Do You See What I See? - The Invisible Hand of Institutional Sexism

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Introduction

This article examines the prevalence of increasingly subtle manifestations of sex discrimination thirty years after the Sex Discrimination Act (SDA) in the UK. Using elements of critical discourse analysis located within a social constructivist paradigm, I argue that, within the workplace and indeed society more generally, visual images, coded language and exclusionary practices are increasingly being used to subvert sex discrimination legislation, giving rise to subtle yet pervasive and pernicious forms of institutional sexism. From a systemic/cultural perspective, institutionalised practices of discrimination are woven into the very fabric of our society and its organizational forms. These are constructed according to a masculine paradigm and enshrined in cultural assumptions that define what we typically accept as "normal, "rational" and "common sense". Manifestations of these subtle forms of institutional sexism can be found by deconstructing organisational policies, procedures, leadership styles and generally taken for granted ways of doing things.

Strategies of Dismissal

Roy Jacques (1997) refers to "strategies of dismissal" as a common means of institutionalising discriminatory practices. He defines a strategy of dismissal as:

a linguistic convention whose taken-for-grantedness permits it to function as though it were a neutral, or even laudable, reflection of competent thinking, but which also contains embedded cultural assumptions that act to reinforce the values of the dominant and to devalue the marginal.

He goes on to state:

the most insidious aspects of these strategies is that they operate within common sense. Thus their effects are not available for scrutiny or discussion….. Even those who are marginalized by their action may often take for granted the logic through which they [themselves] are dismissed.

The case studies below illustrate just some of the manifold ways that strategies of dismissal are enlisted to exclude women from the business world and/or from positions of power therein.

Case Study 1: What Turns Businessmen on? Domination

This advert appeared regularly in *The Sunday Times* "Appointments" section during the spring of 2004. When I first encountered it, I felt as though, as a woman, I was a non-person, like a waitress at a free masons' function with a misogynist as the guest speaker. *The Sunday Times* must have known that women might feel excluded by the advert and that some might take offence. Of course there's an argument for saying the newspaper is merely employing the term 'businessmen' as a universally understood euphemism for business people of both sexes. One might also brush off the concept of 'being turned on by domination' as a vaguely humorous and largely innocuous turn of phrase that underlines the newspaper's attractiveness for recruitment advertising. And indeed, this was how *The Sunday Times* defended its use of language to the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) when numerous complaints were lodged. However, when viewed as a strategy of dismissal, we can begin to understand how such language contributes to the marginalization of women at work. It does so by portraying the business arena as an inherently "man's world", where domination is the norm and where there is no place for anything other than competitive supremacy.

In the event, the ASA found against *The Sunday Times* because the statistics in the advert (as sourced from the British Business Survey[2]) related to both men and women, whereas *The Sunday Times* portrayed them as relating to men only. The overall effect, intended or not, was to linguistically

Figure 1: Domination[1]

airbrush women out of the picture, similar to the way in which Ford famously airbrushed out a number of black and Asian faces in its advertising back in the mid-90s (Legge 1998).

The ASA's ruling, however, can be considered no more than a partial victory for those of us who complained, as it declined to uphold a related complaint about the unmistakably sexual connotations of 'men' being 'turned on' by 'domination' in the workplace. What makes this omission all the more surprising is the fact that the advert appeared in the recruitment pages of the newspaper. Ironically, if such language were to be used by the recruiters themselves, it would, to my mind, be legally suspect.

Case Study 2: Do You See What We See?

Well, what I see in all these adverts (below and overleaf) is something that tells me not to bother applying, not least because I am not male and I don't do the furrowed brow look. Companies who place recruitment adverts such as these will be aware that any language indicating a preference for male candidates is illegal. However, these images, although hugely impactful, are not illegal and indeed such adverts might typically state that the recruiter has a "proactive Equality and Diversity policy". But policies can be meaningless pieces of paper if not accompanied by proactive practice. Such images have the potential to send a much more powerful message than mere words about the type of candidates these organizations are looking for. In addition, adverts such as these are often placed in outlets that are known to be primarily
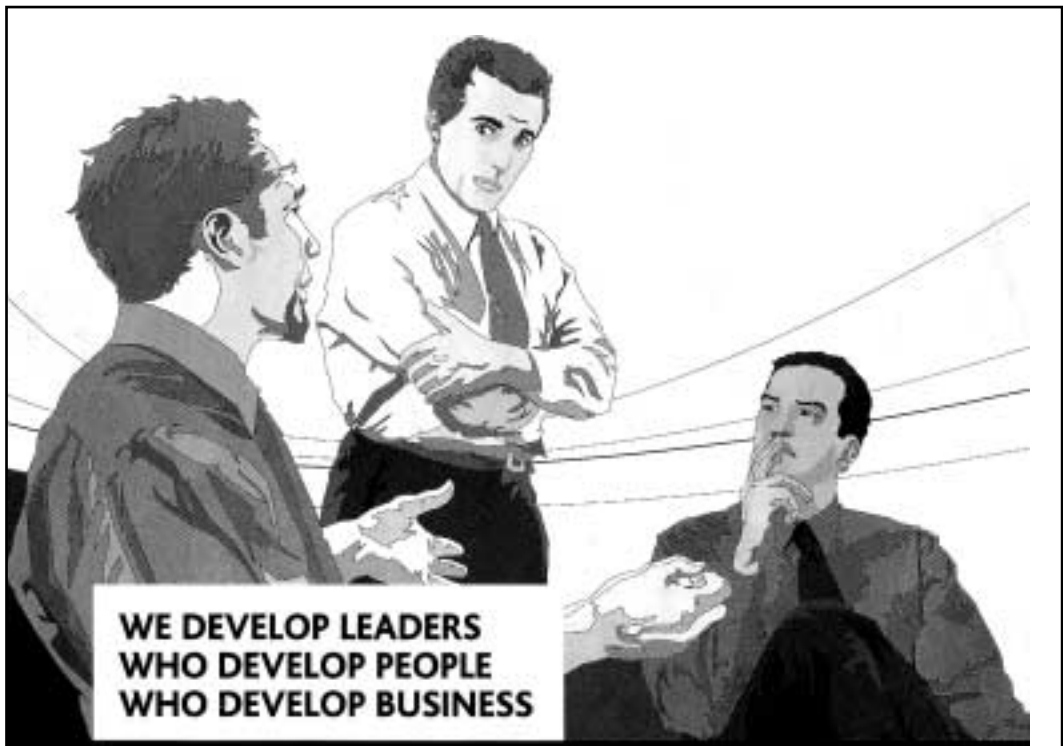

Figure 2: "Do you see what we see" [3]

Figure 3: "We develop leaders":[4]

orientated toward a male readership such as *The Economist* and yes, you guessed it, *The Sunday Times.* This amounts to fishing in a highly targeted pool, substantially restricting the available talent for the job. Such use of imagery is not uncommon (I have a large and growing collection of similar images), and it is only when the images are viewed collectively, as opposed to singularly, that one can begin to appreciate their exclusionary effect.
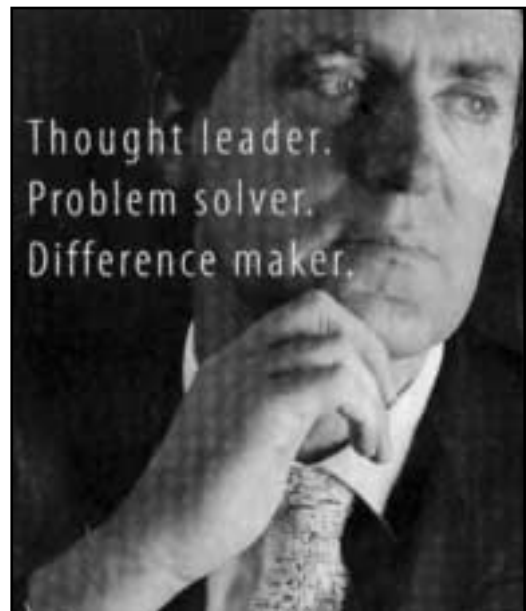

Figure 4: "Thought leader":[5]

Case Study 3: The "Super Man" Series

The Deutsche Bank "super man" series (as I call it), whilst not a recruitment campaign, amounts nonetheless to a powerful symbolic representation of the apparent culture of the organisation and one which is just as available to potential recruits as it is to potential clients. When scrutinized as a strategy of dismissal, the image works quite clearly to equate 'success' with white, able-bodied, athletic, male competitiveness. Just one such image, although powerful, could be argued to be a harmless, insignificant and unremarkable occurrence. But the fact that the image

Figure 5: "Passion to perform" [6]

formed part of a series of at least four similar ones, each just as testosterone-charged as the other, and all displaying the same male prototype, serves to underline the full extent of how such a campaign might be exclusionary towards women, whilst remaining completely within the law. We can see here how, in one fell swoop, a company's marketing/branding department can undermine all the admirable work other colleagues might have been doing to promote the organisation as a gender-inclusive employer.

The "super man" series depicts an apparent culture where a highly masculinized 'passion to perform' (the bank's current slogan) overrides all other concerns. If it was going to fund a series of advertising images, it could have used them to reassure us of a genuine commitment to diversity and effective corporate governance, instead of representing sameness and homogeneity. The business case for diversity has been made elsewhere[7] and will not be repeated here. Suffice it to say that *The Economist*'s (August 28th 2004) views on Deutsche Bank and its performance, is that the bank is "much less than it could be" and that "whilst trying to broaden its horizons it has shrunk them". On a more encouraging note, however, I am reliably informed that the bank's new Global Branding Director is keen to ensure future alignment with diversity and inclusion.

PC Gone Mad or Prejudice Peddling Press?

Political correctness is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as "the avoidance of forms of expression that are perceived to exclude, marginalize or insult groups of people who are socially disadvantaged or discriminated against". This helpfully reminds us of how language can often be employed as a powerful means of keeping people in their place. *The Sunday Times* did this when, inadvertently or otherwise, it linguistically airbrushed women out of its advert, rendering them invisible as players in the business world. But when challenged on such issues, media push back comes typically in the form of "PC having gone mad". But what is interesting is the way in which the right wing press (accompanied increasingly by right wing politicians) has completely hijacked and endeavoured to caricature/discredit a term that embodies and reflects emerging (yet, to some, threatening) social values. My work as a diversity specialist, involves challenging taken for granted ways of thinking and doing business, as well as pushing comfort zones. Those who push back with cries of "*PC gone mad*" are invariably people with a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. For inclusion to work it requires a much broader distribution of power and this is possibly the single biggest threat to those who have historically enjoyed positions of privilege, criteria for which are often being the "right" colour, class and sex, with such "rightness" being enshrined in taken for granted forms of language.

Thirty years ago, "PC gone mad" equated to not allowing people to use the 'n' word, and prohibiting posters of naked women on desks and notice boards. Nowadays, such practices are viewed as unacceptable by all but the most extreme of bigots, but what is interesting is the way in which today's society uses much more subtle ways of keeping people in their place. Examining the discourse of some recent events in the media exemplifies the point. The outstanding victory of Sonia Gandhi in May 2004, clearly provoked unrest among

our patriarchal elite, captured in the headline "The Italian housewife with a lot on her hands"[8]. Voted for by 675m people, the focus of the article was not on that formidable achievement, but on Sonia Gandhi's gender "handicaps". Equally, when Barbara Cassani skilfully succeeded in getting the London bid for the Olympics short-listed, her accomplishment was undermined by the BBC news reporter referring to her as the "chief cheerleader", not once but on two consecutive nights. These were strategies of dismissal, designed (consciously or otherwise) to put talented women in their place, which clearly is not at the centre of power.

Encouraging the use of gender-neutral language is an unashamed and totally legitimate act of political correctness. Many titles, such as 'chairman' and dare I say it 'businessman', are so culturally imbued that they are not recognised for what they are, i.e. symbols of a masculinised business paradigm. Examining language within the social constructivist paradigm, as I do, it would be fatuous not to acknowledge the political aspect thereof and the power it wields. Language does not simply reflect reality (i.e. that the majority of chair or business people are men) but plays a central role in constructing and perpetuating it (i.e. "that's the norm" and "lets keep it that way").

The widespread denigration of the term "political correctness" is another indicator of a patriarchal society hijacking an agenda that might ultimately lead us to reflect on our language and behaviour towards historically disenfranchised and devalued groups.

Analysing the Discourse and Focusing Forward

We are thirty years on from the SDA coming into force and we still have a 30% pay gap, rising to in excess of 43% at board level and only one female chair in the FTSE 100 companies.[9] I would now like to highlight some of the reasons for the SDA's lacklustre impact in removing systemic barriers to women's progress at senior levels. These include firstly, the fact that the Act itself is more often than not interpreted within a masculine framework. A woman who suffers discrimination and harassment will typically be discouraged from "making a fuss" as she will probably lose anyway. If she wishes to go ahead, she must typically pay the costs up front, which could even require her to re-mortgage her house assuming, that is, that she has one in the first place[10]. In addition, whether she wins or loses, she must accept the fact that she will probably be unemployable after being branded in the press as a money grabbing whinge, whose problem stems from a sense of humour by-pass having attended the Germaine Greer finishing school for feminism.

Secondly, many equality bodies and institutions operate within the discourse[11] of the dominant, which inevitably restricts not only what *can* be said but also how it *is* said. By employing language within the terms dictated by the dominant discourse, we simply reinforce arbitrary social arrangements as "the truth", "common sense" and "the obvious". It would be fallacious, whilst engaging in this emotive debate, to obfuscate the fact that one cannot effect change without being prepared to push comfort zones and challenge people's taken for granted reality.

However sensitive and mellifluous ones tone's of delivery, such acts will often be perceived as a threat, therein provoking resistance, which as previously stated, is typically manifested in claims of 'PC' having 'gone mad'.

Thirdly, researchers have historically focused on women in management. But what do we know about why men behave in the way that they do, and about what motivates them? Why are men driven to take up multiple board positions when women struggle to get just one? Why do men persistently refuse to take up flexible working, paternal leave or work part-time? Could it be that they, like women, feel vulnerable to the unwritten rules of the culture where part-time means part commitment and therefore a career-limiting move? Or, could it be that they enjoy/need the power and status because they were socialised to believe these things are not only theirs by right, but part of what it means to actually be "a man"? Could it be then that these men are indeed "turned on" by "domination" (inevitably at the expense of women) because that is what society expects of them? Given that 92% of the most powerful decision makers in British business are men[12], I believe their motivations, behaviours and sense of identity to be central, not peripheral, to our understanding of institutional sexism and the tackling thereof.

Fourthly, what part does socialization and identity, reinforced by all those media images, play in preparing women for leadership? Speaking personally, I was brought up to believe that self confidence was right up there with other cardinal sins such as adultery and debauchery. But "women" and "men" are not homogeneous groups and so react differently to being bombarded with gender stereotypes. Some men have feminine styles and some women are grandiloquent. Bradshaw and Wicks (1997) use the term "zones of indifference" to describe the various defense mechanisms women employ in order to remain blind to acts of domination and discrimination, until such time as they are made salient. These may take the form of physical withdrawal, denial that sex discrimination exists and/or advocating that women abide by the rules of the status quo. Some women manipulate those same rules in order to "beat them at their own game". By doing the latter (often at great personal cost), the risk is that women are complicit in reinforcing the values of a patriarchal system, sometimes emulating macho behaviours to the point that they themselves stereotype women. The prize for "compliant women" prepared to play the game by the old boys' rules is the illusion of belonging and empowerment, as well as access to prestigious, high powered positions on boards.

Conclusion

In this short article, I have set out some of the multitudinous strategies of dismissal (Jacques, 1997) that are effectively employed within society (and more specifically the advertising media) to reinforce the status quo, therein keeping women, and other marginalised groups, on the peripheries of power. Testosterone charged images of the white male "thought leader" abound, as do advertisements that linguistically and/or visually airbrush women out of the picture.

The discourse of the dominant sets out different rules for those with and without power. Language, which itself can be understood to be constitutive of both

knowledge and power, is hijacked to legitimise what is deemed mere "common sense". Protestations that serve to challenge this rationality are ridiculed and labelled as "radical", "militant" or "on the fringe". However robust and intellectually rigorous my arguments for equality and inclusion, those with vested interests in the status quo need only reduce them to a cry of "PC gone mad" in order to "rest their case". No argument need be proffered in its defence. It's simply "common sense". The media very deliberately choose their language to enflame prejudice by playing on people's fears, inciting outrage at the very thought of introducing positive discrimination to attract black recruits to the police, for example. The fact is that positive discrimination has existed for years: the metaphorical tap on the shoulder and old boys' networks are all practices so institutionalised that we take them for granted. Those who profit from privilege accept such benefits as their birthright, and are the ones who have the most to lose if these unwritten rules are exposed by the critical scrutiny of language.

I posit that in order for the SDA to make more progress in the next thirty years than it has in the last, we need to move out of our "zones of indifference" and be prepared to switch our diversity radars on. To notice whose voice is heard, whose opinions are validated, to ask the difficult questions, to seek transparency, and to actively promote inclusion. This is unlikely to be achieved by restricting the debate to the stifling and censorious confines of the dominant discourse and by ignoring the suffusive dynamics of power and politics. Power and politics are at the heart of organisational and social life and, when more evenly distributed, need not be synonymous with dominance, corruption

and discrimination. Promoting inclusion isn't someone else's job, to be carried out between the hours of nine to five. We are all social, as well as corporate citizens. We can all serve the cause by being more aware of our own and others' use of language/imagery and by opening our eyes and ears to render more visible the insidious hand of discrimination[13].

Notes

[1]Appointment Section, *The Sunday Times*, March 2004

[2]See: www.bbs-survey.com/

[3]Job advert for three director positions in *The Sunday Times & The Economist*, April 2004: Norman Broadbent (Executive Resourcing) & Barkers (Advertising Agency).

[4]Programme advert, INSEAD in *The Economist*, 2004.

[5]Advert for The Fletcher School's global Master of Arts programme at Tufts University, in *The Economist*, November 2003.

[6]Deutsche Bank Advert, *Economist*, 14 Feb 2004

[7]Tess Finch-Lees. (2004). *The Business Case for Diversity*. www.globaleffectiveness.com.

[8]*The Sunday Times*. May 16, 2004.

[9]Executive pay Survey. *The Guardian*, August 28, 2004.

[10]Kate Bleasdale in *The Sunday Times*. July 18, 2004.

[11]I use the term 'discourse' here in the Foucauldian sense to denote different and oftentimes conflicting ways of linguistically structuring (and indeed constructing) areas of knowledge and everyday social practice (Fairclough 1992).

[12]The Cranfield Female FTSE report (2003) states that women only hold about 8% of board seats

[13]Space dictates that my focus has been limited to that of gender in this article. However, the principles set out are transferable to all marginalised groups. I do not advocate a hierarchical approach to tackling discrimination, i.e. gender and race do not merit more or less attention than disability, age, sexuality or religion, for example.

References

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