Rules, Sensemaking, Formative Contexts and Discourse in the Gendering of Organizational Culture.

JEAN C. HELMS HATFIELD

Assistant Professor of Organizational Behaviour
Commerce Department,
Mount Allison University,
144 Main Street, Sackville,
New Brunswick,
Canada E4L 1A7

TELEPHONE: (506) 364-2334
FAX: (506) 364-2625

E-MAIL: JHATFIELD@MTA.CA

&

ALBERT J. MILLS

Professor, Management
Department of Management,
Faculty of Commerce,
Saint Mary’s University,
Robie Street, Halifax,
Nova Scotia,
Canada B3H 3C3

TELEPHONE: (902) 420-5778
FAX: Int + 902 420 5119.

E-MAIL: AMILLS@HUSKY1.STMARYS.CA
Gender & Management Stream

Rules, Sensemaking, Formative Contexts and Discourse in the Gendering of Organizational Culture\textsuperscript{1}.

\textsuperscript{1} Our sincere thanks to Mary Jo Hatch, Keith Marcus, and Mark Peterson for comments on an early draft of this
Jean C. H. Hatfield  & Albert J. Mills

Introduction

In this paper organizational culture is used as a heuristic for making sense of the gendering of organizations (Mills & Tancred, 1992). It is argued, following the feminist notion of gender as a cultural phenomenon (Oakley, 1972), that the study of discriminatory practices at work can benefit from a holistic approach that takes into account the interconnections between the various processes and practices that characterise a particular entity. To this end an organizational culture perspective is seen as offering a useful framework for capturing the all-embracing character of gender discrimination at work.

A rules approach to the study of organizational culture (Mills, 1988a, 1988b; Mills & Murgatroyd, 1991) is proposed as a perspective suited to the task of uncovering gendered aspects of organizational realities. A detailed account of the rules perspective is developed to show how the approach can be used to make sense of various aspects of gender discrimination at work.

The paper then moves to a discussion of some of the limitations of the rules approach and reviews selected theoretical developments -- specifically the work of Unger (1987), Blackler (1992, 1993), and Weick (1995) -- that may help to overcome those limitations.
The paper ends with an outline of the rules approach in practice -- suggesting ways that the approach may be applied to address gender discrimination.

**Culture as a Metaphor for Understanding the Gendering of Organizations**

For years feminist scholars have contended that notions of womanhood and manhood are socially constructed; that while there are basic physiological differences between people it is not those differences per se that determine our understanding of ōmenō and ōwomenō but the way that cultural factors shape our understanding of the differences. OakleyÆs (1972) distinction between ōsexō (as the basic physiological differences between men and women) and ōgenderō (as culturally specific patterns of behaviour which may be attached to the sexes), although not uncontested (cf. Rakow, 1986; Acker, 1992; Calas & Smircich, 1992, 1996), has served as a basic starting point for feminist studies of discrimination (cf. Mackie, 1987). This simple distinction represents a holistic approach to gender by contending that notions of womanhood and manhood are outcomes of a multitude of factors that include language, attitudes, patterns of behaviour, symbolism, dress, patterns of belief, value systems, stories, rites, rituals, ceremonies, and physical artefacts. This has generated numerous feminist studies of the relationship between cultural milieu and gendered outcomes (cf. Ginsburg & Lowenhaupt Tsing, 1990).

Within this framework there have been various studies of gender and work (cf. Armstrong & Armstrong, 1990) but feminist studies of organization are more recent (Mills & Tancred, 1992). Feminist organizational analysis has drawn attention to numerous discriminatory practices and processes at work, including language and communication (cf. Tannen, 1994), structure (Savage & Witz, 1992), dress (Rafaeli, Dutton, Harquail, & Mackie-Lewis, 1997), organizational discourse (Burrell, 1992), sexuality, (Hearn,
Sheppard, Tancred-Sheriff & Burrell, 1989), and symbols, images and forms of consciousness (Acker, 1992). These studies have been invaluable in addressing important aspects of the gendering of organizations.

In recent years two major developments have encouraged the view that organizational problems in general and sexual discrimination in particular may well be addressed through a holistic approach that focusses on a particular organization as a culture or as a system. The first development involved a change in the way that legislation in North America characterised the nature of workplace discrimination, moving emphasis away from individual intent to a "systemic approach" focussed on the outcomes of workplace practices. In the US landmark case of *Griggs v. Duke Power Co.* [1971] the court held that, "If an employment practice which operates to exclude [minorities] cannot be shown to be related to job performance, the practice is prohibited" (quoted in Abella, 1984: 201). This approach was taken up in Canada by the *Royal Commission on Equality in Employment* which characterised the root cause of workplace inequities as "systemic discrimination." Reporting in 1984, the Commission advocated that employment equity be dealt with by addressing workplace structures and practices, arguing that the problem lay in "the structure of systems designed for [white able-bodied males] and in [practices based on white able-bodied males'] perceptions of everyone else" (Abella, 1984: 9-10).

The systemic approach paralleled a second important development in the field of management education and practice that argued for an organizational culture perspective to the problems of organizational behaviour and effectiveness. Advocates of this approach, moving away from study of the purely "formal" and "rational" aspects of organization, argued that "organizations are like miniature societies with unique..."
configurations of heroes, myths, beliefs and valuesÆ (Brown, 1998: 5; see also Ott, 1989 for a useful overview of the early developments of the organizational culture debate).

Ironically, while North American law has, understandably, remained focussed on the outcome rather than the minutia of workplace practices the organizational culture debate has almost entirely ignored the contribution of the non-formal and non-rational aspects of organization to the development of discriminatory practices (Mills, 1988a, 1988b). Yet the notion that gender is a cultural phenomenon and that organizations are best understood as miniature cultures provides a compelling reason for an organizational culture approach to the gendering of organizations; an approach that is capable of capturing the complexity of arrangements and relationships that come to constitute a particular set of discriminatory behaviours. This has generated debate among gender-focussed organizational analysts (Smircich, 1985; Mills, 1988a, 1988b; Mills & Murgatroyd, 1991; Ramsay & Parker, 1992; Alvesson & Berg, 1992; Alvesson & Due Billing, 1997) and has led to, as yet, a limited number of studies (Morgan, 1988; Aaltio-Marjosola, 1994, 1998; Aaltio-Marjosola & Sevœn, 1997; Gheradi, 1995; Wilson, 1997; Korvajarvi, 1998), including a rulesÆ approach (Mills, 1994, 1995, 1996a, 1996b, 1997a, 1997b, 1998), of gender and organizational culture.

Organizational Rules as Cultural Framework

We begin our approach to `organizational cultureÆ with the proposition that, as a concept, it is a useful device, or heuristic, for conceptualizing the problem of
discrimination at work. As some scholars have argued, organizational culture can be seen as a `root metaphorÆ for making sense of organizational realities (Smircich, 1983; Allaire & Firsotu, 1984; Morgan, 1996). That does not mean, however, that we entirely reject the notion of organizational culture as a `realÆ entity. We certainly believe that `realÆ (i.e., embodied) persons, engage in `realÆ organizational activities (i.e., the perception of acting within a limited entity ), and that the organizational lives of those persons are shaped by `realÆ (i.e., felt) experiences. Thus, from our perspective, organizational culture is a useful metaphor for attempting to capture a configuration of factors that influence lived experiences, in particular the way that people experience gendered realities.

However, as Alvesson (1993) contends, metaphors are limited if they cannot provide important insights into organizations. From our perspective, the notion of organizational culture must move beyond description of factors that cohere to form a more-or-less consistent set of practices and experiences to explanation of what causes those factors to cohere in the first place. In contrast to symbolist approaches (e.g., Schein, 1996) which focus on `understanding the processes through which organizations are reproduced as shared systems of meaningÆ (Reed, 1992: 168), we seek to understand what is behind those processes, what it is that generates and maintains organizational processes, and what are the implications for the construction of `shared meaningsÆ. This search for an organizing principle mirrors the pioneering work of Eldridge and Crombie (1974) and the more recent work of Trice and Beyer (1993).

But whereas Trice and Beyer (1993: 2) center on responses to ôuncertainties and chaosö and Eldridge and Crombie (1974: 89) center on ôstrategic choiceö as the dynamic that creates ôthe cultural distinctiveness of an organisationö, we find a more compelling argument in CleggÆs (1981 545) focus on organizational control, particularly the idea that control is achieved through ôrulesö that ôformulate the structure underlying the apparent surface of organizational lifeö. Eldridge and CrombieÆs (1974 :89) argument that organizational cultures arise out of choices to ôthe problems of acquiring, combining,
and making use of resources, underplays the role of ownership (i.e., the purposes and goals of the organization) and the exercise of power and control that precede the ability to make choices or, in the case of Trice and Beyer (1993), to deal with uncertainties.

It is our assumption that organizations are specific collectivities of people whose activities are co-ordinated and controlled in and for the achievement of defined goals. That is, that organizations arise out of the desire of some individuals or groups (e.g., entrepreneurs, share-holders, policy makers, philanthropists, social activists, etc.) to achieve certain ends. In the process they recruit or employ other people to help them to achieve their ends and this creates pressure for the co-ordination and control of the various activities that people engage in. This, in turn, leads to the development of a series of rules, or outline steps for the conduct of action [that], depending upon combinations of circumstances and actors, [will] be experienced as controlling, guiding and/or defining (Mills & Murgatroyd, 1991: 30).

Our focus on control and the development of rules arises out of a concern to formulate a more systematic understanding and explanation of the political and ideological practices through which `organizationsÆ are assembled and sustained as viable social collectives (Reed, 1992: 133). It is an approach that Reed (1992: 183) has termed managerial realist, arguing that the development of the rule concept is itself theoretically grounded in a model of the organization as an interrelated network of social practices through which a wide multiplicity of activities are assembled to form institutionalized frameworks or patterns of collective action sustained over time and place by a matrix of rules.

The rules concept provides a framework that offers an explanation of common action without implying a unity, or pattern, of beliefs, values and learned ways of coping with experience (Brown, 1998: 9). Indeed, we contend that rules simultaneously serve to
contain differences of opinion, beliefs and values while resulting in practices that give the appearance of unity of purpose. In this regard, the rules approach has been categorized as a ôdifferentiation perspectiveö in contrast to ôintegrationö and ôfragmentationö perspectives (Martin, 1992). The notion of tensions beneath the surface of organizational rules stands in contrast to the ôintegration perspectiveö which views organizational culture as ôan internally consistent package of cultural manifestations that generates organization-wide consensus, usually around some set of shared valuesö (Martin & Frost, 1996: 602). The notion of unified practice as the outcome of rules, on the other hand, can be contrasted with the ôfragmentation perspectiveö with its focus on ôlack of consistency, lack of consensus, and ambiguity [as] the hallmarks . . . of cultureö (Martin & Frost, 1996: 609). In this latter regard we would argue that the difference is one of emphasis. We do not disagree with the contention that organizations are marked by inconsistencies, divisions and ambiguity but we would argue that these things are often only part of an overall experience that feels coherent. To take the example of airlines that expect their female flight attendants to smile at all times when performing their duties. There is considerable evidence that people sharply differ on the purpose of this type of performance; some flight attendants may see constant smiling as professionalism (Musback & Davis, 1980), some may see it as degrading (Kane, 1974), and some may see it as sexual (Baker & Jones, 1967). Management and customers may also vary on the meaning of the flight attendant performance. Nonetheless, despite ambiguity and disagreement constant smiling is a common practice in the performance of female flight attendants and impose a common situation on a number of disparate actors. This and many other rule bound activities serve to give airlines the feel of coherence and order.

We agree, however, with the fragmentation perspective that the appearance of unity and meaningfulness is created by powerful organizational actors (Martin & Frost, 1996: 608) but, would add, that the ôpowerÆ of those actors is rooted in their position relative to the
construction and maintenance of organizational rules. The problem is that neither the activity of powerful actors nor the existence of rules fully explain why less powerful actors `buy inÆ to aspects of the dominant meanings within an organization: we shall return to this problem later.

There are two elements to the rules approach -- the rules themselves and the actors who engage in the process of establishing, enacting, enforcing, misunderstanding, and/or resisting rules. `RulesÆ --ôphenomena whose basic characteristic is that of generally controlling, constraining, guiding and defining social actionö (Mills & Murgatroyd, 1991: 3-4) -- exist in written and unwritten, formal and informal, legalistic, normative, and moralistic forms. Rules do not ôwholly rely for their efficacy on being known or understood by each and every member of a given situation into which they are appliedö (Mills & Murgatroyd, 1991: 4) but they do arise out of the enactment of organizational actors who differ in their rule-making powers. This approach attempts to synthesize ôboth the enabling and constraining aspects of rule-governed conductö by taking into account ôthe inescapable fact that rules are created by actors but that they simultaneously constrain the action alternatives to them over a series of decision-making situationsö (Reed, 1992: 183).

**Formal rules**: the context for the establishment of an organizational culture, we would argue, is the establishment of a series of formal rules that come to dominate organizational activities, in particular the ômanner in which groups and individuals combine to get things doneö (Eldridge & Crombie, 1974: 89). By `formal rulesÆ we refer to those expectations and requirements, either written or unwritten, that are routinely associated with the pursuit of organizational purposes, activities or goals that are perceived as legitimate or ônormalÆ. It is hard to avoid a rationalized view of organizations and hence of organizational culture because organizations are formally established, constituted by a
series of formal, written rules, and often present themselves in a coherent light through such things as marketing and corporate image. Clearly, this overly-rational image of the organization is not the whole reality but it is an important element of the experience of organizations. Formal rules constitute an important aspect of the experience of organizational life through such things as recruitment and hiring practices, job descriptions, a variety of `human resourcesÆ practices governing absences, leaves, health benefits, etc., wage and salary rates, promotion steps and processes, disciplinary action, and even dress codes: these rules may exist in written form (e.g., as in a requirement to wear a uniform at specific times) or unwritten expectations (e.g., an expectation that people will come to work in `appropriateÆ business attire).

Formal rules are established in response to a number of factors that start with the perceived purposes of the founding members (e.g., profitability, political power, charitable work), and the desire of those in charge to lay down a set of guidelines and limitations to those that they recruit. This process continues and is modified by those who subsequently take over positions of power and authority within the organization. Beyond the specific needs for co-ordination and control by organizational managers, rules enter the life of an organization in various ways, including legal requirements (e.g., laws governing commerce, labour, occupational health and safety, and employment equity), the introduction of technology (i.e., machinery, tools, skills and/or work methods that require specific modes of operation), the employment of specific management practices (e.g., scientific management, re-engineering, TQM), the reproduction of dominant social values about the relative worth of men and women and/or of different ethnic/racial groups (e.g., the establishment of unequal pay rates or differentiated recruitment practices based on gender), the development of social practices designed to integrate employees (e.g., workplace social clubs, sports teams, dinner-dance events), and the establishment of job specializations and practices to deal with perceived environmental demands (e.g., a
process of differentiation or divisionalization as a company moves into new markets or areas).

**Informal rules:** In the process of formal organizational development a series of informal rules develop alongside, and sometimes in contradiction to, formal rules. By `informal rulesÆ we refer to those norms of behaviour that arise within the context of workplace associations but which do not develop to meet the defined goals or activities of the organization. People develop various forms of association at work (e.g., social groups, friendships, unofficial pressure groups) beyond those that are officially defined (e.g., a specific unit, division, or department). In the process of developing informal groups or relationships people typically develop norms that govern aspects of their behaviour. Sometimes informal rules may complement the formal rules such as friendships that contribute to a sense of corporate belonging and identity (Wicks, 1998); sometimes informal rules may come into contradiction with formal rules as in the classic Hawthorne Studies where informal groups of workers pressured each other to restrict output (Rose, 1978); and sometimes informal rules may have little or no effect on formal rules, as in the situation where the casual dress of students, in conformity to an informal dress code, does not effect the scheduled lecture that they are attending. Regardless, informal rules are an important influence on the life of an organization.

**Rules and Organizational Actors:** In the words of Reed (1992: 183), ôthe rule concept forms a linking function in that it connects forms of action to structural features by focusing on the diverse social practices through which actors construct rule matrices that shape their interaction and the institutionalized forms which it reproducesö. Rules are primarily the creation of actors but, once established, appear as structures standing over and above people. People develop rules in several ways. Principally rules develop and are changed by powerful actors such as founders and senior managers (cf. Trice & Beyer,
on occasion a strong or 'unbalancedÆ personality can have a disproportionate influence on a culture (Kets de Vries, 1989). Others are then charged with enacting and enforcing rules (managers, supervisors) and, in the process, rules are negotiated, are unintentionally misapplied, or are resisted (Mills & Murgatroyd, 1991). Rules are also developed by actors as responses to unique situations and rules are influenced by meta-rules as actors reproduce social values (e.g., discriminatory notions of women) that become embedded within organizational rules (e.g., pay inequities). In short, rules are established and changed through a series of interactions and yet are usually experienced as something beyond the control of people. Insights into the human basis of rule development and change can assist organizational actors to gain a more informed and confident approach to the problem of organizational change in general, and in addressing workplace inequities in particular.

**Rules as Organizational Culture:** It is the configurations of informal and formal rules that shape the culture of an organization as it deals with various legal requirements (ôstate rulesö), adopts or adapts to extant management practices (ôreproductive rulesö), utilizes technology (ôtechnical rulesö), absorbs, reflects or attempts to change the social attitudes that members bring to the organization (ôextra-organizational rulesö), develops human resources practices (ôsocial regulative rulesö), and attempts to control aspects of its external operating environment (ôstrategic rulesö) (Clegg, 1981; Mills & Murgatroyd, 1991). Specific configurations of rules provide the basis for patterns of behaviour that appear as 'the way things are done around hereÆ. In other words, rules form the experiential framework of organizational culture. But rules develop and change through the actions of numerous actors as they establish, enact, enforce, misunderstand, resist, and/or break the rules. It is the configuration of rules and the actors involved that constitute a specific culture. Thus, we can say that ôorganizational culture is viewed as
being primarily composed of a particular configuration of rules, enactment and resistance (Mills, 1988a: 366).

**Studying Organizational Cultures Over Time:** As Reed (1990) has observed, metaphors are problematic in that they do not provide insight into the historical development of specific organizations. We share the view that as cultures are, by definition, entities that have been established over time they should be studied over time (Dellheim, 1986). We also share the view that organizational cultures should be viewed in social context (Kieser, 1989), that to understand a specific culture we need to know something not only about the internal dynamic of rule development but also the contribution of the broad social context to the process. In particular, we believe that a longitudinal study of the culture of an organization helps to identify how cultures become gendered and, importantly, how they change (or can be changed) over time (Mills, 1994). With that in mind we now turn to an outline of the rules approach in practice, drawing largely on examples from a study of the gendering of British airline culture from 1919-1997.

**Applying the Rules Approach to the Gendering of Organizational Culture**

A rules approach to the study of organizational culture sets out to address gender discrimination in several ways. First, by uncovering the deep rooted aspects of gender discrimination and, in the process, exposing their mundane nature. Second, by revealing the role of actors in the construction of gendered practices. And, third, by identifying how rules change.

In seeking to uncover the deep rooted aspects of gender our focus is on practices that discriminate against women but also on the way that organizations contribute to notions of femininity and masculinity. It is a controversial approach both within feminist
organizational analysis (Calas & Smircich, 1996) and post-modernist accounts of organizational culture (Hatch, 1997). Certainly, we agree with the argument that concepts of `womanÆ and `manÆ are ôunstableö and may ultimately contribute to discrimination through their reference to essentialist categories. But that does not get past the problem that those very categories have real consequences for embodied persons who are discriminated against on the basis on an assumed set of gender characteristics. We attempt to manage the tension by addressing discriminatory practices in a way that encourages a questioning of the concept of gender itself. In other words, we are interested in both the impact of discrimination on women (and men) and on the construction of women (and men).

In studying an organizationÆs culture over time we use a focus on employment practices (i.e., the hiring and promotion of women) to track changes in the way that images of women (and of men) are constructed. In a study of British Airways, for example, at least eight different periods can be identified, including the absence of female employees in the period 1919-24, the growth of female clerical work in the 1930s, and the rise of the woman manager in the 1990s (Mills, 1994). Each of these eras are associated with different corporate images of women and men (Mills, 1995).

Rules contribute to the construction of discriminatory practices in different ways; some have little or no obvious link to the process of gendering, some have a direct and obvious link and others are indirectly or subtly linked to the process. Organizations differ in the configuration of rules that compose their cultures. Thus, it is important to identify (i) those rules which significantly contribute to the gendering of organizations, (ii) those rules that collectively contribute to the gendering process, (iii) those rules that arrest the process of discrimination, and (iv) how rules change and become more or less gendered in the process.
Formal rules and the gendering of organizational culture: the initial purposes and goals of an organization may or may not directly encourage the development of discriminatory practices. In some cases it is clear that the formal rules of an organization deliberately or effectively exclude women from all (e.g., men's clubs) or parts (e.g., commercial airline piloting prior to 1965) of the organization (Rogers, 1988; Harris, 1945; Mills, 1998). In other cases it may not be the goals of the organization per se as the intervention of other rules that encourages gendered practices. The provision of an airline service, for example, is not obviously gendered and when commercial aviation was established in Britain in 1919 it was a new industry without the baggage of old and existing practices, gendered or otherwise. Yet, from the beginning, despite the existence of women flyers and a number of former members of the Women's Royal Air Force (WRAF), women were excluded from all but clerical positions: it took many years before British Airways (and its predecessors) employed women in the position of manager (1939), engineer (1942), flight attendant (1946) and pilot (1987) [Mills, 1997b]. In such cases explanation must be sought in the intervention of other rule generating activities.

Technology and its associated rules is a prime area for the generation of discriminatory practices (Cockburn, 1991). It is not the material aspect (i.e., machinery, tools, etc.) of technology that is gendered but how the associated skills and modes of operation are understood and practiced. The skills of piloting and the organization of flight crews, for example, were practices that were strongly influenced by the wartime air forces which restricted flying to men. The first commercial airlines reproduced those gendered associations and established formal technical rules that reinforced flying as a male occupation: for a considerable time this affected not only the recruitment of pilots but also of flight attendants (Mills, 1994; 1996a). In a similar vein the skills and organization of secretarial work have come to be associated with women and have led to
formal rules whereby men are excluded from consideration for such positions (cf. Pringle, 1989).

Formal rules that arise out of the practice of managing and organizing may appear gender-neutral in intent but, as feminist studies have revealed, they are often heavily gendered not only in their outcomes but in the assumptions underlying them. Schein (1994), for example, has documented how male and female managers have tended to associate management with masculine characteristics. Other feminist researchers have revealed a link between bureaucratic practice and masculine values, discourse, and/or worldviews (Ferguson, 1984; Morgan, 1988; Martin, 1990; Witz & Savage, 1992). More recently, it has been argued that some of the newer managerial practices, such as Total Quality Management and Business Process Reengineering, incorporate both feminine and masculine characteristics (Fondas, 1997), a view that is contested by others (Kerfoot & Knights, 1993).

In some organizations gendered formal rules may arise out of a series of activities (e.g., sports and social clubs) designed to ‘incorporate’ employees and give them a sense of belonging. Such activities can be gendered where they exclude and/or recreate narrow images of women and men. For example, a study which identified a relative lack of commitment among female as opposed to male employees argued that the root cause lay in management’s valuing of those who took an active part in the company’s male-oriented sports and social club (Crompton & Jones, 1984).

Much more pervasive, although not necessarily overt, are those ‘extra-organizational’ rules (Mills & Murgatroyd, 1991) that reflect dominant social beliefs about the relative nature of men and women. These beliefs become embedded in both formal and informal rules and contribute to the gendered nature of ‘the way things are done’ in an
organization, justifying failures to hire, promote, to pay equitable wages to women. For example, in an era which stresses an association between masculinity and danger we would expect to find that organizations restricted to men those jobs labeled as dangerous. This was the case with piloting which, for many years, was seen as a dangerous and therefore a masculine occupation. In more recent times, in a period where airline companies emphasize the skill rather than the danger of flying, a socio-legal stress on employment equity has lessened previous associations between masculinity and flying. Gendered understandings also contribute to the formal rules of an organization through a series of `externalÆ influences that include legal, inter-organizational and institutional links.

Legal rules are often far from gender-neutral (cf. Razack, 1991; Wolf, 1991) and may contribute to the construction of equitable practices or to a strengthening of discriminatory practices. The former situation can be clearly seen in regard to anti-discriminatory and employment equity legislation which has demonstrably contributed to the reduction of inequitable practices in major US and Canadian corporations (Abella, 1984). On the other hand, as various court challenges have revealed, certain laws serve to support gendered practices on the grounds of `market needÆ (Wolf, 1991). It was legal intervention that established the exclusion of women from British AirwaysÆ flight crews for many decades: establishing Imperial Airways (British AirwaysÆ predecessor) in 1924 the British government effectively excluded women from a range of airline work by requiring that seventy-five percent of all airline pilots, ground personnel and administrative staffs be recruited from the Royal Air Force (RAF), the Reserve or the Auxiliary Air Force (Penrose, 1980). This legal requirement contributed to the fact that over ninety percent of all the airlineÆs jobs were held by men until 1942 (Mills, 1997b). The rule changed by falling into disuse in the face of wartime exigencies. More recently, changes in gendered airline practices have been achieved through a series of legal challenges by women activists inside the industry (Nielsen, 1982; Hochschild, 1983).
Inter-organizational linkages contribute to the development of formal rules which may or may not be gendered. Across the airline industry, for example, standardized recruitment practices have contributed to gendered outcomes, while the development of “code share” ticketing arrangements have not. While legal rules effectively excluded women from British airline flight crews in the 1920s, international agreements of the 1924 International Commission for Air Navigation [ICAN] and the 1925 International Civil Aviation Organization [ICAO] deliberately banned them (Cadogan, 1992; Penrose, 1980). Cases of this type can, and have, been dealt with through legal action: the ICAN and ICAO bans were rescinded in 1926. More difficult to deal with are those “isomorphic”, or institutional, practices (Di Maggio & Powell, 1991) that influence organizations in subtle ways. In the development of an on-board airline service, for example, British airlines simply copied existing practices in comparable first-class transportation systems, employing the gendered title (“steward”), dress (“white jacket”) and physiological associations (men) of first-class rail and ocean-going liner service provision (Mills, 1997a). Interestingly, when, in 1930, United Airlines decided to hire female nurses as flight attendants this established a practice that was copied until the late 1950s by almost all other airlines: United Airline’s employment of nurses was a compromise between using female employees to encourage more men to fly while avoiding charges of “impropriety” by marketing the women as “nurses” (Nielsen, 1982; Hochschild, 1983). Today, the long-association of flight attending with women and of piloting with men has created a powerful set of rules that have proven difficult to erode; formal rules that may be supported in large part by the existence of a network of informal rules.

Informal rules and the gendering of organizational culture: informal rules, in contrast to formal rules, arise out of interpersonal relationships that are relatively free of mediating factors of organizational structure or goal orientation. A workplace friendship, for example, while facilitated and developed within a formal context, will owe more to
personality and group dynamics than to the perceived demands of the organization. As such, informal rules will be more directly influenced by gender dynamics than many types of formal rule. This is because `doing genderÆ (Rakow, 1986) is a constant aspect of organizational life (Hearn & Parkin, 1987).

As Acker (1992) contends, gendered structures and practices develop through (i) interactions, (ii) gender divisions of work, (iii) symbolism and (iv) the mental work of individuals. PeopleÆs interactions at work are more or less influenced by pre-existing experiences of gender roles, e.g., as husband/father, mother/daughter, etc. (Pollert, 1981; Collinson, 1988). This can result in ôsex role spilloverö where, for example, female subordinates and co-workers are routinely treated as surrogate wives, daughters or lovers, leading in some cases to office romances and in more invidious cases to a climate of sexual harassment (Gutek, 1985). It can also result in challenges and confrontation where people resist gender stereotyping. Interpersonal relationships at work will also be influenced by the existence of gendered divisions of work roles in which some jobs and positions are mainly or exclusively occupied by men or women (Hearn & Parkin, 1987). In such cases the ôopportunity structureö may contribute to narrow images of the respective capabilities of women and men, encouraging, for example, informal rules against fraternization with the `opposite sexÆ and people of either `sexÆ in higher positions (Kanter, 1977). Symbolism, ranging from the use of the term ôgirlsö to pin-up posters on the walls, can serve to strengthen narrow images of femininity and masculinity in the minds of those involved.

**Organizational actors & gendered cultures:** When analysing the gendering of an organizationÆs culture it is important to look beyond the rules to their enactment and ask `who are the key players involved in the maintenance or change process?Æ In common
with most theories of organizational culture we look to the founders and senior managers of a company to analyse their roles in the process of culture development (Pettigrew, 1985) but we are also interested in the contribution of other organizational members to the process (Schultz, 1995).

Senior managers can influence the gendering of cultures in numerous ways. The commitment of top managers to a programme of employment equity, for example, has been shown to strongly influence the outcome (Agocs et al., 1992). In the more routine generation or countering of gendered rules the role of the senior manager may be less overt. When Jan Carlzon took over as CEO of Scandinavian Airlines System (SAS) in 1980 he completely revamped the organization and, in the process, profoundly influenced the airline’s culture. This led to ‘improvements’ in service provision that some claim degraded women who were trained to ‘call all the men sir, look them between the eyes, keep your mouth half open’ (quoted in Sampson, 1984): the market success of the overall changes contributed to the maintenance of the new gendered practices. On the other hand, in the same time frame, the CEO of the Bendix company in the US attempted to redress discrimination by promoting a woman -- Mary Cunningham -- to the position of corporate vice-president; an action that was eventually derailed by a series of informal rules in the form of sexual innuendo that forced Cunningham out of the company (Cunningham & Schumer, 1984).

At other organizational levels people are not mere recipients of rules; through enactment, interpretation, compliance and resistance people contribute to both the maintenance and the changing of rules (Bradshaw & Wicks, 1997). Thus, every time someone turns down a female applicant for a job on the grounds that ‘it has always been men’s work’ they are maintaining a gendered practice. Every time someone challenges the sex typing of jobs they are undermining a gendered rule.
Together analysis of the formal, informal rules and the key actors involved in a culture over time can help to identify those mundane practices that maintain and those which challenge discriminatory practices, and how practices change over time. However, the application of a rules approach raises questions about the micro processes through which rules are generated and maintained and this has led to exploration of recent social psychological theories of organizing, including the work of Foucault, Blackler and Weick.

**Rules and Social Psychological Processes**

**Foucault and discourse:** While the notion of organizational rules is useful for capturing the various expectations that guide and constrain behaviour it does not explain how some of those expectations cohere into a way of thinking or behaving, nor how coherence is contested and rule-bound behavior changed. Although clearly not a social psychological approach the work of Foucault provides a useful way of understanding not only how organizational actors generate and act in accordance with consistent behaviour expectations, but how they come to resist dominant notions (Mills, 1993).

Focusing on “histories of experience” (Gutting, 1996), Foucault (1979) contends that human subjectivity is constructed within and as a result of given “discursive practices” constituted as discourse. In other words, discursive practices give rise to a multitude of experiences, some of which are translated into expectations or rules of action through the development of various discourses. Thus, for example, a number of experiences of doing gender are generated in an organization but in order to take on the power of rules some of those experiences need to cohere in a way that “makes sense” to a significant number of people. As Sawicki (1996: 300) expresses it, “discursive practices that construct gender
are rule-governed structures of intelligibility that both constrain and enable identity formations. The notion of discourse, the empowering of certain ideas through their appearance as 'knowledge', helps to explain how certain rules come to be accepted by those involved. In the words of Walkerdine (1990) 'femininity and masculinity are fictions linked to fantasies deeply embedded in the social world which can take on the status of fact when inscribed with the powerful practices... through which we are regulated' (quoted in Ussher, 1991: 13).

By analyzing key discourses in the life of an organization it is possible to track dominant sets of rules and explain their power and weaknesses over time. To take examples of flying and on-board service provision. In the early days of commercial aviation discourses of piloting and flight attending had at their center particular images of masculinity, respectively 'the heroic flyer' and 'the white-coated steward' (Mills, 1998). The association of danger, professionalism and masculinity with flying existed as a powerful discourse within British Airways (and many other airlines) until recently. Not until the mid-1980s did these associations begin to unravel sufficiently to allow the recruitment of women pilots. It was a discourse that was continually supported not only by male-only recruitment practices in the industry itself but in the military air forces, by continual wartime images of the male pilot, and the practice of recruiting retired air force pilots as commercial flyers. It took considerable challenges to the exclusion of women from military piloting and combat roles, alongside challenges to commercial airline practices before the discourse of male piloting began to weaken. The discourse of flight attending as a male occupation, on the other hand, weakened relatively quickly. The role of airline steward developed in the middle of the 1920s as a strictly male occupation and yet by 1930 United Airlines hired the first female flight attendants and a number of airlines followed: British Overseas Airways Corporation (BOAC) and British European Airways (BEA) were, in 1946, among the last to employ females. Analysis of the discourse
indicates that the power of the masculine associations were only as strong as their links to practices in other transportation industries which, in any event, were not strongly associated with dominant notions of masculinity. Indeed, the main weakness of the masculinity focus was the characterization of the steward as, for example, someone who was “completely dedicated to the passengers and their comfort; experienced and consistent; part psychologist and part actor; methodical and meticulous; small, agile, quick-moving, deft and proud” (Imperial Airways description of the role of the steward, quoted in Mills, 1998). In the face of other market strategies it was not difficult to adapt this image in support of the employment of female flight attendants, and the association of masculinity with stewarding eventually lost its power (Mills, 1996a; 1998).

**Weick and sensemaking:** we are particularly drawn to Weick’s (1995) theory of sensemaking because of its focus on meaning and identity (Helms Hatfield, 1997, 1998; Helms Hatfield & Mills, 1997). Indeed, as Weick (1985a) puts it, the culture metaphor is significant in so far as it bestows meaning on an otherwise disparate set of events.

Weick’s (1995: 17-62) outline of the “properties of sensemaking” provides a useful way of conceptualizing the generation of rules (i.e., the way that gender rules are developed). Central to Weick’s (1995) notion of sensemaking in organizations is “enactment” which refers to the construction of social reality through action that is then (retrospectively) made sense of by the actor or actors involved. People act, in one way or another, and in so doing come to make sense of their actions in ways that constrain and also provide opportunities for future actions. How people come to construct social realities through enactment is influenced by the “ongoing” nature of sensemaking, the “enacted cues” that people use to build a sensible story around, the situational and “social” contexts in which “retrospective” understandings occur, the need for “plausibility” in story construction, and the impact of sensemaking activity on “identity construction.” More problematic is
the theoryÆs downplaying of power and politics and the assumption that sensemaking is a gender-neutral universal process.

The notion that sensemaking is õgrounded in identity constructionö meshes well with the idea of rules as a set of experiences that have consequences for how people view themselves and others as particular men and women. Nonetheless, while Weick (1995:23) contends that, õpeople learn about their identities by projecting them into an environment and observing the consequencesö, he does so in a way that downplays the role of more powerful actors. Although focused on õactionö much of WeickÆs theory centers on the imposition of ideas on situations that have consequences for those beyond the primary sensemakers. This is at its clearest where Weick references managers as sensemakers who õconstruct, rearrange, single out and demolish many `objectiveÆ features of their surroundingsö (quoted in Hatch, 1997: 41). Thus, while it may be true that everyone can be said to engage in sensemaking it is far from clear that everyone is equal in the process. Nor is it clear that people are equally interested in enacting realities that come to dominate othersÆ sensemaking, or in the creation of ordered understandings of reality. From a feminist perspective there is some concern that sensemaking may, in itself, be a theory that is grounded in the construction of a white, western male identity.

By emphasizing the role of power, while downplaying the (male-associated) universalizing assumptions, WeickÆs theory of sensemaking can provide important directions for a rules approach. To begin with, through an examination of the role of founders and senior managers in the enactment of rules we could usefully explore the particular ways that sense was made of specific events, especially challenges to the gendered order and the extent to which there was a felt need to impose õorder, clarity and rationalityö on events (Weick, 1995: 29). For example, perceived market pressures to introduce female flight attendants led managers at BEA and BOAC, in 1946, to develop a policy of
ôodesexualizationö which allowed them to employ women in a way that de-emphasized the feminine characteristics of female ôstewardsö (Mills, 1997a).

The notion of the ôongoingö character of sensemaking as a series of reference points for making sense of new events and dealing with interruptions to existing plans and actions is invaluable in directing us to explore how particular rule activities at any one time serve to maintain gendered order, and how challenges to certain rules are dealt with through reference to those rule activities. Similarly the notion of ôenacted cuesö suggests that it may be possible to identify significant elements in the development of rules that have served to define particular situations. The ICAN and ICAO banning of women from flight crews in the 1920s, for example, referenced womenÆs menstrual cycle as a central reason. This acted as a cue for wider notions of the physiological and psychological unsuitability of women flyers (Cadogan, 1992). The ôretrospectiveö character of sensemaking (i.e., that `people know what they are doing only after they have done itÆ) can be traced through such things as corporate materials with the view to revealing how enacted rules (e.g., the recruitment of all-male flight crews) influenced gendered notions at a subsequent point in time.

The issue of ôplausibilityö (i.e., ôsocially acceptable and credibleö accounts) is also an interesting idea that directs our attention to the peculiar ways in which gendered rules are maintained and resisted. Exploration of the success or failure of certain gendered accounts may help us to identify factors which make certain prejudices credible. Also the notion of ôresistanceö as ôconfronting the activity of the environmentö (Weick, 1995: 33) leads us to think that changes to certain gendered rules may be uncovered not only in evidence of confrontational action (e.g., union action, legal challenges) but in prominent examples of viewpoints that question existing ways of making sense of an activity. For example, British Airways News, the airlineÆs in-house journal, contained a number of
letters in the 1970s which questioned not so much the restriction of flight attending to
to women but the meanings (e.g., a focus on the bodily features of the job holders) and labels
(e.g., "girls") attached to the practice.

Finally, the "social" character of sensemaking (as a "social process" whereby "conduct is
contingent on the conduct of others, whether [...] imagined or physically present", Weick,
1995: 39) strengthens our view that not only does the enactment of rules have
consequences for all involved -- shaping the sensemaking contexts in which new rules are
developed and in which identities become known, but that it is not shared meanings, nor,
as Weick (1995: 42) suggests, shared experiences that influence collective action, but the
existence of rules of action that are understood (and experienced) in different ways by
those involved.

**Blackler and organizations as activity systems:** the work of Blackler (1992, 1993) offers a
way of understanding not only the micro and macro contexts within which rules are
enacted but the possibilities of change (Helms Hatfield, 1994, 1996). For our purposes,
Blackler's work on activity systems provides a more comprehensive explanation of the
'social' element in Weick's notion of sensemaking while providing a way of
conceptualizing a link between socio-cultural factors, discourse, and organizational rules.
Curiously, for a theory developed out of post-Marxist accounts, Blackler downplays the
role of power, a fact that is particularly evident in his notion of "emancipation" as a
process of making people aware of the social constructionist 'dynamics of their situation'

Central to Blackler's work is the related notions of activity and activity systems.
Drawing on the work of Vygotsky, Blackler (1992: 289) defines activity as "a sociocultural interpretation imposed on the context by the participants themselves," that is, that activity is not merely 'action' but the inter-relationship between the processes of
acting and making sense of the action. Thus, for example, the activities of a male engineer should be seen not simply as engagement in the physical act of engineering (e.g., machine tooling) but in a process that is framed by a particular understanding of what engineering is (e.g., a masculine undertaking involving the exercise of certain skills, etc.). "ActivityÆ alone does not tell us anything about the roots of the sense that people impose on an action and this is where Blackler (this time drawing on the work of Engestrom) develops the notion of activity systems. Activity systems refers to ôthe context of actionsö that is constructed, by social actors, through a series of influences ôwhich mediate the interactions between the individual and his or her context; by the appearance of traditions, rituals and rules which mediate the relationship between the individual and her community; and by a simultaneous emergence of a division of labour that mediates the relationship between the community and the actions of its membersö (Blackler, 1993: 868). Thus, a social actor draws upon broad understandings to make sense of a particular activity. In our example above the engineer does not simply make sense of his activity from a peculiar personal understanding of the situation (although this is always a possibility) but, rather, draws on established notions of the masculine character of engineering tools, skills and knowledge.

Through exploration of key aspects of social life that contribute to the construction of an activity system Blackler reveals the potential for organizational change. Here, while consistently focusing on contradictions and ambiguities within and between activity systems, BlacklerÆs understanding of the ôessentials of such contextsö shift from an emphasis on UngerÆs notion of formative contexts to an emphasis on EngestromÆs model which includes ôculture, division of roles, and physical artefactsö (Blackler, 1993: 868-9). In brief, Unger (1987) contends that ôthe origins of social arrangements lie in past social conflicts and the institutional and imaginative arrangements which followed their resolution. [That such] ôformative contextsö are deep seated and pragmatic in their
effects on everyday life [and] provide an implicit model of how social life should be ledÆ (Blackler, 1992: 283). UngerÆEs notion of formative contexts links activity at the local level with dominant social assumptions about the character of social life and helps to explain how people come to reproduce existing practices. Following the first World War, for example, it is not unreasonable to speculate that, in Britain, a dominant social viewpoint that `womanÆs place was in the homeÆ (Pugh, 1992) influenced the hiring practices of those involved in airlines (Mills, 1994) and other types of organization, with imaginative action leading eventually to institutional practices and the development of gendered rules.

While Unger `recognizes [...] the privileged hold that certain groups and traditions have upon the mass culture [exerting] a unifying influence over expectations and idealsÆ (Blackler, 1992: 280) he nonetheless provides ôa somewhat restricted account of human agencyö, having little to say about how ôthe distinctive characteristics of a formative context may be learned and internalized by those affected by themö (Blackler, 1992: 287-8). To this end, Blackler turns to Engestrom for answers; sadly, in the process, losing sight of the role of dominant actors. EngestromÆEs focus on processes of mediation -- `of tools between subject and object, of rules between community and subject, and of the division of labour between community and object æ (Blackler, 1993: 869, emphasis in the original) -- appear as no less vague in their specifics as UngerÆEs concept of formative context but is important in focusing attention on (i) the idea that different elements, or essentials, contribute to the construction of an activity system, (ii) that each essential may contain conflictual and ambiguous elements, (iii) that an activity system can be composed of actors who are more or less influenced by different essentials or reflect a different aspect of an essential, and (iv) that an activity system may contain conflicting and ambiguous ideas. From this perspective change can occur when actors confront or are confronted by conflict and ambiguities in their activities. For Blackler (1993: 881) this can
help managers and others to effect change by being making participants aware of the social
constructionist nature of their activities and encouraging people to stand back from
their everyday routines and to perceive the overall pattern that such routines fall into.

From our perspective, the notion of organizations as activity systems encourages a focus
on different areas of dominant social, institutional, and local practices in the maintenance
of a particular set of gendered rules and the role of conflict and ambiguities in how those
rules change or might be changed. Thus, for example, in order to explain how the hiring
practices of BEA and BOAC shifted from a policy of desexualization in 1947 to the
selling of eroticised images of women in 1960 (Mills, 1997a) we would need to examine
the contribution of such things as local practices (e.g., female flight attendants actively
sought a more `feminineÆ look to the uniforms they wore), institutional practices (e.g.,
the hiring of women to an increasing number of different jobs and the further development
of segregated work), broad social understandings and practices (e.g., the role of fashion
and beauty contests in the social construction of images of women and men), and the
potential for contradiction within and between levels (e.g., `positiveÆ changes in the
employment of women in a range of jobs vs. the strengthening of segregated work;
changing definitions of women as employees vs. a changing emphasis on the bodily
presentation of women, etc.).

Insights from the work of Foucault, Weick and Blackler help to strengthen elements of the
rules approach by providing a level of explanation for how rules are made sense of
(Weick), develop a dimension of coherence (Foucault) and change (Blackler) over time.

Application
At first sight the rules approach may appear overly complex -- asking the practitioner to consider not only key organizational rules, discourses, and formative contexts but the sensemaking frameworks of the actors involved. We would answer in two ways. First, we make no apology for focussing on the complexities of organizational life -- to untangle `the way things are doneÆ in a given place it is important to unravel the various interconnections; too many `quick fixÆ models falsely suggest that it is possible to overcome deep-rooted attitudes and behaviours in a short space of time. Second, we would argue that the model is not that difficult to operationalise.

Operationalising the model: To begin with, it is important to work collaboratively with organizational clients to establish a desired element of change (e.g., the creation of a more equitable pay system). Then, through a series of interviews, observations and content analysis, (i) document the extent and nature of the problem (e.g., comparable rates of pay between men and women at all levels of the organization), [information gathered through company data and/or surveys of employees]; (ii) identify extant rules that contribute to the (discriminatory) practice [through analysis of dominant themes gathered through interviews, observation and analysis of corporate documents]; (iii) identify key organizational discourses that appear to support the practice in hand [again drawing on analysis of dominant themes]; (iv) identify key socio-cultural influences (formative context) on the practice [drawing on identifications of those influences by informants and undertaking selected content analysis of extant themes within the industry, profession, or occupation]; (v) identify major sensemaking differences between salient actors involved in the construction of the selected practice [information through interviews and observations]; (vi) identify any significant ambiguities and conflicts in the different levels of influence [information through conflicting and unclear themes]; and (vii) confront those involved with the `findingsÆ and assist them to find ways not only to address the specific
problem but to establish a process of reflection and negotiation that serve to question the purpose of particular sets of rules.

As a final word we would say that we do not see the problem of addressing the gendering of organizational culture as an easy process. Power and politics will continue to play a key role. However, power is gained not only from structural position but within relationships to rules and to discourse. By questioning rules, sensemaking frameworks, discourse and formative contexts we are in some small, but important way destabilizing existing frameworks of power.

References


36


