further action.

However both gender blindness and gender suppression became more difficult for managers to sustain when faced with questions about pregnancy, maternity leave and breastfeeding. Like Martin (1990) and Peterson and Albrecht (1999) we suggest that future research could usefully explore organizational rhetoric and policy about these practices because they seem to exacerbate the gender contradictions and tensions already present and so could tell us more about the gendered subtext of organizations.

To some extent, the patterns in management rhetoric in our study resonate with those of previous studies: like Benschop *et al.* (2001) and Stobbe (2005), here gender denial or neutrality, natural differences and availability to work were frequent justifications given to make sense of the gendered nature of the organization. Consistent with Martin (1990) and Peterson and Albrecht (1999), women were disempowered and problematized and a public–private dichotomy was used to absolve the organization of responsibility. In addition, we found that the constructions of gender identity inherent in management rhetoric were central to their justifications for the lack of organizational progress in affirmative action and these constructions had a circular dynamic: women were represented as responsible for achieving equality, but, given the version of gendered identity constructed in the accounts, such an outcome was unlikely.

In light of this circularity, it is perhaps unsurprising that so little change is observable in managers' sense-making about their role and responsibilities in relation to implementing affirmative action and EEO. Our findings suggest that, despite 20 years of legislative and policy interventions, managers' understanding of the purpose of affirmative action and EEO and the social or structural causes of disadvantage experienced by women remained largely constant. To this extent, managers typically still see EEO as formal equality, allowing women to participate in paid forms of employment alongside men. This lack of a discursive change in managers' knowledge and understanding of EEO appears to be consistent with the lack of substantive progress in EEO in Australia.

Note

1. In 1996 the option of waiving employers' requirements to submit reports was introduced. In order to take up this option, employers' are required to have previously submitted a comprehensive programme meeting the requirements of the Act over a period of three years.

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