RESEARCH REPOSITORY

This is the author's final version of the work, as accepted for publication following peer review but without the publisher's layout or pagination. The definitive version is available at:

Gander, M. (2014) The intersection of gender and age: an exploration. Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education, 18 (1). pp. 9-13.

The intersection of gender and age: an exploration

Abstract

The understanding of gender inequality for women entering work has not been subject to significant research or theorizing. This small study indicated that young women entering the workplace are subject to direct discrimination and by using an intersectionality approach this paper proposes that the intersection of gender and young age results in women being identified as the out-group, stereotyped and subjected to micropolitics. This paper also argues that the continued unequal power relations in organizations ensures that equality and diversity policies do not change the individual non-conscious processes that take place that allow the continuation of the glass ceiling.

Introduction

There is significant evidence in the literature of a glass ceiling for women in management (see Berry and Bell 2012, Bell *et. al.* 2002, Yonette and Crompton 2008, Kumra and Vinnicombe 2008, Meyerson and Fletcher 1999, Ragins *et. al.* 1998). There has also been research into the dearth of women academics making it to senior positions in higher education institutions (HEIs). For example, in 2010/11 at the most senior positions in HE women made up only 14.3% of Vice-Chancellors (EHRC 2011), 19% of the professoriate and 28% of academic staff in senior management roles; the data also show that male academic staff were twice as likely to earn over £50k than women (ECU 2011). However, there has been little written on the success or otherwise of graduate entry professional services staff in HEIs (G7–10, UCU 2004). Research by this author in 2010 showed that throughout the HE sector in England and Scotland women made up the majority of administrative staff at G7–9 where they outnumbered men 2:1; however, at Grade 10 the reverse was found to be true – men outnumbered women 2:1. This disparity in women's seniority can be shown further by the fact that only 33% of members of the Association of Heads of University Administration[1] are women. Smith (2009) even reported that women administrative staff in one post-1992 university were paid 22% less than their male counterparts.

---

[1] The representative body for senior university managers (typically Registrars, Chief Operating Officers, Heads of Administration) in the United Kingdom and Ireland.

Women in Management

Schein's work in the early 2000s in the US showed that male managers still perceived men as more likely than women to possess characteristics of successful managers; again women did not attribute gender to these characteristics. However, worryingly for the UK, evidence here showed that both female and male managers attributed more characteristics of successful managers to males than females. Adler and Izraeli (1988, as quoted in Schein and Mueller 1992) stated that "probably the single most important hurdle for women in management in all industrialized countries is the persistent stereotype that associates management with being male". This research clearly showed that the 'think manager – think male' attitude held by men was still valid. This sex-role stereotyping is determined primarily from the percentage of people of a particular sex undertaking that role. The result is a preferential bias for male or female staff dependent on the sex-role type of the role. It seems then that an original sex-role type i.e. that of managers being male, even if the actual number of men and women doing that role are now nearly equal, means that the original sex-role type is embedded in mens' consciousness so that according to Schein's research three decades later there has been little enlightenment. It was reported (Ely and Meyerson 2000) that when organizations have many women in senior positions, junior women could identify with and respect them. It is suggested that in sex-integrated organizations women are "psychologically intertwined with the fate of women as a group". It could be postulated then that women in HE, being the dominant gender, should progress more easily to senior management roles but the statistics quoted above show the opposite to be true. It can be argued that discrimination is ongoing, not just by the statistics of job role but by the evidence of the gender pay gaps (EHRC 2011).

Discrimination in the workplace

Discrimination is unlikely in HEIs both because human resource policies reflect equal opportunities legislation and because HEIs, characteristically, commit to equality as part of their statement of values. I suggested previously (Gander 2010) that this leads to non-conscious discrimination and the concomitant categorizing of individuals into in-groups and out-groups. It has been argued that discrimination can be evidenced via the 'exit' phenomenon whereby women make the decision to leave the organisation as they try to balance work and family life. Discussions on this early exit from the employment market came to prominence in the 1990s especially round the debate of 'older' workers. However, age discrimination, especially for women, is not contained to older workers because it has been noted that women tend to be discriminated against at almost every age reflecting the

2

'double jeopardy' of age and gender (Duncan *et. al.* 2000). In the US for example, 22 percent of women holding graduate or professional degrees have chosen to stay at home - one in three women holding an MBA degree is not working full-time (only one in 20 MBA-bearing men); 37 percent of highly qualified women have voluntarily exited the employment market at some point during their careers, a statistic that increases to 43 percent among women with children yet drops to only 24 percent among men (Volpe and Murphy 2010). Anderson *et. al.* (2010) reported two themes in the accounts of successful women partners from a management consultancy firm who chose to leave the organisation, i.e. loyalty and choice regarding work-life integration. Women showed loyalty and warmth towards their firm, but this was not reciprocated by job flexibility so that they could balance their non-work responsibilities with work; the flexible working offerings for women lower down the hierarchy were celebrated by the firm. More recently, research has shown that age discrimination is also experienced by young employees. Hodges (2012) reported that some women felt pushed into self-employment due to the barriers they face in organizations. Duncan and Loretto (2004) reported that 35% of 500 undergraduates who had work experience claimed to have experienced age-related discrimination. Loretta and Duncan (2000) reported that younger employees (under 25) along with older employees (over 45) were most prone to negative discrimination and that was more extreme for women than men and that discrimination for women was associated with appearance and/or sexuality. A Gallup poll on behalf of Age Concern found that a quarter of people aged 16-24 claimed to have faced age discrimination in employment (*ibid.*). One aspect of this is of course women with children who often experience direct discrimination but also often have restrictions placed on them in terms of being able to travel or re-locate and organisations not prepared to have any other working pattern than 9-5 office presence (Sellgren, 2013).

Women may therefore experience multiple discriminatory perspectives - gender, age and organisational sex stereotyping. The concept of intersectionality was first used by Crenshaw in 1984 to describe how black women are exposed to a number of different regimes of oppression, each operating within its own conceptual categories but where both categories intersect with the concomitant impact being more than its individual categories. Intersectionality perspectives are useful for examining and understanding how individuals in real-life situations in organizations are subject to no one single perspective but continuously become located in multiple domains; it allows exploration of how socially-constructed categories are mutually constitutive - how they articulate with one another.

Intersectionality suggests that classification systems such as class, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity/race are examined, how they co-exist, and how they are are simultaneously mutually constitutive and thus constantly influence how social life is structured and organized. Intersectionality perspectives are therefore useful theoretical frameworks for understanding how individuals in real-life situations in organizations are not only examined from one single perspective or operate under one disciplinary register but continuously become located in domains where various fields of knowledge intersect. For example, a female African-American manager at a company implies that at least three regimes will be in operation: race, gender and management ideology (*ibid.*). The Equality Act 2010 recognizes this for the first time and includes a section on combined discrimination which includes the protected characteristics of age and sex.

Methodology

As highlighted above there seems to be a glass ceiling for women administrators at G9 in UK HEIs, therefore six participants at this grade at the Open University volunteered for this study. The participants ranged in age from their late-20s to early-50s and were all White/British. Five had worked within further or higher education since graduating (two had undertaken graduate schemes elsewhere but left quickly), only one had worked within a different sector for a significant length of time before working at the institution. Research in the area of sexual harassment has shown that while large-scale studies are useful in revealing the ubiquitous nature of sexual harassment that they reveal little about the multiple forms, meanings and consequences of this. In-depth case studies have been shown to uncover individual decision-making processes related to whether certain behaviors are labelled as sexual harassment or not (McDonald and Dear 2008) and so an in-depth approach was used to capture any discriminatory experiences of women in the workplace valuing the emphasis they put on this. This in-depth approach utilized the unstructured interview method to provide the background of the women's careers to date with interviews lasting approximately one hour.

Results

The results of the interviews showed that most of the participants had experienced either direct verbal discrimination, sexual harassment and/or been subject to organisational micro politics when they were younger (age unspecified).

One participant had been subject to both sexual harassment and micro politics at the institution which she joined not long after her first graduate job:

> "I haven't ever experienced direct [sexism] I think its always been more subtle than that. No less pernicious because of that, in fact you could argue that its more pernicious because its done in such a way which is quite difficult to challenge...I'm not unique in that sexual harassment happened to me when I was a lot younger."

Another had been subject to micro politics at the institution because of her early success:

> "...when I was in my early 20s I was basically a target working in a Faculty...many were really very sexist and many were threatened by the fact that I seemed quite successful...and there were all sorts of things - rumours. I wasn't doing well because I was doing well, I was doing well because of all sorts of things. All rubbish!"

Two participants who joined commercial graduate training schemes both reported that they were subject to more direct discrimination, for example:

> "My new boss told me direct he didn't know why he was wasting his time' training a girl who would just leave to have children."

> "...there was bullying of all sorts, not just because of gender...but I had to 'be one of the boys' and not be upset by sexist comments, or swearing or posters..."

One participant noted that a senior academic had commented on her physical appearance and another had made inappropriate physical contact.

However, all the women reported that the sector and the institution were good, supportive and benign places to work although one participant noted:

> "...what struck me is that still the majority of the very senior posts were still male..."

There was also a feeling that there was ageism at work when the women were younger. two participants reported:

> "I certainly have been and remain conscious of being quite young. Certainly in meetings...I sometimes think 'oh god what are they thinking' or I've felt conscious of looking quite young and being female."

> "...its more ageism here being quite young compared to most people. Ageism is definitely something that is an issue here. I have got issues with looking young"

Discussion

Historically in the UK senior positions in HEIs have been filled by men. Perhaps then we could argue that men are still the 'in-group' in organizational life. Acker (1990, 2006) argued that organisations are not gender neutral as they espouse but are indeed gendered in terms of organisational norms which maintain the inequality regimes over time. Even now when women make up over 50% of the labour market they then are still categorized as the the 'out-group' with all that implies.

The unexpected finding in this study was the extent of discrimination that the participants reported within an HEI environment. For these women most of their negative experiences had occurred whilst they were 'young' probably defined as < 30 years old which had left an indelible mark on them. It could be argued that when young women enter the world of management work, and because management is still sex-stereotyped as male, and that they are still entering a dominant male work culture - that is power and influence still lie in the hands of men - that they automatically get gender categorized as other to the dominant culture with all the associated stereotypes taking place but additionally they get categorized as other due to being young. Although this categorization of age affects men and women it affects women in greater proportions.

All of the participants in this study reported age-related and gender-related discrimination and it is the intersection of both these categories that makes the experience I believe stick with and influence these women throughout their careers. In some sectors/organisations

this leads to direct discrimination. At the Open University discrimination was far less direct but perhaps more pernicious as evidenced by individuals use of the micro-politics of rumour and gossip. The direct discrimination that young women seem to be on the receiving end of may be the result of an organisations acceptance that because women disappear from employment either through childcare responsibilities or other reasons that it is therefore somehow acceptable that the organisation does not need to provide support for women outside of the normal organisations policies. If a young women entering this world of work is subjected to this attitude, she cannot defend herself against this. She is at the bottom of the career power hierarchy so others have power over her and so to negotiate her work and career life she accepts and works round this attitude on an individual basis and if she becomes successful she confirms that the organization doesn't have a problem because she proves women can make it. This was highlighted by one of the participants who worked in engineering before joining the institution as a second career. She reported that to become accepted and to have a senior career one had to "become one of the boys" so her femininity was 'unseen'. Bem (1978 in Powell 2012) said that "behaviour should have no gender." What should matter is how well individuals, male and female, young and old, respond to the demands of the particular role that they occupy.

This indirect discrimination often takes place due to unconscious bias and plays out in many ways through micro-politics. If institutions wish to take gender equality seriously then this is an area that needs tackling. Most institutions have projects in place to tackle the 'problem' of women - often by asking women to do more - mentoring, coaching, preparing for promotion, taking on additional work etc. All of this is welcome and plays a part but unless the root cause of the problem is tackled - that men occupy positions of power and hold power over women in the organisation - then gender equality still has an uphill battle. The Open University is tackling this issue head on by many of the above types of activity but also by providing training on unconscious bias to it's most senior managers. It is hoped that by providing both these organisational approaches that it will both encourage and more importantly enable more women to be employed in senior leadership positions.

Limitations

Conclusions drawn from this study must be tentative due to the small sample size taken from a single organisation and therefore the greater likelihood of idiosyncratic reports being given greater emphasis. Additionally, the participants were reporting on their career history in general 5-10 or more years before the date of the interviews (January 2011).

However, as all of the participants reported gender discrimination when they were 'young' - normally in their first graduate jobs and they themselves viewed this partially as gender and partially as age discrimination.

References

Acker, J. (1990) Hierarchies, jobs, bodies: a theory of gendered organisations. *Gender and Society*, **4**(2) pp. 139-158.

Acker, J. (2006) Inequality regimes: gender, class and race in organizations. *Gender and Society*, **20**(4), pp 441-464.

Anderson, D., Vinnicombe, S. and Singh, V. (2010) Women partners leaving the firm: choice, what choice? *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, **25**(30), 170 - 183.

Bell, M. P., McLaughlin, M. E. and Sequoia, J. M. (2002) Discrimination, harassment, and the glass ceiling: women executives as change agents. *Journal of Business Ethics*, **37**(1), pp 65-76.

Berry, D. and Myrtle P. Bell, (2012) Inequality in organizations: stereotyping, discrimination, and labor law exclusions, *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*, **31(**3), pp 236-248.

Center for Work Life Policy (2010) *The sponsor effect*

(http://www.worklifepolicy.org/index.php/section/research_pubs), accessed 16 July 2011.

Crenshaw, K. (1991) Mapping the margins: intersectionality, identity politics and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, **43**(6), pp 1241-1299.

Duncan, C. Loretta, W. and White, P. (2000) Ageism, early exit, and British trade unions. *Industrial Relations*, **31**(3) pp. 220-234.

Duncan, C. and Loretta, W. (2004) Never the right age? Gender bad age-discrimination in employment. *Gender, Work and Organization*, **11**(1), pp 95-115.

Ely, R. J. and Meyerson, D. E. (2000) Theories of gender in organizations: a new approach to organizational analysis and change. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, **22**, pp 103-151.

Equality Challenge Unit (2011) *Equality in Higher Education: statistical report 2009*. London, ECU.

Equality and Human Rights Commission (2011) *Sex and power*. Manchester, UK.

Equality Act (2010) http://homeoffice.gov.uk/equalities/equality-act, accessed 20 July 2012.

Gander, M. (2010) Cracked but not broken: the continued gender gap in senior administrative positions. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, **14**(4) pp 120–126.

Hodges, J. (2012) The transition of midlife women from organizational employment into self employment. *Gender in management: An International Journal,* **27**(3), pp 3-30.

Kumar, S. and Vinnicombe, S. (2008) A study of the promotion to partners process in a professional services firm: how women are disadvantaged. *British Journal of Management*, **19**(S), pp 65-74.

Loretta, W., Duncan, C. and White, P. J. (2000) Ageism and employment: controversies, ambiguities and younger people's perceptions. *Ageing and Society*, **20**, pp 279-302

Lyonette, C. and Crompton, R. (2008) The only way is up?: an examination of women's "under-achievement" in the accountancy profession in the UK. *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, **23**(7) pp. 506 - 521.

McDonald, P. and Dear, K. (2008) The incidence and patterns of discrimination and harassment affecting working women in Australia. *Women's Studies Journal*, **22**(1), pp 37-48.

Meyerson, D. E. and Fletcher, J. K. (1999) A modest manifesto for shattering the glass ceiling. Harvard Business Review, Jan-Feb, pp. 126-136.

Metcalfe, H, (2009) Pay gaps across the equality strands: a review. *Equality and Human Rights Commission*, Manchester, UK.

Powell, G. N. (2012) Six ways of seeing the elephant: the intersection of sex, gender, and leadership. *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, **27(**2), pp 119-141.

Ragins, B. R., Townsend, B. and Mattis, M. (1998) Gender gap in the executive suite: CEOs and female executives report on breaking the glass ceiling. Academy of Management Executive, 12(1), pp 28-42.

Schein, V. and Muller, R. (1992) Sex role stereotyping and and requisite management characteristics: a cross cultural look. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, **13** pp 439-447.

Schein, V. (2007) Women in management: reflections and projections. *Women in Management Review*, 22(1) pp 6–18.

Sellgren, K. (2013) Many mothers 'feel discriminated against at work', BBC News Online (http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-23600465), accessed 13 August 2013.

Smith, M. (2009) Gender, pay and work satisfaction at a UK university. *Gender, Work and Organization*, **16**(5), pp 621-641.

Styhre, A. and Eriksson-Zetterquist, U. (2008) Thinking the multiple in gender and diversity studies: examining the concept of intersectionality. *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, **23**(8) pp. 567-582.

The Economist (2011) Still lonely at the top. The Economist (http://www.economist.com/node/18988694), accessed 20 July 2012.

Volpe, E. H. and Murphy, W. M. (2010) Married professional women's career exit: integrating identity and social networks. *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, 26(1), pp 57-83.

Wyatt, S. and Langridge, C. (1996) 'Getting to the top in the National Health Service' in *Women in Organisations* eds Ledwith, S. and Colgan, F., pp 212-244. Basingstoke, Macmillan Press.

UCU (2004) Framework agreement for the modernization of pay structures (http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/pdf/frameworkagreement.pdf). Accessed 20 July 2012.