

*Human Relations, Vol. 49, No. 8, 1996*

## **Discourse and Enactment: Gender Inequality in Text and Context**

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This paper examines the discourse surrounding a major U.K. initiative designed to increase the "quality and quantity" of women's participation in the workforce and in managerial roles. Texts are studied to explore ways in which the persistence of inequalities may, without apparent intention, be encoded in language. Our analysis suggests that cognitive schemata are framed by the dominant discourse, here of "target-setting" within organizations. We find from commentaries that even potential critics of the campaign were drawn into acceptance of a common agenda and have been thereby diverted from addressing other pressing issues affecting women's opportunities. This analysis draws upon a conceptual scheme which is concerned with ways in which cycles of cognition, action, and outcome collectively actualize social structures, a process referred to as social enactment. We explore how a conventional discourse reinforces enactment processes supporting prevailing structures while new discourse offers the potential for change.

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**KEY WORDS:** discourse; enactment; equal opportunity; women in management.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The disadvantages experienced by women at work derive from a combination of mutually reinforcing processes. It follows that attempts to tackle one manifestation of disadvantage without responding to the wider context are unlikely to succeed. In this paper, we examine the role of discourse in the enactment of disadvantage and in attempts to overcome inequalities. We attempt to give specific content to our argument with reference to a prominent text which aims to increase employment opportunities for women.

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First, we examine the part played by discourse in the concept of the enactment of inequality. By enactment, we refer to the cycles of cognition, action, and outcome which actualize the social structures, or patterned interactions, among which individual action is situated and to which it contributes.<sup>4</sup> The interactions whereby these processes unfold are both spatial and symbolic. We displace ourselves to effect transactions with others and we engage in forms of symbolic interaction, of which the most central is language. These forms of interdependent action give rise to on-going processes and relations of interdependence which can be viewed as social systems (Garnsey, 1993a, b). The social system of the household and of the employing organization are those which, through their intersections, shape the experience of paid work. Women's work is constituted through discourses based on the attributes of gender, on the needs of the family, on notions of skill and competence, realized through the division of labor and distribution of resources in the household and labor force (see, for example, Marshall, 1984; Dex, 1988; Freedman, 1988; Crompton & Sanderson, 1990). Yet women's failure to "achieve" within employing organizations continues to be viewed as a self-contained problem, remediable within those organizations. This set of assumptions is often the basis for policy measures aimed at increasing opportunities for women, texts on which we examine below.

We view discourse as a form of symbolic interaction. Language is the medium whereby individual cognitions can be shared. Discourses we take to be extended collective conversations whereby participants together make sense of their experience. In this way, aspects of subjective experience can become intersubjective. Discourse frames the wider means of language to address concerns, making them knowable and communicable.<sup>5</sup> Following Foucault on *savoir* and *positivités* in *L'archéologie du savoir* (1969, p. 237ff) and combining his account with concepts from constructionist psychology (originating with Kelly, 1955), we argue that to take part in a discourse is to share a set of constructs, a vocabulary, a repertoire of preconceptions which together shape cognitions and their expression. Discourses are a collective means of molding individual cognitions, but at the same time they are created through the expression individuals give to their own thoughts. As a collective expression of cognition (an individual attribute), discourse

<sup>4</sup>Our conception of enactment is derived from Weick (1979) and from Giddens (1984) who gave fuller expression to the ideas of enactment in structuration theory. We argue that enactment unfolds through constitutive processes. A critical systems approach embodying these ideas is presented in Garnsey (1993a) and the role of discourse in social systems referred to in Garnsey (1993b).

<sup>5</sup>A helpful synthetic conceptualization of discourse as symbolic interaction is provided by Heraclous (1994).

influences thoughts, but it does not determine these. We argue that discourse is to individual cognition as agency is to structure in structuration theory (Giddens, 1984). Cognition as an individual attribute and discourse as a collective attribute are in continual interplay. Discourse, in our view, partially confines individual thoughts within its forms, but at the same time enables individual cognition to enter and contribute to the domain of collective expression—as structure constrains and enables individual action in structuration theory (Giddens, 1984). There is potential for innovation within a discourse, but only to the extent of its possibilities. If a disparate set of cognitions is to be conveyed, the old script may prove incapable of giving expression to them and a new discourse will have to emerge if these are to be shared. So discourses come to compete for attention and legitimacy. A mainstream discourse can for a while suppress contending emergent ones, but these may in time supersede the old orthodoxies of expression (cf. Foucault, 1969, p. 226). Taking part in discourse is a way in which individuals contribute to cycles of cognition, action, and outcome through which social practices arise. These, institutionalized, further reinforce and diffuse the discourses which gave rise to them. Discourse is a central feature of enactment processes.

## DISCOURSE, MEANING

The concept of discourse has its roots in the work of linguists, in particular in the work of Saussure, who, in his semiotic of language, established that the linguistic sign was arbitrary—in other words, there is no identity between the sound image (signifier) and the concept signified (Saussure, 1968). Further, this sign is part of a system of meaning where words acquire significance by reference to what they are not. Later the plurality of meaning (e.g., the different and conflicting meanings of concepts such as femininity and masculinity over time) came to be emphasized by linguistic theorists. Derrida has suggested that the signified is only a moment in an ongoing process of signification: “The meaning of meaning is infinite implication, the indefinite referral of signifier to signified . . . which gives signified meaning no respite . . .” (Derrida 1973, p. 58). Viewed in this way, discourse becomes a critical site of struggle, where agency is attributed and unattributed and subjectivity is constructed, where the past is construed in relation to the present and where the future is predicated on the past. Here knowledge can be built up and aligned in support of particular power structures (Foucault, 1969).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Recent work has explored underlying interdependencies found in the U.K. today as reinforced by discourse (Miller & Rose, 1990; du Gay & Salaman, 1992).

Because of its wide implications and through converging developments in phenomenology, critical theory, and constructionist psychology, among other areas of thought, the study of "discourse" has emerged concurrently in various disciplines (see, e.g., Dant, 1991; Van Dijk, 1993). Discourse analysis can be used to trace the interconnection between a discourse and the social context in which it emerges. By analyzing a discourse critically alongside the social context, the method can take account of the agents and groups of agents who take part in discourse and trace the relations between discourse and social processes.

## INEQUALITY AND DISCOURSE

Women do not experience inequality, in income, in job opportunity, in status, passively. In certain respects they are constrained to collude in their own disadvantage. The persistence of inequality can only be understood as the outcome of perceptions and choices of women whose options and resources are limited by the wider social structures and potential sanctions which situate their actions. This is not to blame victims for their own disadvantage. Basic material constraints and the paucity of recognizable options can trap women into situations where almost anything they do confirms their disadvantage. Elsewhere, cognitions framed within a patriarchal discourse may obscure the nature of collusion (Apter & Garnsey, 1994). If women collude unintentionally in their own disadvantage, men may enact inequality with or without intention. Conspiracy to prevent the removal of disadvantage, though sometimes in evidence, is often unnecessary where the reproduction of inequalities is programmed into ongoing social processes. Though much work remains to be done on the structural and psychological obstacles to equality, here we are seeking to explore the ways in which discourse represents and constructs these obstacles and the potential for change. Such representations frame the options for action.

For example, the dominant discourse of the level playing field advocates that women be equipped to enter economic competition and perform better on the existing course, in particular through improved training and qualifications. The preconceptions of this language of equal opportunity may be unfounded. There has for some time been evidence in the U.K. of widespread underuse of women's existing qualifications (Elias & Main, 1982). Training and education for women far more extensive than anything achieved in the West provided little real equality for women in Soviet style regimes, because the gendered division of labor in the household and government remained unaltered (Garnsey, 1982). If women are to succeed better in achieving their own objectives, the interconnections between different aspects of women's lives, the various systems within which they live,

have to be addressed. If women do not succeed even when changes are instituted within employing organizations, it may be because effective action must move beyond the gates of the organization. Efforts by employers to alter the terms of employment to respond to the conditions under which women have to supply their labor could make a great deal of difference to opportunities for women, as discussed below. But insofar as minor changes to existing arrangements are all that are aimed at, yet are dressed up as part of a high profile campaign, expectations may be raised which it may not be possible to meet through the recommended means. Consequently, the campaign may rebound by drawing attention to and later confirming women's apparent inadequacies. Such an outcome would represent the enactment of the very effects the campaign aimed to remove.

When wider factors affecting women's lives are disregarded in the dominant discourse on equal opportunities, it is partly because underlying expectations and assumptions form conceptual schemes (schemata) representing the conditions of dependence which enforce inequality as inevitable and normal. These multiple strands of thought are embedded in language which sometimes requires unravelling before the weave of preconceptions which render inequalities acceptable and inevitable can be identified. Only then can the actions which follow from and further reproduce these representations and their ensuing actuality be traced out in detail. This is a task of discourse analysis.

### THE OPPORTUNITY 2000 CAMPAIGN

We have selected for examination the discourse surrounding "Opportunity 2000," a business-led campaign supported by the U.K. government to increase the "quality and quantity" of women's participation in the workforce. We selected this initially because of its prominence not its content. The campaign "Opportunity 2000" was undertaken in recognition of the slow progress being made by women in business and in response to voting analysis which showed that the Conservative Party was losing support among women voters. Launched in October 1991, it is a high profile campaign backed by the Prime Minister. At the time of the launch, 61 organizations had committed themselves to the campaign, including founder companies such as British Airways, J. Sainsbury, the BBC, ICI, Royal Mail, and the National Westminster Bank. Two years after the launch, this number had risen to 216.

The campaign offers participating members a plan of action typical of any well-formulated consultancy project: namely, audit, development of goals, backed by commitment from the top, implementation, and evaluation. In business terms, the campaign can be viewed as a well-intentioned, well-

organized attempt at improving the position of women in the workforce. Yet evidence of progress is scarce, indeed, the Institute of Management reported that the proportion of women managers fell in 1993—from 10.2% to 9.5% (National Management Salary Survey, 1994). Further, there is continuing evidence of a pay differential between men and women's pay—a pay differential that increases the higher up the managerial echelons women progress (IDS, 1992). How is it that such a well-organized and supported campaign does not as yet appear to be having any impact on its avowed goals? We would suggest that a major reason for this lack of progress relates to the way in which ideology is embedded in the discourse. The following part of the paper examines the discourse surrounding Opportunity 2000 to explore the various layers of meaning that lie below the text. We do not suggest that we are exposing collusion or ineptitude. Instead, this case provides an empirical demonstration of how language works to perpetuate ideologies. Whether this is a conscious or unconscious embedding would be the focus of another, more extended research project.

We analyzed four different texts relating to the campaign. These are: The description of the "*Opportunity 2000 approach*" as issued by Opportunity 2000 (Business in the Community Information Pack, 1994). *IDS Study 535*—"Opportunity Knocks" (August 1993) pp. 1-3. *Equal Opportunities Review* "Opportunity 2000" No. 41 (January/February 1992) pp. 20-23. *Labour Research* "Whose Opportunity in 2000?" Vol. 82, No. 11 (November 1993), pp. 8-10.

These texts represent a broad spectrum of ideological positions on the issue of opportunities for women. The original mission statement and description of the approach obviously promotes the initiative strongly. We would expect the *IDS* study and the *Equal Opportunities Review* to present a balanced but potentially critical coverage of the initiative, while we might expect *Labour Research*, as a trades union based research organization, to challenge the initiative. Each of the journals carried articles on the progress to date of the Opportunity 2000 initiative. We analyze a selection of the three journal articles to illustrate how "discursive hierarchies" around a central discourse emerge and examine the text in more detail to demonstrate how discursive work is carried out in linguistic terms. Such a strategy gives us an "across" and "within" texts perspective.

### Discursive Frameworks

Our most striking finding is that despite the apparently diverse ideological positions of the publications we examined, there was a marked similarity in treatment of the subject in these texts. In addressing the issues raised by Opportunity 2000, even potential critics were drawn into accep-

tance of a common agenda and diverted from considering the wider context and its impact on women's working lives.

For our analysis, we used techniques from linguistic studies to shed light on how the discourse about women's opportunities in business was constructed. We identified a range of contextual and linguistic mechanisms which served to build up a central discourse around the notion of "target-setting" for women's achievements in companies. We began with a simple content analysis of the three articles to reveal the discursive themes which were clearly identifiable. The method we employed was to count the number of times each theme was referred to in the article. The most common were as follows (in order of referential frequency):

*Goals/Aims/Targets.* The merits/demerits of setting targets for employing women in business were fundamental to the discussion in each article. This was usually followed up by discussion of the types of targets that needed to be set.

*Commitment.* The notion of commitment to the initiative was emphasized, with particular weight given to the commitment of top managers.

*Recruitment/Selection/Promotion/Training and Development.* The answer to the problem is to set up suitable recruitment/selection and promotion opportunities.

*"Family-Friendly" Policies.* The importance of more appropriate working conditions such as paternity leave, eldercare policies, etc. and the provision of childcare, either by government or organizations.

*Monitoring/Evaluation/Progress.* Emphasis is placed on the monitoring of the goals, aims, and targets.

*Business Reasons for Employment of Women.* Great emphasis was placed throughout on the business reasons for employing women (e.g., "maximizing the potential of the workforce" meeting the "demographic time bomb", shortage of young entrants to the labor market, etc.).

*Flexible and Part-Time Working.* It was noted that flexible working patterns were being introduced; these were a useful strategy for increasing numbers of women.

Only the issues of family-friendly policies and flexible work patterns directly acknowledge the broader aspects of women's lives. Table I indicates the frequency of mention of issues relating to the promotional campaign in each publication.

The terms of the campaign give small scope to the acknowledgment of inequalities which stem from common features of social structure, but the commentaries do not make the most even of such scope as there is, giving little emphasis to proposed remedies such as "family-friendly" policies. Even the article in *Equal Opportunities Review*, which might have provided a more equally distributed range of references to issues raised by

Table 1. Frequency of Reference to Issues in Selected Texts on Opportunity 2000<sup>a</sup>

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Goals/targets	Commitment	Recruitment	Family-friendly	Monitoring	Business	Flexibility
LR	8	5	5	4	3	2
IDS	2	6	4	4	3	2
EOR	4	7	4	4	2	1

<sup>a</sup>Key: LR = *Labour Research* (c. 2000 words), IDS = *Incomes Data Services* (c. 2000 words), EOR = *Equal Opportunities Review* (c. 3000 words).



Opportunity 2000, devotes more than half its emphasis, as measured by these indicators, to the issue of targets and only 8% to flexibility or family-friendly policies. The term used to refer to this unexamined notion is of interest in itself. It is expressed in software language as though to indicate simple packages which could readily make work easy for families to assimilate. Under this umbrella term comes the concept of childcare provision. We note that, in the EOR review: "A small number of organizations mentioned lack of childcare provision as a barrier to recruitment and retention of women. For example, both Allied Dunbar and the Cabinet Office state that they have already given priority to providing childcare support." What is interesting here is that only a "small number" mentioned this as a problem at all, and it seems that only two of the organizations has actually given it priority. There is extensive evidence (e.g., from the General Household Survey) that childcare is the major factor preventing women from undertaking employment commitments; given the lack of interest in this topic revealed here we need to know whether women with childcare concerns are already largely excluded *de facto* from employment by Opportunity 2000 companies or whether such needs are not accorded importance for other reasons.

The important concept "flexible working," to which we return in our conclusion, also remains undefined. The business argument for equality is treated as very much more central; this reflects a pragmatic recognition of the need to harness the undoubted benefits employers themselves could find in change, but as we see below, employers' self-interest taken out of context is an argument which can backfire. The emphasis on the need for commitment from top management may well be realistic but it is symptomatic of the hierarchical tone of the initiative and the absence of discussion of attempts to encourage debate by women on their own needs and to respond to initiatives from below, which we see below can be construed as "the construction of absence." EOR notes that a strategy group had been set up to look at equal opportunities and cultural change. The high status of the members this group is noted, but no comment is made on the fact that it consisted entirely of men.

In these articles, there appears to be an attempt to deal fairly with the issues—there is a sense of shared desire to address problems, admit mistakes, and encourage reform. Even the article in *Labour Research*, which sets out to examine progress critically, and does make reference to the limitations of the campaign, concludes by suggesting that the campaign is "an extremely useful tool with the right union involvement." We would reiterate the positive aspect of the campaign and its potential for raising awareness of and encouraging the mapping of women's position in business. However, despite merits and good intentions, the nature of the discourse propounded

raises doubts over the capacity of Opportunity 2000 to have the anticipated impact. There is a possibility that the campaign may even be counterproductive. Some of the linguistic mechanisms which support this discourse, to be discussed below, are further explored by Barthes (1956), Astroff and Nyberg (1992), and Sorenson (1991).

“La vaccine” (or inoculation) is a technique identified by Barthes as acknowledgment that a phenomenon has undesirable aspects, but through admission of an incidental aspect and in such a form as to obscure major, intrinsic ill effects (Barthes, 1956, p. 238). In this case, a problem is admitted in the underrepresentation of women in management, but reassurance is immediately offered in terms of an achievable solution and the underlying factors are not examined. Imbalance in numbers of women is admitted, but as though it were an incidental feature, without an examination of causes, in a way which conceals structural inequalities. Sorenson (1991) shows how such a technique “depolitizes and dehistoricizes” discourse; in the cases he examines, “technology” becomes a substitute for “capitalism” (p. 228). In this case, no discussion of the reasons for the slow progress of women at work is offered. If there is imbalance we are left to conclude that somehow women have not made progress as a result of perhaps inadvertent processes of “recruitment, selection and promotion.” There is no suggestion of deliberate action in such processes. Years of discrimination become subsumed as business strategies which had a defensible rationale. The new emphasis on the importance of employing women to satisfy business goals under current conditions in itself even suggests implicitly that the situation of inequality that existed prior to Opportunity 2000 had an element of common sense, perhaps it was a reasonable response to prevailing circumstances which may since have changed.

A third mechanism is that of paradox—whereby contradictory information from other discourses is appropriated and apparently disarmed (Astroff & Nyberg, 1992). In this case we found a “paradox” of this kind both in contrasting texts and within them. In *Labour Research* it was reported that:

... a third of members say that the recession has hindered the progress of Opportunity 2000. Redundancies, financial constraints and a shortage of promotion prospects has meant that, for many, equal opportunities measures have taken second place. (p. 9)

In contrast, in *IDS*:

Opportunity 2000 believes there is still concern in industry about the “demographic time bomb” even though the recession has sharply reduced the demand for young workers and consequently the need to bring more women into the workforce (p. 2).

Later, however:

The recession has had an effect on Opportunity 2000 but it has not been entirely negative. Although recruitment and selection policies have assumed less of an importance, Opportunity 2000 believes that the business case has been reinforced. In difficult times, companies have to make the most effective use of their staff. Therefore the case for developing the skills of women workers and giving them opportunities in management is strengthened. (p. 3)

On the one hand, the recession appears to have thrown the business case into question since the need for more women in employment, previously based on shortages of young people, is undermined by cutbacks. But it is argued that the business case for employing women has been strengthened. This is achieved by shifting the business argument that more women should be employed, to focus on the women already in an organization. Here, we suggest by raising issues and then discounting them, the discourse serves to confuse and obfuscate the issues. A policy based purely on the business interests without regard to equity or wider implications inevitably encounters contradictions and does not allow of a balanced weighing up of factors.

A fourth device is that of repetition and condensation. In a promotional text, a concise statement is needed, but this can be used to reinforce a discursive technique with perhaps unintended consequences. The content analysis we undertook above reveals the extent of repetition of a limited set of ideas to be found in the language surrounding Opportunity 2000. The repeated use of short-hand terms such as “recruitment and selection” or “family-friendly” policies leads to “condensation,” where terms are not defined nor associated ideas unpacked. There is an assumption that the reader accepts the discourse and will understand what is being said. However, if we take into account the broader social context in which the discourse is situated, a different picture emerges. One example of “family-friendly” policies is paternity leave. Paternity leave is often granted as a concession—a gesture on behalf of the employers to the workforce. In many countries in the EU, paternity leave is a right. Further, even though paternity leave may be available, men are often not encouraged to take it in practice.<sup>7</sup>

Again, condensing ideas into a package summed up by “recruitment, promotion and training” fails to take into account domestic constraints that many women face. For many women, even if training is offered, the conditions in which it is offered (longer hours, possibly away from home) may prevent them from taking up the opportunity. Similarly, the decontextualization of the ideas of “recruitment and promotion” diverts attention away from the extensive research that shows that women are often discriminated against through stereotyped thought and labeling. (These reflect cognitive schemata constructed by multiple discourses on the nature of women’s

<sup>7</sup>Communication by Mike Heron, former Personnel Director of Unilever.

work.) In diverting attention from other aspects of women's lives, attention is focused on the simple solution of targets. Frequent repetition of condensed and unexplored concepts creates a simplistic set of cognitions relating to the solution of obstacles to equality and dismisses other matters from the agenda.

Although this can go unnoticed, techniques of appropriation function to deprive women of any voice. The voice of the subjects about whom these articles are written, those of women in work, are appropriated and absorbed into the rational and authoritative voice of management and government. The texts are full of nominalization (verbs and adjectives turned into nouns) and use of the passive. Nowhere, apart from interviews with women representatives of the TUC in the *Labour Research* article, do women appear or speak in these texts. They are the subject of "targets," "monitoring," "recruitment," or "commitment." "Opportunity 2000" is reified into some mysterious body speaking on behalf of management for women. Thus, for example, in the IDS report: "Opportunity 2000 has held human resource workshops and a number of seminars on goal-setting, although it does not offer customized training for individual companies." Who is "Opportunity 2000?" Who is running the workshops? What does "goal-setting" mean? What exactly is meant by "human resource workshops?" In this discourse, such questions do not arise, all is taken as given.

Nowhere is there any sense of the subject or person. There are not even the usual type of quotations from simplified "success stories" which we might expect. An important mechanism, in its nature easily overlooked, which utilizes similar techniques, and cuts across other mechanisms mentioned above, is that of the "construction of absence" (Sorenson, 1991, p. 230). In identifying the construction of absence we draw attention to what is not being said. Here what is significant is how each of the texts fail to say the same thing. They fail to acknowledge structured inequalities and the processes which reinforce them. They fail to mention the needs of women or to allow them a voice. The discourse has become so entrenched that the set of concepts we identified become part of a shared cognitive schema—these in their turn become incorporated into further reinforcing discourses building on a repertoire of concepts and preconceptions. In the texts we analyzed, disconnected sets of statistics about increased numbers of women making it into junior management are not set against the pay rates for these junior managers. No comparisons are made with the pay of male counterparts in manufacturing, for example. Success stories about the introduction of flexible working are not set against research that has shown that part-time work is almost invariably lowly paid and low status and that for those in responsible jobs, hours worked are actually on the increase. Reports of increasing "family-friendly" policies are not compared with

those in other European Union countries where family-friendly policies are statutory (e.g., The Netherlands) or where childcare between the ages of two and five is free and universal (e.g., France). In only one case (EOR, p. 22) is there a mention (and this only in passing) of tackling job segregation—which research has shown to be the major contributory factor to women’s subordination in the workforce (see for example, Bradley, 1989). In the Second Year “Executive Summary” issued by Opportunity 2000, the third of four learning points was to “find out what women want.” This belated recommendation suggests a recognition that the avowed goals of the campaign may not in practice be meeting women’s needs.

Inevitably, authors have to select what is said and how to say it. But this analysis shows how certain concepts become identified with a particular discourse—and are used irrespective of the ideological position of the writer. So, even though the article in *Labour Research* appears to set out from a critical stance, and does point out some of the inconsistencies in the campaign, and how, in some organizations, not much progress has been made, by using the same terminology, ideas, and constructs, it ends up perpetuating the restricted mindset revealed in Opportunity 2000.

If participants in a debate can be so caught up by the discursive frameworks in which they operate, they may well end up inadvertently contributing to the perpetuation of inequalities. Such a conception would point to one strand in the apparent collusion of women in their own disadvantage (Apter & Garnsey, 1994). The text of Opportunity 2000 appears at first sight to embody good sense and a business-like approach, focusing on attainable targets and specific measures to draw attention to what can be done to improve opportunities for women. The statement can be viewed in a context in which management on the basis of targets and performance indicators has become unquestioned orthodoxy as the appropriate mode of achieving control and accountability, reflecting the importance of the accounting profession and its methods in British management. The language is one suited to clear-cut situations where obvious and undisputed solutions are available. This language transforms the problem from a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, to some extent within but in other ways beyond the control of management, to one which appears straightforward, readily amenable to solutions attainable by managerial hierarchies. In this text, our attention is diverted from any possibility that we may not here be dealing with such a clear-cut situation.

### Linguistic Analysis

We can provide examples in somewhat more detail to show how language is used to carry out this discursive work. We carried out an analysis

using techniques of critical linguistics as developed by Fowler (1991) building on the work of Halliday (1978/85). For our analysis we used the text "The Opportunity 2000 Approach" that appears on the promotional material issued by the Opportunity 2000 office. First, we need to make a brief exposition of the techniques of critical linguistics by way of methodological explanation.

### Making the Conditions of Inequality Appear Natural

We have attempted briefly to read between the lines of what is being said and to expose what is not said. This has shown how structural inequalities can be encoded in discourse in such a way as to appear natural and unremarkable, so as to become accepted and acceptable in the cognitive schema we use to perceive the world. How is it that, as readers (and indeed as writers) we come to "take-for-granted" the presuppositions that underlie the text?

We can provide some examples from critical linguistics developed by Fowler (1991) to see how the language used is "working" discursively to perpetuate conventional assumptions. First, we need to provide a brief exposition of some of the constructions we can look out for in analyzing discourse. These can be distinguished as: (1) transitivity, (2) lexical structure, and (3) modality.

(1) *Transitivity* is a central feature of representation. The relationship between subject and object is thereby conveyed or passed over. There are two important ways in which transitivity is used to inform and transform a text: (a) the use of active and passive voice, and (b) nominalization.

(a) When we write texts we often unconsciously (or consciously) choose a particular style to help us transmit our message. In academic writing, for example, we are taught to use the passive. This is a stylistic technique which can affect our thinking. Using the passive can reduce our perception of the agent as bringing about an effect, or it can remove the agent altogether.<sup>8</sup>

(b) The second aspect of transitivity is nominalization, "... a radical syntactic transformation of a clause which has extensive structural consequences and offers substantial ideological opportunities" (Fowler, 1991). English is a nominalizing language: it is structurally possible and common

<sup>8</sup>Compare, for example: (a) "senior managers told the part-time staff that unless they could work two shifts per day, management would have to replace them with full-time staff," with (b) "the more experienced part-time staff were told that unless a 2-day shift could be worked more full-time staff would be taken on." In the first example, the message of who is doing what is clearly put across, whereas in the second, agents are removed from the picture and causality shifted to unknown factors.

practice for predicates (verbs and adjectives) to be transformed into their derived nominals. Thus from “to allege” we find “allegations,” “development” from “develop.” There are also many noun forms to represent what are in practice actions or processes rather than entities. Such a strategy is endemic in English, and can have the effect of obscuring “who is doing what” to whom, when, where etc.; alternatively this usage can have the effect of reification (representing actions, processes, etc. as entities). The term “organization” is a well-known example of the construction of entities through linguistic usage.

(2) Critical linguistics can analyze *lexical structure* to identify hierarchies of vocabulary, each of which carry associated conceptual schema. Continued use of vocabulary in particular contexts reinforces preoccupation with particular concepts and may shape agency to the point where people act (and think) in predictable ways. To explain this, Fowler uses the analogy of a “map.” A map is a symbolic representation of a territory; the signs used figure the area in terms of features which interest the consumer, and maps can vary considerably according to what is singled out for representation. In the same way, vocabulary can be seen as mapping out segments of the undifferentiated flux of experience. Continued use of each term crystallizes and normalizes the areas that are mapped out in particular ways.

(3) Another construction is *modality*, revealing the “comment” or “attitude” of the writer. Fowler distinguishes four types of modality, conveying: (1) truth or objectivity, (2) obligation, (3) permission, (4) desirability. Modality is encoded through the use of what are called in traditional grammar “modal auxiliary verbs”—such as “will” (truth), “must” (obligation) “can” (permission) or use of a range of evaluative adjectives and adverbs—e.g., mad, effective, efficient—(desirability).

We now go on to analyze the “Opportunity 2000 Approach” to identify these three characteristics—and draw our conclusions from their use. Here is the text with the nominalizations in *italic*.

### The Opportunity 2000 Approach

Opportunity 2000 invites *organisations* to increase opportunities for women in the workforce and membership of the *campaign* offers a range of *information* and *support* to bring this about. Making any *change* requires an accurate *view* of the current *situation*, a clear *vision* of the desired outcome, a *plan of actions* and a means of *measuring progress*.

The *Opportunity 2000 approach* therefore involves:

- The *development* of challenging but achievable goals based on an *assessment* of each *organization's current situation* and *future needs*

- A *public statement of commitment* to the organization's specific Opportunity 2000 goals and *publication of progress* at agreed intervals
- An active, on-going *programme* of initiatives which will provide a measurable *improvement* in each *participating organisation*.

Opportunity 2000 is able to provide help in each of these stages, In particular by stimulating and supporting board level initiatives, providing practical *publications*, *exchange of information* and local forums for human resource specialists and line managers

It is only by *promoting* effective initiatives in all three levels that measurable *change* will be achieved.

The text is shrouded in anonymity. The author (whoever this may be) chooses a modality which avoids any comment on the position—giving the impression that the statement is from a completely objective stance. The lexical register is provided by the conceptual associations of a managerial discourse (“staff development, assessment programme, achievable goals, etc.”) identified earlier. There is an absence of any modal verbs which might indicate a subjective viewpoint. There is no scope within this conceptual mode to call the objectivity of the discourse into question.

Extensive use of abstract nouns and nominalization removes the need to provide subjects for verbs or any reference to agency (i.e., who, specifically, does what). In this text, women are rendered passive recipients of unknown agents' actions, it is apparently inappropriate for them to assert their own position. While the processes to be undertaken are presented as enabling companies to choose their own methods, there is no indication that women themselves will be or need be active in these. There is no reference to women's role in the campaign, or how they might take the initiative in making known their needs.

Phrased as it is, the exercise could become a mere formality, another area for the creative accounting approach, where the appearance of concern with these issues prevails over substantive concern, public relations considerations prevail over any conviction about the wider importance of the issues.

What are the implications of a text on opportunity, written from a position of authority, using managerial concepts and passive constructions, which does not provide any acknowledgment of the underlying causes of inequality? The discourse may well frame or reinforce in readers' minds the notion that women are not reaching managerial positions largely as a result of their own shortcomings. There were many pronouncements to this effect in the British media in response to the figures on the decline in the proportion of women in management in May 1994. If efforts should be made to define targets for women, and so on, as recommended by this program and, nevertheless, little progress were to ensue, the idea that women are themselves to blame would appear to be still more plausible.



After all, only managers' targets and their female employees' achievements are framed as relevant to the analysis; all other factors have been largely removed from the frame of reference. As this decontextualized relationship (targets, achievements) becomes part of cognitive schema, other items may fall off the agenda. The campaign could have "puzzlingly" little outcome, or even be part of a discourse reinforcing existing processes rather than reversing them. A discourse can shape thinking on an issue, placing and excluding items on the agenda of public discussion, drawing potential critics into its domain and leading them to address the issue on predefined terms. It may be that instead of instituting real change, such a process will maintain or even strengthen the conditions the text purports to alter.

Dissenting voices from the managerial orthodoxy of predetermined targets and milestones, have carried out work which reveals clearly that hard methods proposed in this campaign as a solution may sometimes be inappropriate or counterproductive (OU, 1984). These findings have not entered the mainstream of managerial discourse but remain at the intellectual periphery (perhaps the leading edge) in such areas as soft systems thinking (Checkland & Scholes, 1990). There are situations where setting predetermined goals and an emphasis on metrics, as appropriate in hard systems settings, come into question at least as initial methodologies.<sup>9</sup> These include circumstances where there is diversity of objectives among the various participants, multiple, interconnecting systems, disparity of perspective, diverse and vested interests and where only ambiguous measurements are available. These are precisely the conditions which obtain in relation to employment opportunities for women, throwing doubt on the suitability of methods presented as beyond question in the text cited here.

Simplistic solutions proposed for complex problems may perform above all as promotional devices. In indicating concern without assuming responsibility for the real complexities of the matter, they may preempt and divert potential forces for change. Discourse, as language structured and shaped in unstated schemata, acts as a powerful instrument both of promotion and of diversion. The development and appropriating capacity of a central discourse can preempt an agenda and here divert attention from the processes maintaining the structurally and culturally reinforced disadvantages experienced by women. These arise from the gendered division of labor in the household and workplace, and the outlook which renders this normal and inevitable. They are the result of the segregation of men's and women's work, from the nature of educational and training,

<sup>9</sup>The Open University Course "Complexity, management and change" (applying a systems approach) discusses methods similar to those proposed in Opportunity 2000 and why they are prone to serious problems when used inappropriately (Block 4, Naughton, J. *The Soft Systems Approach*, p. 8).

from working arrangements and other entrenched features of social life. All this is well known; the former U.K. Department of Employment commissioned decades of research revealing structural and cultural obstacles to women's opportunities (see Department of Employment Research Paper Series, HMSO). These findings are disregarded or at best reduced to simplistic formulae in this campaign. It is necessary to "start somewhere" to promote opportunities, but the reservations explored in this paper suggest that such an initiative, without strong support in other areas, may not get beyond the starting point.

### AVENUES FOR CHANGE

An enactment approach does not suggest that progress is unattainable, though it acknowledges how entrenched are established structures. Change is endemic and there are innumerable points at which the interlocking of structures and expectations weaken or loosen; as expectations shift, the nature of interactions can alter. Such points would be ideal for investigation since they are also starting points of resistance—resistance that could be rendered more effective if more "knowledgeable," if better informed by research. Shifts in patterns of working (part-time, flexible, teleworking), the introduction of new technology, new legislation, change of ownership and reorganization—all these can give rise to situations where structures and expectations move out of articulation. These are points where inequalities can be amplified—or resisted.<sup>10</sup>

We argued earlier that deviant discourses have to struggle for the public stage. In this process possibilities for change arise. Agents are both subject to and creators of multiple discourses at different levels. When we are subject to conflicting features of discourses which affect our lives, we experience the inconsistencies between them. We have already seen how a discourse builds up a lexical register around a particular subject, such that the meaning in a word arises from its relationship to these other words. Certain key words in particular may be used inconsistently—e.g., where "empowered" is used as though it signified "given autonomy" in contexts where in practice what is implied is "subjected to *de-personalized* targets and controls rather than direct supervision." Once recognized, these dis-

<sup>10</sup>For example, a new managerial discourse is becoming dominant in many U.K. universities, legitimizing more control over previously autonomous professionals. Thus one of the few professional groups whose working arrangements used to be flexible, researchers and teachers in further education, are having their conditions redefined as 9-5 work on the premises. This is just one of many areas in which longer on-premise hours and more rigid working conditions are being instituted despite lip service paid to flexibility. The interests and assumptions underlying such moves deserve careful investigation.

crepancies may give rise to a questioning of the underlying assumptions of a discourse which previously went unnoticed (e.g., of the assumption that empowerment must be aligned with hierarchical control).

We do not underestimate the difficulties of tackling the structures through which inequalities are reproduced, but argue that until the language which perpetuates these cycles is recognized and exposed, we are not in a position to do so effectively. A greater level of awareness of the role and workings of language and its influence on cognition and outcome may be required by those whose aims involve challenging a dominant discourse.<sup>11</sup>

We can explore the term "flexibility" as a brief example of inconsistencies and the potential for change these imply. In the current managerial discourse on flexibility, we find what Foucault describes as contradictions in a discourse: ". . . *irregularité dans l'usage des mots, plusieurs propositions incompatibles, un jeu de significations qui ne s'ajustent pas les unes aux autres, des concepts qui ne peuvent pas être systématisés ensemble*" (1969, p. 195). A coherence is assumed in the use of the concept which is in practice missing. We are told that flexibility is required of the workforce and of the labor market, yet the "flexibility" offered by most employers could be described in an alternative discourse in terms of rigidity and workforce segmentation. Long working hours, de-localization, availability on the employer's terms are exacted from those who hope to progress in the corporate setting. These conditions are manifestly inappropriate to the needs of those with responsibilities in families for the care of the young, the old, and the sick, which fall mainly on women. Shorter hours and temporary work are offered as flexibility, but usually on casual conditions which offer little by way of income security or career advancement: a situation not fully acknowledged by writers who celebrate new working trends (e.g., Handy, 1985). That full-time, full-year employment has for long been virtually a requisite for income security was demonstrated by Freedman's detailed study of labor market segments in the U.S. in the 1970s (Freedman, 1976). A report by the Institute for Fiscal Studies shows that income from casual and self-employment in the U.K. is highly unequal, with only top-earners outside regular employment achieving a secure level of earnings (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 1994).

Some high level part time and temporary jobs are available under attractive conditions, but generally these are open to a select few. At the summit of the occupational hierarchy, positions as chief executive, non-ex-

<sup>11</sup>This is not novel since the study of rhetoric goes back to the Ancient Greeks. However, discourse analysis reveals unconscious aspects of language technique as well as deliberate technique.

ecutive director, consultant, head of department—are held on a part time basis, often by the same person, a member of a multiple job-holding elite. Here is a form of flexibility undreamed of elsewhere. Such jobs are exceptional; in general, the rigid working requirements of responsible and well-rewarded jobs can be met only by those who take on no commitments outside paid employment or can offload their family responsibilities onto others. Under the current household division of labor, the requirements of availability for work on employers' terms act as rationing devices, excluding those who devote time to care of the young, the old, and the ill, and so perpetuating the disadvantages women experience.

But the requirements of availability on employers' terms exact their price from those who succeed in meeting them, as from those prevented from doing so. Many of the responsible and well-rewarded jobs from which women tend to be excluded by their other commitments require hours and make demands which are in important respects excessive. These requirements construct jobs on terms which can “steal your life” (Schor, 1992). It is not the nature of the work that demands full-time commitment of employees during their years of family formation in current career structures; strategies of corporate budgeting and control make these demands. The discourse of “flexibility” needs to be deconstructed to expose underlying complexities and contradictions. This calls for further work.

Reference to the notion of flexibility in condensed, shorthand mode, as in the texts associated with Opportunity 2000, evokes a simplistic panacea to complex interrelated problems, reminiscent of other campaigns with political support. The contradictions in the terminology of flexibility can be exposed, indeed are coming to be questioned in the critical media. In a more vigorous debate, the language of flexibility and its associate practices could be challenged in new discourses moving into the mainstream and calling for more human working arrangements for men and women alike. Such a debate would address the issue of structural change and unemployment and the collective irrationality of the current distribution of paid employment in times of job displacement. Instead of being fragmented promotional devices, policy measures could be multifaceted and integrated attempts to acknowledge and move with new developments in the light of wider public concerns and aims.

If Opportunity 2000 were one strand in a broader opportunity policy which was concerned with the stereotyping of outlook inculcated by the media, which addressed the needs for quality childcare, which confronted occupational segregation, the basis for pay disparities, rigid working arrangements and other interrelated issues in an integrated manner, then the “targets” of this campaign would be set in context. They would take their proper place as an important contribution to women's opportunities. By

acknowledging the conditions on which women have to supply their labor, changes in the terms on which women are employed could in turn alter that supply (Garnsey & Deakin, 1990). Women's expectations are shaped by what they know about the demand for their labor. Few women even apply for jobs which are incompatible with their family commitments; they train for jobs which will fit in with home demands. Employers are then under little pressure to change arrangements which most of their male employees do not question. Changes in working arrangements and requirements are needed to alter this interlocking cycle of mutual expectation and enactment.

An integrated policy acknowledging and addressing the systemic nature of the disadvantages experienced by women should extend to considering the costs to men of current arrangements. If men continue to prevail in the battle of the sexes, their victory is not achieved without great cost. Quantitative indicators such as mortality and accident rates measure the toll taken on men by the prevailing division of labor (Social Trends, 1993). The costs of current notions of masculinity are also coming to be judged too high (Badinter, 1992). The costs of being an absent or distant father, of having too little time for friendship and self-development, which are imposed by long hours of work and pressures of the job are increasingly recognized by men. When men do take on full responsibility for their children they tend to be disadvantaged as women are in the world of paid work (George & Wilding, 1972). These issues must be addressed in any full discussion of the disadvantages suffered by women at work. Instead the implications of these factors are set aside in the promotional literature. The Opportunity 2000 campaign is decontextualized and simplified for attainability, raising the question of the value of what can be so attained.

This paper is a form of discourse. We are aware that we are using our own cognitive schema to "make sense" of our perceptions. We have been facilitated by discourses on which we draw and hampered by other forms of discourse within which the ideas to which we attempt to give expression are caught up in contradictions. By deconstructing a discourse on women in management we hope to have shown the need for a different discursive framework in terms of which to conceptualize the relationships between women and men—in search of more fully human forms of interaction.

## SUMMARY

Throughout Europe, there is evidence of persisting inequality of women in the workforce. Our argument rests upon the understanding that one manifestation of disadvantage cannot be tackled without responding

to the wider social context. We use the concept of "enactment of inequality" to ground our understanding. By social enactment, we refer to cycles of cognition, action, and outcome which collectively actualize social structures. We suggest that the nature of certain discourses is a major vehicle in this cycle, and we provided a conceptual analysis of the relationship of discourse to enactment.

As a study of text and context exemplifying this conceptual scheme, we analyze the discourse surrounding a major U.K. government-backed initiative designed to increase the "quality and quantity" of women's participation in the workforce and in managerial roles. We examine texts to explore how the persistence of inequalities may, without apparent intention, be encoded in language. Our analysis suggests that cognitive schemata are framed by the dominant discourse, here of "target-setting" within organizations. We find from commentaries that even potential critics of the campaign were drawn into acceptance of a common agenda and have been thereby diverted from addressing other pressing issues affecting women's opportunities.

Finally, we point to contradictions in the use of the term "flexibility." We suggest that discourse analysis provides a tool for exposing the preconceptions and interests behind apparently neutral facades. A wider vision is needed, acknowledging the costs to men as well as women of current working arrangements under conditions of high unemployment. This would point to the need for integrated attempts to address sources of disadvantage both within and outside employing organizations.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

A version of this paper was presented at the European Institute for Advanced Studies in Management for the Second International Workshop on Organizational and Managerial Cognition, Brussels, May 1994.

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