Exploring gendered cultures

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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this paper is to describe the implementation of a methodology for exploring gendered organisational culture. After outlining concepts of culture, the paper discusses the extent to which all organisational cultures are gendered. A distinction is made between the investigation of gender cultures, where culture is explored solely in terms of gender, and gendered cultures, the extent to which all cultures are gendered. Methods for investigating culture are reviewed and a methodology described which is designed to explore both general and gendered aspects of culture. This includes interviews using Repertory Grid, as well as workshops, augmented by documentary evidence and observation. The resulting findings from the application of this methodology are described briefly in relation to four organisations in different sectors: a privatised utility, a UK National Health Service Trust, a council Leisure Services Department, and a company in the financial sector. The paper concludes that this is a useful methodology for exploring gendered culture.

CONCEPTS OF CULTURE

The concept of culture comes originally from social anthropology (Pettigrew, 1979). In an influential paper Smircich (1983) drew attention to the main divisions and subdivisions within the field of organisational culture, identifying two main uses. The first regards organisational culture as an independent variable, that is something separate from other features of the organisation such as structure and technology, and the second perceives it as a root metaphor. The phase root metaphor needs some explanation. Smircich (1983) reviews work suggesting that both managers and organisation theorists use metaphors or images as a way of understanding organisations and organisational life. Thus stating that an organisation is a culture is a way of stating that it can understood *as if it were* a culture.

To put these two meanings of Smircich (1983) into the context of this study, the first view treats organisational culture as something which may be influenced, changed and manipulated, and in turn influence, change and manipulate members and features of the organisation. Thus the number and hierarchical positions of women, which could be taken as one example of gendered culture, could be seen as an outcome (a dependent variable) of the organisational culture (the independent variable). The second broad approach, where culture is viewed as a root metaphor, regards the number and hierarchical positions of women as one of many manifestations of organisational culture. It is a facet of organisation that throws more light on a situation without assuming a cause and effect argument. The purposes of these two approaches can be seen respectively to promote managerial action, and to aid broader understanding (Alvesson, 1993). These two approaches have more simply described by Schultz (1995) as functionalism and symbolism.

In functionalism the organisation is seen as a natural system, and culture is viewed as necessary for its survival, hence the name functionalism. The functionalist 'seeks to discover the role which each aspect of cultural practice plays in sustaining the culture as an ongoing system' (Morgan et al, 1983 p. 19). 'Symbolism ... is less precise than functionalism or rationalism and sometimes appears only to share with them the concept of the symbol' (Schultz, 1995 p. 15). Symbolism is concerned with shared meanings, and the aim of the researcher is to understand these meanings (Schultz 1995). Schultz (1995) summarises the main theoretical and methodological differences between functionalism and symbolism as follows. He sees the key analytical question for functionalism as concerned with answering the question of what function culture plays in the organisation. He suggests Schein (1992) is the main protagonist of this approach, although noting that he is not a pure functionalist. There is an assumption that culture develops

through problem solving within the organisation, what Schein (1992) refers to as the problems of external adaptation and internal integration. In functionalism a universal framework for culture is postulated which envisages different levels of culture (Schein, 1992) and is applicable to all organisations (Schultz, 1995). These cultural elements are therefore listed according to the categories/levels within which they fall, and the researcher's task is to find the relations between them. The functionalist approach is primarily diagnostic, and the results produced between organisations are comparable and potentially generalisable as they are using the same theoretical framework (Schultz, 1995).

Meek (1988) makes a thorough and iconoclastic critique of the functionalist concept of culture, tracing its route from social anthropology to organizational behaviour. She points out that this conceptual usage has been imported from one particular branch of social anthropology, the 'structural-functional' paradigm, and that culture as used in anthropology is usually descriptive rather than explanatory or evaluative (Meek, 1988). She criticises the reification and anthropomorphism of culture (for instance talking about a culture as healthy) and rejects the idea that culture is an independent variable that can be manipulated.

By contrast to the culture-as-variable perspective described above, the symbolist approach takes a social constructionist view that culture is about the construction and reconstruction of meaning, which is necessarily specific to the organisation and its particular context (Schultz, 1995); meaning may even be specific to a small part of the organisation. Research findings are usually the result of ethnographic investigation, where there is a search for associations between meanings (Schultz, 1995). Rather than a model being produced, what is forthcoming is a narrative text, uniquely describing the organisation (Schultz, 1995). The aim is to achieve understanding (Schultz, 1995). Although culture is seen in a pattern in both perspectives, in functionalism the pattern is seen as shared, whereas in symbolism there may be shared or non-shared webs of meaning (Schultz, 1995).

Symbolism is similar to functionalism in viewing culture as an integrated pattern, but it allows for the local creation of meaning, that is, sub-cultures (Schultz, 1995). The ontological basis is different. In functionalism, culture is assumed to be real and discoverable. In symbolism, reality is defined as subjective and multi-dimensional,

with the possibility of different meanings attached to the same phenomenon; conversely the same meaning may be conveyed by different phenomena (Schultz, 1995). It follows that culture can never be totally understood and explained, and must be discovered through interpretation (Schultz, 1995).

The lack of consensus about definition has implications for operationalisation (Rousseau, 1992). Whatever concept of culture is preferred, many writers agree that there are both external manifestations of culture, which may be observed in behaviour or processes, and also supporting belief systems, which Schein (1992) calls underlying assumptions. Further distinctions are made between conscious and unconscious values, cited as espoused values, and values in action by Siehl and Martin (1988), or what Schein (1992) describes as espoused values and underlying assumptions. Many writers conceive culture as multi-layered (e.g. Rousseau, 1990). Schein (1992) writes about a three part model; first manifest artefacts, behaviour and processes; second, conscious and sometimes written espoused values; and third underlying, unwritten, and largely unconscious assumptions.

More distinctions have been made between and within these two broad perspectives, which it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss in detail (see for example, Morgan et al, 1983, Alvesson and Berg, 1992, Alvesson, 1993).

THE CASE FOR INVESTIGATING GENDERED CULTURES

There are some descriptions of cultures which are identified in terms of gender, such as Maddock and Parkin's (1993) account of the types of gender cultures within the UK public sector. Serious investigations of gendered cultures such as Cockburn (1991) focus on those aspects of organisations pertaining to Equal Opportunities and sexual equality. This paper draws a distinction between 'gender cultures' where culture is addressed solely or principally in terms of gender, and 'gendered cultures', the extent to which all organisational cultures are integrally and invisibly cast in terms of gender (Hearn et al, 1989). The distinction is essentially one of approach or intention. When gender cultures are investigated the researcher is seeking those aspects pertaining to gender. On the other hand any investigation of culture is inevitably one of gendered cultures, whether this is highlighted by the inves-

tigation or not. In his theoretical work on organisational culture and leadership Schein (1992) writes about the difference between espoused values, those appearing publicly in mission statements, policies and charters, and the underlying assumptions which are rarely articulated and may conflict with espoused values and even with each other. Many companies with espoused 'woman friendly' policies are exposed by their organisational underbelly: women daily experience that they do not fit, as underlying assumptions do not support espoused values.

Some writers suggest that all organisations are gendered (e.g. Gherardi, 1994). Alvesson and Due Billing (1992) point out two different ways in which organisations may be considered gendered. First, one could take a simple head count of the numbers of each sex in a particular job; second they point to jobs and organisational areas having an 'aura' which they consider as more persistent than mere head counting. As Acker (1990) states:

> 'To say that an organization, or any other analytic unit, is gendered means that advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine.' (p. 146)

Gendered culture can be seen in hierarchical and patriarchal features (Itzin, 1995), gendered social divisions (Newman, 1995) gendered departments (Roper, 1994), gendered jobs and roles (Kanter, 1977), gendered processes (Alimo-Metcalfe, 1993), gendered outcomes in terms of promotion (Davidson and Cooper, 1992), gendered pay (Symons, 1992), gendered discourse, sexualised environment (Itzin, 1995), gendered bullying, gendered power (Itzin, 1995) and gendered dominant and subordinate subcultures.

INVESTIGATIVE METHODOLOGIES

Sackmann (1991) reviews existing research methods, putting them on a scale between outsider (etic) and insider (emic) perspectives. She suggests that the range of methods from outsider to insider will include: questionnaires, structured interviews, documentary evidence, group discussion, in-depth interviews and participant observation. She contends that an outsider approach is more likely to be based on positivist science, with the goal of generalising from data, and will conceive culture as an independent variable. An insider approach aims to understand life within a particular organisation (Sackmann, 1991).

Looking first at quantitative techniques, a number of off-the-shelf culture surveys have been developed (for example, the Kilmann-Saxton Culture Gap Survey, 1986, Sleezer and Swanson, 1992, Simpson and Beeby, 1993) designed as a preliminary for organisational development work. These surveys are limited to measuring what has been predetermined as important, and presuppose culture as an independent variable. However, Reichers and Schneider (1990) note that culture researchers are more likely to use qualitative than quantitative techniques, and allow meaning to emerge from the group under investigation, which would be in sympathy with a symbolist perspective. Ethnography is advocated by Gregory (1983) and Rosen (1991). Gregory questions the management-centric approach of most research on organisational culture, which tends to view culture as homogenous and evaluate it in terms of its effectiveness of delivering top management goals. Rosen (1991) argues for the use of ethnography as a method of investigation for organisations and organisational culture. He regards 'truth' as socially constructed, in opposition to positivist approaches. He points out however that the academic publication and reward systems militate against traditional ethnographic approaches such as participant observation.

Pettigrew (1979) describes a longitudinal processual approach to studying organisations and organisational culture. He proposes using 'social dramas', significant events in the organisation, as a focus. He also discusses the fact that culture is notoriously difficult to study, and also change (Pettigrew, 1990) because of a number of issues. These issues are: first, levels, the difference between manifestations and core values; second, pervasiveness, the fact that culture is not only deep but broad; third, implicitness, the taken for granted nature of much of organisational culture; fourth, imprinting, by the history of the organisation; fifth, political, the link between vested interests and dominant culture; sixth, plurality, the existence of a series of subcultures in many organisations; seventh, interdependency, the interconnection of culture with many other aspects of the organisation (Pettigrew, 1990). Because of the issues Pettigrew (1990) highlights, a number of researchers in the culture field have focused on a particular aspect. Meek (1988) suggests that any approach to empirical research within organisational culture must dissect the

concept into manageable proportions. For instance, Sackmann (1990, 1991) chose to focus on one issue, asking respondents about innovation in their company.

Rousseau (1990) discusses the case for multiple methods of assessment of organisational culture. She notes that organisational researchers have investigated widely differing aspects of culture, and discusses the difficulties of operationalising something over which there is no clear agreement. She points out that the extent to which elements of culture are accessible varies. Artefacts and structures are observable by an outsider, whereas behavioural norms and values can only be understood by direct information from members of the organisation. However, underlying assumptions, which are assumed to be unknown even to members of the organisation, require significant interaction between researcher and members. Thus those aspects which most researchers conceptualise as the most important aspects of culture are the least accessible. Noting the tendency of researchers to investigate the layer of culture they find most appealing (or accessible) Rousseau argues the case for multiple methods of assessment. Similar arguments for combining methods are put by Reichers and Schneider (1990) and Siehl and Martin (1988). Reviewing the arguments in favour of qualitative or quantitative research on culture, Rousseau (1990) summarises the summarises the position in favour of the former. This is that culture is at its basis unconscious and highly subjective, requiring interactive and iterative investigation, and an individualised approach.

A noted researcher in the field, Schein (1992), suggests two main methods, whether one is deciphering culture for insiders or outsiders respectively. In the first case, he suggests that the reasons for undertaking the study is for action-research, in order to help leaders understand and manage internal cultural issues. Schein describes a workshop approach with key culture carriers. Where the existence of subcultures is suspected, then he advocates the repeating of the process with different groups and samples. This is essentially a top-down approach undertaken for managerial reasons. As group members are selected for their role as key culture carriers, they are likely to be organisation members in positions of authority and therefore predominantly men. While this may convey the dominant culture of the organisation, there is a concomitant likelihood of ignoring female perspectives and subcultures.

Schein's (1992) second approach to the exploration of organisational culture is for scientific research, where the researcher is trying to gather data for theoretical reasons, which was the purpose of this study. In this case he advocates iterative interviews, and proposes joint exploration between the researcher and motivated informants, to avoid subjectivity and to overcome the insider's lack of awareness. He suggests that where the same observations have been made by the insider, then one is dealing with a 'real' cultural issue (p. 173). The next step is to formalise hypotheses. Only at this stage should the researcher embark on other methods such as questionnaires, the content analysis of documents, stories, and formal interviews. The data from these are then used to amend and modify the culture model, which can be re-tested on interested insiders. Schein (1992) points out that the presence of the investigator is itself an intervention which must be included in the analysis.

After reviewing the above advice on method, the next section looks at the methodology chosen.

METHODOLOGY FOR THE CASE STUDIES

The criteria which guided the choice of methodology were as follows:

1. Whilst the main aim was to investigate gendered aspects of culture, a general understanding of the culture was also necessary to put this into context.
2. The desire of the interviewee to give pleasing answers, particularly on topics such as gender and Equal Opportunities, should be avoided as far as possible.
3. Influence by the interviewer on the interviewees' data should be minimised.

After being piloted in a recently privatised public utility, the methodology was successively applied to a UK National Health Service (NHS) Trust, a Leisure Services Department, and a financial sector company. These are referred to respectively as Westco, the Trust, Leisure Services, and Finco. These were organisations chosen so that commonalities and comparisons could be determined between them. All are organisations in the North of England, but they vary on a number of features, for instance, Westco has a predominantly male workforce, whereas the Trust is predominantly female. Leisure Services and Finco are more mixed in their gender composition. Two are in the public sector, Leisure Services and the

Trust, and two in the private sector, Finco and Westco, and the four organisations are in a range of different sectors. Only one, the Trust, is a member of Opportunity 2000, the UK voluntary initiative to improve women's contribution in the workplace.

The methodology, slightly amended after the pilot study, comprised the following five components:

1. Interviews

Individual interviews with 6 women and 6 men managers were conducted. These individuals were selected to represent a cross section of managers from supervisors to Director level. The individuals were selected in each case with the help of an inside informant, who contacted them prior to my making individual appointments. Because of the smaller number of women in managerial positions, the women were selected first, and then men in similar positions were matched to them. This meant top managers were rarely interviewed.

As indicated above I was concerned to avoid socially pleasing answers. It seemed likely that any interview format that relied on eliciting a direct answer on gender issues was likely to be unreliable. This would be the case whether the interview were structured, semi-structured, or an open in-depth approach. Even if respondents were not deliberately misleading, there might be a further problem of them repeating common theories about why women fail to progress which appear in the media (see Faludi, 1991). The Repertory Grid method of interviewing was therefore used, largely following advice in Stewart et al (1981). Repertory grid is a systematic technique for eliciting constructs (Dunn et al, 1987) based on original work done by Kelly (1955). It allows the researcher to uncover the mental map of the interviewee, and shares responsibility with the interviewee for the course of the discussion (Stewart et al, 1980). Kelly (1955) proposed Personal Construct Theory (PCT), which is concerned with the patterns people use to make sense of the world (Gammack and Stephens, 1994). Repertory grid is the technique which operationalises PCT.

Repertory grid as a technique is quite precise. First of all 'elements' must be selected, which should be things or people likely to have the range of properties which the interview is intended to explore. They can be provided by the interviewer (Stewart et al, 1980), or the researcher may suggest role titles or situations (Easterby-Smith et al, 1996). Easterby-Smith et al (1996) state that the list must be homogeneous, representative, unambiguous and not more than 8 to 10 in total.

The next stage is construct elicitation. The most usual method for this is to use triads (Stewart et al, 1980). A group of three elements is selected and the interviewee asked in what way two have something in common not shared by the third; an alternative way of putting this is to ask if two are similar and one is different (Stewart et al, 1980). Thus the researcher may ask the respondent to talk about differences 'in terms of' or 'from the point of view of' material properties, actions, or feelings (Stewart et al, 1980). Generally bipolar constructs are elicited, such as 'helpful – unhelpful'. Constructs can be explored in greater depth by 'laddering'. In 'laddering up' the researcher asks why a particular set of constructs is important, which could be in terms of the interviewee's preference or view of importance (Stewart et al, 1980). Based on Kelly's (1955) assumption that constructs are hierarchical, this should lead eventually to core constructs, those which an interviewee cannot explain. Stewart et al (1980) point out that it is not necessary to explore these in every application. 'Laddering down' is when the researcher asks the interviewee, to give an example (Stewart et al, 1980), or to ask what is meant (Easterby-Smith et al, 1966.

The next stage in the full application of this technique, which need not be proceeded to, is the construction of a matrix, the eponymous grid. As this was not utilised in this study, it will not be further discussed here.

There are a number of advantages of repertory grid. It enables people to explore their own ideas, perceptions, feelings and values (Easterby-Smith et al, 1996) and, despite the structured approach, it does not undermine the self determination of the subject (Gammack and Stephens, 1994). It is a suitable method for finding out about the things managers take for granted, for instance, bringing out the differences between implicit and explicit judgement (Easterby-Smith et al, 1996), or unverbalised assumptions (Stewart et al, 1980). It is a participative method which respondents find interesting (Easterby-Smith et al, 1996). It is said to reduce observer bias (Dunn et al, 1987). Easterby-Smith et al (1996) dispute that bias can be eliminated.

There are also disadvantages, one problem being the nature of the constructs elicited. First,

bipolar constructs may be over determined, that is, they may be forced into existence where in reality there is a weak distinction between them, or may be contrived (Gammack and Stephens, 1994). Second, there may be some constructs common to all elements that are therefore not mentioned as they are not apparent through the triading technique (Gammack and Stephens, 1994). Third, not all constructs are equal in importance (Gammack and Stephens, 1994).

As a result of this advice on repertory grid, the prime concern was to use it as a non-threatening technique to find out about perceptions of managers, and reduce influence on the interviewees. It was also decided to focus the investigation on particular parts of culture, where gendered aspects might be revealed. I chose as the area for investigation what underlies selection and promotion processes. The question asked of respondents was: 'How do people progress in this organisation?' The initial set of elements (Stewart et al, 1980) that each respondent was asked to assemble was a number of managers known to them: three people who had done well in the organisation or who were recognised as potential high flyers; three who were making steady progress and might expect one or two more promotions; and three who were low achievers and were perceived as having no promotion prospects. The aim of selecting these elements was to find out those constructs individuals associate with success in this particular organisation, and through discussion gain insight into organisational culture. I asked respondents to select a mixture of men and women in each group of three elements. This was so that I could find out differences and similarities between and within men and women. From these elements I selected three, one from each group (for instance numbers 1, 4, and 7), and asked respondents to identify ways in which two were similar and one was different. I continued to use triads, following a routine of selecting mixed groups of three.

I spent some time clarifying constructs with interviewees and ensured that each construct only dealt with one continuum of meaning, although I emphasised that they might either come up with opposites, or alternatively they might suggest one construct qualified by 'more' and 'less'. I consider that allowing this obviated one of the criticisms of repertory grid, that it forces oppositional constructs at the expense of more subtle distinctions. I also allowed interviewees to offer constructs based on all three elements, where they felt these were important. Sometimes

interviewees looked at all the elements together, as they obviously found it helpful. In all cases the repertory grid exercise served as a helpful trigger point for discussion. Some interesting material came up unprompted; on the other hand repertory grid formed a useful framework for the less forthcoming interviewees.

The Repertory Grid topic was successful in encouraging discussion. Having established rapport with the interviewees in relation to general aspects of how employees progress, a fairly non-threatening topic, it was easy to move on to asking about differences between men and women. Although it was possible that some were giving me what they perceived as socially acceptable answers, the range of people I interviewed, from paternalist chauvinist to committed feminist, meant I could cross check data. The question arises as to whether this information would have been obtained without using this particular interviewing technique, and it appears less likely. Having said this, the amount of time spent on general discussion varied from almost none to half of the interview, as interesting topics were followed up when they arose.

All bipolar constructs were recorded on cards, the constructs on one side, with comments and notes on the back. After each interview the content was transcribed, including comments additional to the constructs, general discussion, and my observations and reflections.

There are several methods of analysis available, of which the most pertinent to this study are the frequency count and content analysis (Stewart et al, 1980). What Stewart et al (1980) describe as content analysis might elsewhere be called thematic analysis. They suggest that a series of categories is used and that elements and constructs as appropriate are assigned to categories, and this advice was followed.

2. Group workshops

Steyaert and Bouwen (1994) underpin a discussion of group methods with a social constructionist perspective. They distinguish three purposes of group discussion: exploration and description of ideas; the generation of ideas; and intervention. The workshop method advocated by Schein (1992) encompasses the first two of these. Group methods of interview give the advantage that views can be checked contemporaneously against a cross section of organisational participants; conversely, there is always a dan-

ger that there may be pressure for consensus, for instance if a higher status person or particularly persuasive personality is part of the group. One requirement of this kind of interview is that the interviewer needs skills in group process and dynamics as well as research skills, and a disadvantage is that there is less control over outcome (Steyaert and Bouwen, 1994). As a solo researcher I could not analyse process at the same time as controlling the group session and participating intelligently. It is suggested in relation to interviews that the more sensitive topics be left till later (King, 1994). It seemed sensible to apply the same consideration to data gathering with groups.

Group meetings with the women managers, and with the men managers separately were undertaken, using Schein's workshop methodology for eliciting culture (1992). The reason for deciding on separate meetings for each sex was based on a number of different considerations. First, there was my own experience of being a woman manager in male dominated organisations. Second, there is evidence that women in mixed groups contribute less than men (Alimo-Metcalfe, 1993). Third, Blanksby (1988) indicates not only quantitative differences in contribution rates, but also qualitative differences in content. I therefore thought it possible that men and women in an organisation would have different perceptions of culture in general and gendered aspects of culture, and that in a mixed group the women's perception and contribution could be muted.

Schein (1992) recommends two days for workshops, but I often had to settle for two to three hours. I ensured in every case that I left enough time to recapitulate at the end, identifying jointly with the group espoused values and underlying assumptions (Schein, 1992). I stuck to approximately the same format, but the topics explored varied between organisations, generally in line with areas where I wished to confirm or disconfirm preliminary findings from the interview data. Thus I might start by asking about dress codes or modes of address, proceed through topics such as promotion, and finish by asking about gender differences. Most workshops had a purposeful and good natured atmosphere, and many participants said they had enjoyed the workshop and found it interesting. The workshop sessions lasted approximately 2–3 hours, whereas Schein (1992) recommends a day. The main reason was that people were giving their time to me as a researcher rather than being involved in focused problem solving for the company. The topics

selected (an example is set out in Appendix 1) yielded plentiful data about the organisational culture in general, and its gendered aspects. The individual interviews and the separate workshops for men and women meant that differing viewpoints were revealed that might otherwise have been obscured. The group meetings were recorded on flip chart sheets, and subsequently transcribed. An example of topics discussed is found in Appendix 1.

3. Examination of documents

In relation to organisational documents, I compiled a list which included information about the espoused company image, and policies relevant to Equal Opportunities. I did not expect company documents to convey the 'real' organisation, but rather a desired version of the organisation, the espoused values. Forster (1994) suggests that company documentation should never be taken at face value as it is context specific. I considered that authenticity would be covered by receiving material from an authoritative source. Given that I was asking in the main for official policies and pronouncements, I thought it unlikely I might need to consider written data that was sensitive. In relation to documentary evidence, there were two types: policies given at my request, and information I picked up casually, or asked to have copies after hearing about. None was personally sensitive, and none appeared politically sensitive.

4. Discussion with insiders

As each case study progressed I had discussions with interviewees and other informants to check out my perceptions. Help from informants was variable. In some cases I could use my initial contact, as in Leisure Services and Finco, and in other cases I tested ideas out on later interviewees after my ideas had started to form, for instance the Trust.

5. Observation and reflection

Lastly I made casual observations and reflected on my own reaction to the organisation. I collected data opportunistically, for instance when waiting for appointments I watched and observed, or chatted to receptionists.

6. Analysis

At the end of each case study there were two main sources of primary data, from interviews and from the workshop sessions. The interview data was of two sorts: the basic constructs which were all on cards, and the comments, explanations, observations and reflections, which were transcribed into narrative form, as well as being in note form on the back of the cards. The workshop data was as given in the sessions, with the addition only of notes in parentheses.

FINDINGS

Drawing on the workshop sessions and the narrative content of the interviews, this section demonstrates some of the general as well as gendered aspects of organisational culture elucidated by the methodology. Interpretation will draw on both paradigms within the culture field. First, Schein's (1992) framework of espoused values and underlying assumptions will be used to represent a functionalist analysis. Second, this will be supplemented by interpretations drawn from the symbolist perspective. Organisation members, as in Finco, directly and consciously suggested some symbols. For other symbols, as in Westco, I am relying on my intuitive and interpretative skills. Analysis of the constructs elicited by the repertory grid exercises will not be discussed in this paper. What follows is a selection of findings from each case study.

Westco, a privatised utility, has three main divisions, dealing respectively with core operations, technical support, and support services. Women form only 5% of the workforce, and are usually in support roles such as administration. In this industry there have been large increases in the numbers of women employed in basic roles, but not at Westco.

Most managers in Westco said that 'people skills' are increasingly important, and that Westco is moving from a traditionally directive management style to one that is more participative and trusting. There appeared to be a number of contradictions between this espoused value and underlying assumptions, which is demonstrated in Table 1.

For instance, there appear to be assumptions about the need to control manual employees, with a complicated disciplinary procedure and tariff of punishments. A further example is how managers talked about a recently recruited senior man-

Table 1: espoused values and underlying assumptions that conflict with each other – general issues, Westco

Espoused values	Underlying assumptions
Participative management style	Military experience is a good preparation for management
	Manual staff must be controlled
	Shouting can resolve conflict
	Uniforms are necessary to distinguish grades of employees
	Sometimes managers need to behave in a macho way

ager. Many people said to me: 'Jennifer was in the Navy, you know'. When I met her that I found out she also had an MBA from a prestigious European institution and blue chip experience. It seems that colleagues were more impressed by her former military experience than by her management expertise. The command-and-control management style in its extreme manifestation was described as 'macho' management in parts of the organisation. One manager told me that he tries to be as macho as possible in certain situations. Stories circulated about one director who has a fearsome reputation throughout the company, being known as 'the mobster'. Methods of conflict resolution include debate but also shouting. Uniforms denoted the occupational, and hence status, group to which an employee belonged, acting as a horizontal differentiator.

To look at these phenomena from a symbolic perspective, Westco has various manifestations of 'toughness', which appear throughout the organisation, although not universally accepted. Toughness is not referred to as such, but appears in various guises. It includes the quasi-military ranking of staff through distinguishing uniforms, and was evident in the underlying assumption mentioned above about military experience. The reputation of the 'macho' director referred to above also bolsters toughness. In this particular case, the meaning of toughness is probably wider than Westco itself, being linked to both industry sector (Turner, 1971) and the region (Alvesson and Berg, 1992). The strength of this shared meaning about toughness is a further way of explaining the conflict surrounding management style. For instance, as long as toughness is sanctioned and reconstructed through the repetition of stories about the macho director, it will continue to be difficult for alternative values and be-

Table 2: *espoused values and underlying assumptions that conflict with each other – gender issues, Westco*

Espoused values	Underlying assumptions
Headhunt for the best person (male or female) for the senior jobs	Women are good in supportive roles e.g. in office work
	Women have no technical knowledge.

haviour to find a secure place in the organisation. As toughness is usually associated with men, this must make the organisations less welcoming to women, who are unlikely to be socially constructed as tough. Toughness appears a widely held but not universally accepted value in Westco.

Women have traditionally been accepted within the organisation as subordinates, and there appears to be ambivalence about senior women managers, for instance women are not expected to have technical expertise, a fact resented by one female chartered engineer. Some conflicts between espoused values and underlying assumptions in relation to gender are indicated in Table 2.

Turning to a symbolic interpretation, one way in which gender divisions are reinforced in Westco is through stories that appear to have attained mythical status about the unsuitability and unreliability of women in basic grade jobs. For instance one woman was said to have been off sick for the entire nine months of her pregnancy. This myth fulfils the three functions cited by Alvesson and Berg (1992). First, it conveys a basic but incorrect assumption about reality, the effect of pregnancy upon women. Second, it supports behaviours, which would otherwise be unacceptable, the exclusion of women from employment in certain parts of the organisation. Third, it expresses a deep pattern, which justifies the contradiction inherent in honouring and excluding women. As these meanings are not shared throughout the organisation, this places the interpretation of the myth in the symbolic perspective (Alvesson and Berg, 1992)).

The *Trust* assumed its current technically autonomous status in 1993, and provides both hospital and community services. In this organisation, it could be said that what is valued in managers is a combination of 'the nice and the strong', taking the best of what are generally

Table 3: *espoused values and underlying assumptions that support each other – general issues, the Trust*

Identical/similar/supportive espoused values and underlying assumptions
Communication matters
Participative management style

Table 4: *espoused values and underlying assumptions that conflict with each other – general issues, the Trust*

Espoused values	Underlying assumptions
Care for yourself (staff)	Work to complete the job

Table 5: *underlying assumptions that conflict with each other – general issues, the Trust*

Underlying assumptions	Underlying assumptions
Caring for patients	Caring for staff

perceived as female and male characteristics, similar to the androgyny described by Bem (1974). The Trust has an emphasis on communication and people skills might perhaps be expected in an organisation concerned with the care of people. This is shown in quarterly open meetings for all staff, and information for the public in the entrance lobby of the main hospital. Almost all managers are addressed by their first names, including the female Chief Executive. There is encouragement to staff to learn from mistakes, rather than be blamed. There is an 'employee of the month' and long service awards, and other features which encourage feelings of 'belongingness'.

Pressure to perform to the rising Government led requirements puts strain on some aspects of management, which puts downward pressure on managers, as illustrated in Table 4.

The Trust's slogan implies caring for both patients and staff, but as one manager said: 'When someone gets the push it makes you wonder'. There is no room for 'passengers': a number of managers were not successful when the Trust was established, and so those who remain are probably similar in terms of commitment and outlook. This ambiguity is shown in Table 5.

Turning to a symbolic perspective, the most potent symbol in the Trust is the story of how the Chief Executive rose from the position of a hum-

ble clerk to her current position. I would suggest that this can be described as a story or saga (Alvesson and Berg, 1992), but I conceive it primarily as a morality tale, as it is a story which emphasises how hard work and determination, as well as some deserved luck, yields a just reward. The Chief Executive demonstrates her twin attributes of ordinariness and specialness by being familiar with a wide range of Trust personnel, from cleaners upwards, and of course by holding her position successfully. The repetition of this story is a largely localised social construction that transmits norms, values and meaning.

At the time of the case study 3 out of 5 top management post holders were women. As stated the Trust is a member of Opportunity 2000, and therefore one might expect progress for women to be swifter than elsewhere. However, Opportunity 2000 is not without its detractors. A number of men feel that the application of Opportunity 2000 had gone too far in the NHS generally. They allege that positive discrimination had taken place, although they reassured me that this did not apply to this particular Trust. A different view (female) suggests that there were a number of competent women below director level in the Trust just before it took on its new status, but that women who made it to the top in the NHS had to work harder than men. Outside the Trust the top team is mocked as 'petticoat management', and comments are made about knitting.

The generally positive picture for women is not reflected in the thriving subculture of the doctors. Medical specialists remain predominantly male, with suspicions of the 'old boy network' facilitating medical appointments. Some still regard female nurses as handmaidens, and their behaviour can be loud and intimidating. Some women described them as persistently chauvinist. These conflicts are illustrated in Tables 6 and 7.

The strongest gendered symbol in relation to the Trust is necessarily ambiguous, as it is the androgynous management style of managers. The strongest example is the Chief Executive, Sarah. In suggesting there is an androgynous management style, this is not to suggest that managers are asexual clones. Rather there is a common value base, within which individual differences in a preferred way of managing can be accommodated. This was put succinctly by a male manager:

"Good male and female managers have a similar style... open, direct, good listeners, concerned to get things done, and receptive to change"

Table 6: espoused values and underlying assumptions that conflict with each other – general issues, the Trust

Espoused values	Underlying assumptions
Participative management style	Medical specialists can behave in an intimidating way

Table 7: espoused values and underlying assumptions that conflict with each other – gender issues, the Trust

Espoused values	Underlying assumptions
Equal opportunities	Women get preferential treatment (men)
	Clinicians operate an old boys network

Table 8: espoused values and underlying assumptions that support each other – gender issues, the Trust

Identical/similar/supportive espoused values and underlying assumptions
There is no significant difference between the management style of men and women

This could also be expressed as supportive espoused values and underlying assumptions as in Table 8.

The *Leisure Services Department* is an amalgamation of previously separate Council departments: Sports, Museums and Arts, Libraries, and a number of manual services. In Leisure Services there appears to be a variety of management styles in the Department, on a continuum from the directive to the participative. Some managers are perceived as somewhat authoritarian, dealing with subordinates on a need to know basis; others are seen as over consultative. Whilst some range of style is to be expected in a department dealing with manual workers as well as highly qualified professionals, unfortunately certain styles had become associated with certain divisions. Not only does this mean that managers do not always value the style of colleagues, it also leads to some stereotyping of managers according to which division they belong. Thus sports and manual services tend to be viewed as directive, museums and arts as participative, with libraries in between. There is a tension between identifying with the department as a whole,

Table 9: espoused values and underlying assumptions that conflict with each other – general issues, Leisure Services

Espoused values	Underlying assumptions
Participative management style	Directive management style (some managers)
All one department/ ~~corporate~~	Divisional fiefdoms

and being proud of the section to which you belong. This appeared to be symbolised by the cmmon badges worn by all staff when greeting the public, and the variety of uniforms in different sections. For instance, rangers always wear green outdoor jackets, beards and collar length hair, whereas cinema attendants wear drab navy uniforms. These tensions are illustrated in Table 9.

Using Hatch's (1993) model of cultural dynamics, different management styles and dress can be construed as artefacts that retroactively challenge the espoused value of a united department. Instead, the surplus meaning that they have as symbols maintains the underlying assumptions of differentiation between divisions.

The differentiation of divisions, exemplified by different uniforms and management styles is also the strongest gendered symbol, supported by job segregation. In Leisure Services, there are strongly and less strongly gendered occupations and sections, for instance most countryside rangers are men, and the bulk of library staff are women. However of particular significance is the gendering of divisions, which increases their differentiation (Roper, 1994). Libraries has an overwhelmingly female staff, but is now headed up by a new keen male Assistant Director. Perceived as traditionally female, it is now more indeterminate. Some managers in Museums and Arts think colleagues see them as somewhat effete and rarefied, the phrase used was 'arty-farty'. This division is perceived as female, and this appears to colour the view by outsiders of both male and female members of staff. Both of these divisions can be contrasted with the others which are alleged to have more robust management styles; their gender is male. This gendering is of significance for every day relationships as well as potentially affecting progression, and can be construed in the functionalist perspective in terms of an espoused value challenged by an underlying assumption, as in Table 10, or as a locally so-

Table 10: espoused values and underlying assumptions that conflict with each other – gender issues, Leisure Services

Espoused values	Underlying assumptions
Equal Opportunities	Gendered stereotypes of divisions
	Gendered jobs

Table 11: espoused values and underlying assumptions that are ambiguously related – general issues, Finco

Espoused values	Underlying assumptions
Empowering staff	Managers believe in empowerment, the organisation does not
	The company believes that employees do not need explanation, training and support in order to be empowered

cially constructed meaning in the symbolic perspective.

Finco is a company in the turbulent UK financial sector. Conflict about management style at Finco was less marked and more ambiguous than elsewhere. During the case study Finco was committed to a clear corporate approach, encapsulated in a series of statements under 'This is Finco' known as TIF. The aim was to make the organisation more customer responsive, innovative, entrepreneurial and competitive, by encouraging empowerment and teamwork. Opinions varied as to its effectiveness. Women managers said that empowerment had not really been sufficiently explained, or supported by training. They felt there was a gap between the espoused values encapsulated in the TIF statement and what was really happening, which is illustrated in Table 11.

In Finco everyone talked openly about the system of sponsorship, which was more important than the formal procedures in gaining promotion. In theory Finco had an open, equitable internal system for promotion; in practice it was a mixture of sponsorship and ad hocery, where outlook and approach were more important than specific competence. In Finco the role of sponsorship and suitable job assignments were crucial in ascertaining promotion, and the system clearly had not worked as well for women as for men. This can be seen in Table 12.

Table 12: espoused values and underlying assumptions that conflict with each other – general issues, Finco

Espoused values	Underlying assumptions
Open, equitable, internal promotion system	Ad hoc promotion system relying on sponsors and self promotion

Table 13: espoused values and underlying assumptions that conflict with each other – gender issues, Finco

Espoused values	Underlying assumptions
Equal Opportunities	Women are not suitable for top positions
	Some jobs are better done by men, and some better done by women
	Women are good in support roles and departments

Sponsorship was also appeared a significant local symbol. It seems to be a dynamic attachment between respectively more and less powerful employees, with both parties aware of the relationship. The sponsor invests reputation, power, energy and influence in order to further the career of the person sponsored. The social construction of this particular meaning appears peculiar to Finco, as it is context and organisation specific (Schulz, 1995). Thus interpretation lies within symbolic particularism (Alvesson and Berg, 1992).

A number of managers, both male and female, identified a 'glass ceiling' for women in the company; the few women who had gained substantial middle manager positions in previous restructurings had not progressed further. Finco has an Equal Opportunities policy, but as with Leisure Services, there is a tendency for certain job roles and sections to be seen as gendered (Roper, 1994). It was suggested that work dealing with the public which required good interpersonal skills, often done well by women, was undervalued. On the other hand, negotiations with other financial institutions were seen as high profile, and a pre-requisite for promotion to senior manager grade. These were more likely to be undertaken by men. These conflicts between espoused value and underlying assumptions are illustrated in Table 13.

The glass ceiling was demonstrated not only by the absence of women from the top layers of managers in the organisation, but also by the apparent lack of any women's toilets on the top managers' floor. I was assured by several interviewees that this was the case, and only latterly discovered that there are toilets, but that they are very difficult to find. The significance of this seems not to be the fact of whether there are female toilets but rather the widespread understanding that there are not. Finco's HQ is a modern building, about 20 years old, so any partiality in the toilet provision could be assumed to be a deliberate ascription of top managerial roles to men. Both the glass ceiling and the gendered

perceptions of work appear to be widely held socially constructed meanings in Finco.

DISCUSSION

There are two main topics for discussion: first, the success or otherwise of the research methods; and second, discussion of the data. The purpose of this research was to find ways of exploring the gendered aspects of culture. The primary methods of research were the individual interviews and the group discussion. Other methods of research were secondary to leads generated in the interviews or discussions.

First, in relation to the methodology, the study described has demonstrated that the use of established research methods, Repertory Grid interviews and group workshop sessions, can be used to gather qualitative data as an alternative to ethnography as a method. These methods have elicited data about both general and gendered aspects of culture. Second, it has shown that one set of data from a case study may be analysed/interpreted in different ways, using two different theoretical perspectives that are complementary. Third, it has demonstrated that greater understanding may be possible if more than one perspective is used. In these cases the data has been examined and ordered within two broad paradigms, functionalism and symbolism. I have looked at both organisational symbols and meanings, which appear peculiar to the organisation, as in Finco, and also at some that probably transcend the organisational boundaries, as in Westco. I consider this eclectic approach has added to the interpretative value of my analysis. Fourth, the methods used proved helpful for exploring politically, and potentially personally, sensitive issues.

Criticisms that could be made include first, the sample being limited to managers, as other employees could have other views of the organisation. Second, there was no direct observation that could have confirmed, disconfirmed, or augmented the data from interviewees. Third, content rather than process was examined.

The second topic concerns the data collected. An aim of this research was to explore both general and gendered aspects of organisational culture. Schein's (1992) distinction of artefacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions has been a useful framework for elaborating in each organisation the consistencies, inconsistencies, contradictions and ambiguities manifest in everyday organisational life and belief systems. Augmenting this functionalist approach with a symbolic perspective extended understanding of each organisation. As discussed, I have confirmed suggestions discussed above that the functionalist methodology as represented by Schein (1992) lends itself to comparisons across case studies. In this study it is possible to compare management style between organisations. On the other hand, the symbolic perspective conveys deeper understanding, but is contestable and less open to generalisation. In relation to gender research, having elicited both general and gendered features of organisational culture, it has been de demonstrated that in some cases, for instance Leisure Services, these features are indivisible. In other cases symbolic interpretations throw more light on phenomena, as in Westco. This helps to explain why some aspects of gendered culture are so deeply embedded, despite the espoused commitment of organisations to equal opportunities.

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Appendix 1: TOPICS DISCUSSED AT GROUP WORKSHOP SESSIONS – Westco

Subsidiary	Women Managers	Men Managers
physical artefacts clothes name badges	clothes	clothes name badges
architecture room appearance personal decoration equipment	accommodation cleanliness personal decoration doors	
communication address jargon swearing	communication address jargon swearing sense of humour	communication address swearing
celebrations/rituals socialising	celebrations/rituals socialising golf	celebrations/rituals socialising golf
organisational history learning		
emotions	emotions	emotions
hierarchy decision making rewards	rewards	hierarchy decision making rewards
punishments conflict	punishments dislike of procedure conflict	punishments dislike of procedure conflict
recruitment/promotion termination		termination
discipline	discipline	discipline
gender mothering	gender meetings women's promotion caring responsibilities	gender meetings men's views caring responsibilities macho management
	management development	management development