

Resistance in Academia

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Introduction

This paper describes various types of resistance within academic organisations. It starts from a recognition that gender is embedded in such organisations (Acker, 1990 and 1998) and that once we accept 'that staff bring their personal interests into organisations and that these shape the way they discharge their functions, we must also accept that gendered perceptions, practices and attitudes will be present too' (Halford, 1992:172). It assumes, drawing on Connell's work, (1995a: 82) that although only a minority of men actively subordinate women (hegemonic masculinity) the majority benefit from the patriarchal dividend 'in terms of honour, prestige or the right to command. They [men] also gain a material dividend.' This dividend is facilitated by the fact that hegemonic masculinity is used as 'an organising principle' in such structures (Cheng, 1996:xiv). Resistance is understood 'in terms of consciousness or action, whether structurally or subjectively determined, either collectively or individually engaged' (Gottfried, 1994:109): a definition which encompasses, but is not restricted to, the kinds of resistance typically associated with industrial labour conflicts

This paper is coming from an Irish perspective, although it seems plausible to suggest that the patterns of resistance identified here are by not peculiarly Irish. It is worth noting that recent dramatic changes have not occurred in academic structures in Ireland (although such changes in the UK do not seem to have substantially altered the gendered nature of the faculty profile: Davies and Holloway, 1995; Morley, 1999; Hearn, 1999). Ruane and Sutherland (1999), using Irish data derived from the Higher Education Authority (and including two primary teacher training colleges), found that women constituted 28% of the faculty in academia and just over 5% of those at professorial level. The latter pattern is virtually

identical to the situation before the Marriage Bar ended in 1973 (this obliged women to withdraw from paid employment on marriage in a variety of occupations and created a context where there was social pressure to do so in a variety of other areas: O'Connor, 1998a). In Ireland the proportion of women at professorial level is low, but it is not very different from that in the UK where women constitute 7-8% of those at professorial level (Hearn, 1999). In the US women constitute 20% of those with full professorial status: Chronicle of Higher Education, 1999, September: 14); and only 8% of those in the Eight Ivy League and the 'Big Ten' Universities. In Finland (widely seen as 'the promised land': Husu, 1999) 18% of those at professorial level are women. Such patterns cannot be explained by a country's level of economic development (Malik and Lie, 2,000); nor by the proportion of women in the labour force or by their educational levels. Indeed Irish women constitute just under two thirds of those in professional occupations; they are out-performing boys educationally in state examinations and constitute roughly half of all undergraduate and post-graduate students in higher education (O'Connor, 1998a; Ruane and Sutherland, 1999).

Methodology

It is important to stress the methodological limitations of this article. It draws particularly on participant observation of the position of faculty women in three Irish academic organisations in which I was employed at various times over the past 30 years (i.e. in the early 1970s; the 1980s; and the 1990s respectively): initially at research assistant level and more latterly at professorial level. There is absolutely no evidence to suggest that these institutions are in any way atypical. Up to the early 1990s my interests had studiously, and unconsciously, excluded power. Personal and professional experiences in the 1990s led me to reflect on these issues at the level of 'discursive consciousness' (Haugaard, 1997). More latterly I have been seen as an academic whose activities have some legitimacy in view of the externally imposed requirements in the equal opportunities area (Universities Act, 1998).

However, raising issues publicly about any organisation is widely seen as problematic and involves questions of institutional loyalty. Ireland is a very small country (3.7 million people) of whom only 1.3 million are in paid employment. It has a total of seven universities, fourteen other higher education establishments and a handful of other semi-state research institutes. The size of the academic sector can be illustrated by the fact that there are a total of 18 women at professorial level in the entire academia (Smyth, 1996; Ruane and Sutherland,

1999). Hence the specific characteristics of the three organisations will not be described nor the differences between them referred to. This puts demands on the readers trust. I can only echo Sennett's (1998) hope that this deviation from normal methodological practice is seen for what it is: a device that enables ideas and observations to be presented in a delicate situation.

Types of resistance

Analytically separate kinds of resistance are described below and are speculatively located on a continuum in terms of their potential for organisational transformation. This focus on the micro-politics of organisations reflects an assumption that seeing the issue at close range, and dealing with them at that level constitutes resistance.

1. 'Keeping your head down'

This is an individual approach that involves social, emotional and/or physical withdrawal from the wider organisational structure and a focusing of energies on that limited arena where the maximum level of control can be exerted (viz. the lecture theatre or one's own desk). In all three academic institutions, women's withdrawal from the wider organisational context was simultaneously an act of individual resistance and was used as evidence that they were not promotable. It is seen as the least organisationally transformative type of resistance.

2. Creating or maintaining a 'separate' world

Predominantly female areas of employment are typically characterised by a chronic shortage of resources. Their very marginality means that it is difficult to achieve the kind of visibility that is important as regards promotion. In predominantly male areas of paid employment, ties between women, although important for identity validation, are less useful for career advancement (Kilduff and Mehra, 1996). In such structures women who do not wish to see themselves as victims may resist by collectively creating their own 'separate' world where a gendered sense of identity is valued. Such relationships with other women offer a definition of identity which enables them to critique the definition of self as the 'Other': 'In these places of women-among-themselves, something of a speaking (as) woman is heard'; 'In suffering, but also in women's laughter. And again: in what they "dare"- do or say- when they are among themselves' (Irigaray, 1985:135 and 134). Resistance is likely to provoke little negative reaction when the areas involved are seen as trivial. Where they are seen as subversive, invisibility is not an option: 'slagging', bullying, isolation, the

undermining of professional identity and stymieing of task achievements being used. Attempts to sustain a non-stigmatised identity and a collective worldview in this situation were only possible through retreats to a bunker (Telford, 1996): of necessity a short term solution.

3. Challenging the (socially created) opposition between work and family

This opposition can be dealt with by remaining single /not having children. National data is not available on the extent to which this still happens. However limited Maternity Leave has only been in existence in Ireland since 1981 and (unpaid) Parental Leave since 1998. Family friendly employment policies are limited. In any case these facilitate individual women's attempts to reconcile work and family but do not challenge traditional work structures' (Lewis, 1997:21). Furthermore there may be a lack of a 'sense of entitlement' (Lewis, 1997) to them within many organisational cultures. Indeed Byrne and Dillon (1996) noted that faculty women did not even take advantage of their full statutory rights in relation to maternity leave.

4. Passing on the challenge to next generation

The very nature of teaching is such that it is eminently suitable to passing on the challenge to a new generation. This can be done directly through the content of the teaching material used. At a more general level the pedagogic style adopted can be more or less facilitative of developing a radical critique of institutional realities. At a less obvious level, the creation of awards and bursaries that validate the academic achievements of young women in a context where the under-representation of women in academia is also stressed publicly can be seen as recognising the responsibility of a new generation to keep the issue alive. Such activities are useful and important but they do not tackle the immediate problem.

5. Tackling the 'enemy' within?

Intriguingly, although women were severely under-represented at decision-making level in the three academic organisations, the majority did not 'see' it. Educational and occupational systems relentlessly encourage this illusion: one which is very re-assuring for those who benefit from the patriarchal dividend but are 'bashful about domination' and like to feel that the privileges they enjoy are given to them 'by nature or tradition or by women themselves rather than by the active social subordination of women going on here and now' (Connell, 1995b: 215). In this context references to women and women's interests may be perceived as 'sexist' and effectively as attempts to demean. A widespread lack of confidence and

organisational naiveté appeared common amongst the faculty women. Low levels of self-esteem have been shown to appear very early in Irish women and to exist even when class background and ability are controlled for. This is not surprising in a society where, with the exception of the largely symbolic position of President, the face of authority is typically male; women's work is seen as less valuable than men's; women are paid less; and where there is a belief that men's power and authority is 'natural' and 'appropriate'

6. Naming aspects of organisational culture which are not 'woman friendly'

Organisational culture is the concept that is typically used to refer to ideas about 'women's place' and to what has been called the complicated fabric of myths and values that legitimise their position at the lower levels of the hierarchy and portray managerial jobs as primarily masculine. A variety of work has adverted to its existence and importance in 'chilling' women out (Deem, 1999; Husu, 1999). Publicly naming such a culture in a variety of internal fora (at Departmental, Faculty, Management Co-ordinating Group; Promotion Committee; Governing Body and Union meetings) is a form of resistance. In some cases doing this was seen as indicative of an inability to accept authority. Those raising such issues were sometimes demonised, thereby undermining their attractiveness as collaborators, reinforcing their status as not being 'team players' and so increasing their structural vulnerability. It was also common for the accuracy of the figures to be challenged; for such concerns to be seen as feminist and divisive and for claims to be made that the trends would change 'naturally' in the future.

7. Revealing organisational procedures which are not 'woman friendly'

Subtle limitations to the degree to which procedures were 'woman friendly' persist. Thus for example a requirement to ensure a gender balance on the interview board was sometimes met by including only one woman- and one who was at a lower professional level than her male counterparts. Frequently, high profile work was not allocated to women, making it difficult for them to achieve visibility, to 'show form', to be seen as an obvious candidate for promotion. There were of course some pro-feminist men (Hearn, 1999:135). However, many men at the middle ranks of these organisations had ties to male colleagues rooted in their common identity as men, in patterns of sociability and past indebtedness. The limit of such men's support frequently consisted in not actively opposing any proposal that might benefit women. Even where positions of managerial authority were rotated, this sometimes occurred amongst a small number of men who utilised existing structures to allocate resources to each

other and generally advanced each others' careers: the most administratively arduous of these posts being given to a man at quite a low level, whose own chances of promotion were increased by the ties of indebtedness he was then able to create.

Subtle discrimination may also be reflected in the allocation of senior posts to particular gendered areas; in the framing of advertisements; in the importance attached to vague criteria at critical access points; in loose marking schemas and general assessments of a candidate's 'style' at interview as well as in ideas that men are more 'natural' management material or that they 'need' promotion more. The recent Employment Equality Act (1998) permits but does not require positive action and lacks specificity (Barker and Monks, 2000). The inadequacies of legislation as a way to promote equality have been widely noted (Bercusson and Dickens, 1996 and McCrudden, 1993).

8.Exposing aspects of gendered career structures

Despite considerable discussion of de-layering and of flatter organisational structures Halford et al (1997) noted that in the organisations they studied it was very unlikely for men, other than at the very start of their careers, to be in junior positions, while these latter positions were filled by women who stayed there for most of their careers. Similar sorts of patterns were evident in these organisations. In many cases predominantly female areas of employment had heavier teaching loads than predominantly male areas: a pattern which militated against women within an increasingly research conscious milieu. The narrowness of the 'channel' from which senior academics were recruited, and the existence of integrated promotion mechanisms, further militated against the presence of women at senior level.

9.Creating/Mobilising allies

Electronic networking between women is becoming important as regards the transmission of information (e.g. MIT 1999) and the creation of a feeling of collective strength and identity amongst what is a very scattered and fragmented community. Such electronic ties are particularly useful since visible strong ties between women were sometimes informally ridiculed, and in other contexts were seen as subversive. The quiet support of various kinds provided by women in the administrative structure, many of whom were in junior positions, was also crucially important in many situations.

Within the organisations men at senior level had more potential than those at middle management level as allies (a point also made by Barker and Monks, 2,000). This reflects the fact that they are less threatened by such developments; more accountable to wider

institutional forces and more sensitive to the performance of their organisation on a variety of externally defined indicators. Such support was strengthened by their 'buying into' a 'female' agenda through participation in gendered projects to raise the profile of their area. In this way they became stakeholders in the wider gender project: exemplifying Foucault's observation (1980) that 'resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.' Their receptivity at a personal level to such initiatives seemed to be related to their own experience of discrimination; and their willingness to identify across gender (a willingness which it has been suggested was related to their ideas about their own sexuality: Maile, 1999). Their involvement meant that resistance was indirectly legitimated.

10. Targeting key structures

If women recognise that they are unlikely to be either sacked or promoted, their co-operation with structures which disempowered them became problematic and they took steps to become increasingly represented in union structures, on key committees and representational bodies. In some cases the sheer paucity of women, especially at senior level, and the requirement that senior staff be involved in key committees, made the support of pro-feminist men critical. A decision to introduce quotas on certain key representational structures in one organisation created a context where women were more willing to put themselves forward, so that the imposition of quotas became unnecessary.

11. Whistle blowing

Rothschild and Miethe (1994: 254) defined whistle blowing as 'the disclosure of illegal, unethical or harmful practices in the workplace to parties who might take action' (i.e. to those further up or outside the hierarchy). They noted that typically whistleblowers were highly competent employees, although the typical response was to depict them as troublemakers, 'whingers' or crazy people (if they could neither be got rid of nor intimidated into silence). The personal and the financial cost of attempting to raise gender related issues through whistle blowing is usually considerable. In this context the public action of eight faculty women in University College Dublin in publicly highlighting the position of women in their organisation in 1998 was remarkable. The recent initiative by the Employment Equality Agency (now the Office of the Director of Equality Investigations) in independently taking a case on behalf of all women faculty within that University offers possibilities. A number of the women involved in the initial whistle blowing have, incidentally, been promoted.

12. Use of Negative Power

Handy (1993) defines negative power as 'the capacity to stop things happening, to delay them, to distort or disrupt them'. This power is available to everyone regardless of position, and can be very effective when used politely but firmly to highlight the workload implications of directing all undergraduates and postgraduates who are interested in issues related to women to that minority of faculty who are women. Various kinds of industrial action are of course a collective form of such negative action. However, in hierarchically and numerically male organisations, it is extremely difficult to get the union to negotiate on measures which are seen as even predominantly in favour of women. Quite simply the membership will not support them. Individual male representatives (particularly those who had some personal experience of discrimination) were frequently personally supportive but there were very clear limits to that support. The perceived timidity of those women whose 'frontier of control' (Gottfried, 1994) is a personal and professional commitment to the students further inhibited industrial action. It is perhaps worth reflecting that the transformative potential implicit in the use of negative power has only begun to be appreciated by many women.

Conclusions

The extent to which change is brought about by resistance is difficult to assess. In one or more of the organisations referred to, equal opportunities policies were formulated; structures created to deal with equality issues; directives issued as regards the composition of interview boards and the use of search procedures; a women's academic network was formed; gender awareness workshops were undertaken by senior management and a commitment was given that line management would identify time specific targets as regards redressing gender balance and ways of dealing with an organisational culture which was not 'woman friendly'. These changes may have occurred anyway. Change in the proportion of women at senior level in these organisations has been minimal.

Resistance does seem to be useful in generating an ongoing awareness of gender amongst both women and men. Such awareness is not, of course, enough since it may simply increase women's frustration and the intensity of the backlash. The most obvious counter resistance strategies are the stigmatisation of any initiative in favour of women; the demonization of prominent women; the establishment of organisational 'roadblocks' and the rendering of hard-won procedures irrelevant by the introduction of new ones containing implicit positive discrimination in favour of men. The process is painfully slow and extremely time consuming

(Price and Priest, 1996). However the abandonment of the academy to hegemonic masculinity in the Third Millennium is not an attractive option.

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