

Gender and Diversity in Management

A Concise Introduction

Caroline Gatrell
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For Tony, and Pam and Max

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For everyone involved, past and present, in the Institute of
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1

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY GENDER AND DIVERSITY IN MANAGEMENT?

All organizations have inequality regimes, defined as loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions, and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender, and racial inequalities within particular organizations. (Joan Acker 2006: 443)

Introduction

In the past thirty years, the literature on women and men in management, on diversity in management, and what Acker terms 'inequality regimes' has grown (see, for example, Halford and Leonard 2001; Maddock 1999; Alvesson and Due Billing 1997; Prasad et al. 1997; Mills and Tancred 1992). Changes to legislation and policy have focused on equality of opportunity and diversity, meaning that, *in theory*, the possibilities of careers in management should be open to everyone, regardless of their gender and/or ethnic background. So why do we need a book entitled *Gender and Diversity in Management*? A quick analysis of the gender and the cultural backgrounds of board-level managers within many public and private sector organisations will rapidly demonstrate that the top positions in business, and in the public sector in the UK, are largely filled by white, able-bodied men. Furthermore, studies by government agencies such as the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC 2005a), research by academics (Ahmed et al. 2006), and surveys utilised by activists such as the Gay Rights group Stonewall (TUC 1999) show that discrimination within the workplace remains widespread and persistent and leads to further inequalities in a broader context. Thus, legislation and policy notwithstanding,

'minoritised' groups (by which we mean social groups who are actively constructed as 'other' or outside the dominant norm) continue to face oppression and unequal treatment at work through inequality regimes. The forms of inequality, discrimination and oppression in the workplace can vary but include:

systematic disparities between participants in power and control over goals, resources, and outcomes; workplace decisions such as how to organize work; opportunities for promotion and interesting work; security in employment and benefits; pay and other monetary rewards; respect; and pleasures in work and work relations. (Acker 2006: 443)

Oppression can also refer to symbolic and actual violence.

Women from a range of social locations are still held back by the existence of a wide range of formal and informal organisational practices and processes, often referred to as the 'glass ceiling', and each year tens of thousands of women face pregnancy-related discrimination at work. In terms of career advancement, black and minority ethnic workers experience what is called a 'concrete ceiling', and are often pushed by employers into roles which give them responsibility for diversity in their workplace, but which are not recognised when it comes to promotion or recognition. They thus experience a range of racisms (Ahmed et al. 2006). Workers with disabilities may be seen as a 'problem' by employers who are reluctant to make 'reasonable adjustments' in the workplace so as to offer workers with disabilities a workplace that is less disabling (Disability Rights Commission c. 2004). And gay men, lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered employees face discrimination, and even abuse, in their daily working lives (TUC 1999).

Glossing some complex debates, we can say, in sum, that there is a disparity between the ideals espoused in policies and in theory and what is actually happening in practice. Furthermore, while there continues to be a growing level of scholarly interest in the field(s) of gender and diversity in management, there are still many debates from which the notions of gender and diversity are excluded. Thus, for example, so-called 'mainstream' discussions about 'strategy', 'power', 'economy' and 'knowledge' are often played out in management or organisational journals and books without any reference either to gender or to race, sexuality, or disability, as if these

organisational concepts and practices are somehow neutral when, arguably, the reverse is true. Organisations themselves tend to be constructed as gender-free, colour blind or asexual. In examining processes of inequality in organisations, we can help improve workplace practices but also enhance management and organisational theorising by opening up what has been a partial view of workplace life. Influential feminist organisational theorists see this as a radical move which will produce a new account of organisational life.

The purpose of this mini-guide is twofold. Our main aim is to provide an accessible introduction to gender, race, sexuality and disability, and diversity in management. Our main focus is on waged work and employment, rather than unpaid labour that women do in the home or community. As such, we cover contemporary issues which are central to the debate among scholars and practitioners. At the same time, however, while attempting to present these topics in a straightforward manner, we attempt to set in context the various debates around gender and diversity in management. Even the terms 'gender' and 'diversity' are highly contested and examined from quite different perspectives, which we introduce in the following chapters. *Gender and Diversity in Management* is designed for students on courses across a range of business and management subjects, including women in management, gender in management, equal opportunities and diversity, and human resource management. We also hope it will be valuable to managers from a range of organisations and sectors who wish to understand better the debates around gender and diversity in management, or who seek a practical and up-to-date guide to contemporary thought and practice.

It would be impossible, in one mini-guide (or even in a heavy-weight textbook), to cover issues of gender and diversity across the globe. For this reason, our main point of reference is the UK. However, although localised and legislative differences mean that there are different cultural perspectives on gender, diversity and management, many of the concepts and practices outlined here are of international relevance. Thus, although many of the examples given in this book are from the UK, the ideas and theoretical perspectives may be applied to a wider context, albeit reconfigured to take account of national and cultural perspectives and political contexts. Before we proceed, we will briefly define how we are using the core concepts of 'gender' and 'diversity'.

What Do We Mean by ‘Gender’?

The term ‘gender’, although widely used in everyday discourse, policy documents and academic literature, is hotly debated. There is no one definition that works across all contexts or that is used by all theorists or activists. As leading organisational theorist Joan Acker writes, ‘although the term [gender] is widely used, there is no common understanding of its meaning, even amongst feminist scholars’ (1992: 565). Gender, then, is not self-evident or unproblematic but has immense consequences for the way that the workplace and life outside the workplace are organised and experienced (Wharton 2005). Gender not only organises bodies but bifurcates the whole social world into segregated domains in the workplace, in cultural practices and in the home. In spite of many differences, contemporary gender theorists and activists tend to move away from understanding gender as a natural, unchanging or even biological essence (sometimes referred to as ‘essentialism’). For most social theorists, gender is a social construction. This means that gender – and, in fact, other social categories, such as race, sexuality and disability – are seen as the result of human social processes, actions, language, thought and practices. There are many debates on what it means to say that something is socially constructed. For our purposes, we can say that it emphasises the ongoing and dynamic processes and mechanisms through which gender, race, sexuality and disability are brought into being in the workplace.

To stress the ongoing production of gender, race, sexuality and disability, many social theorists also refer to verbs: for example, gendering, racialising, or disabling. This use of the participle attempts to get at the way that gender, race, etc. are not simply pre-existing as one enters the workplace. Rather than seeing gender, race, etc. as an individual’s properties, they are understood as outcomes of social practices and as being continuously produced and reproduced outside the workplace but also through workplace structures, discourses, cultures, practices, policies, interactions and procedures. Gender and other social differences are thus seen as processes rather than as given traits or essences: thus, gender is actively produced in and through the workplace, and does not simply exist as something that is static prior to or outside the workplace.

There are still debates among activists, feminists, critical race theorists and organisational theorists on which of the above is the most salient practice through which gender and gendering are