

'SAMENESS' AND 'DIFFERENCE' REVISITED: WHICH WAY FORWARD FOR EQUAL OPPORTUNITY INITIATIVES?

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ABSTRACT

Recent interest in 'managing diversity' has reopened debates about forms of equality in the workplace. Approaches to equality developed in the 1970s and 1980s have been characterized as an attempt to ensure that if individuals bring the same abilities to work, or perform in the same way, they should receive the same access to jobs and employment benefits, regardless of social group membership. Managing diversity appears to be about a more positive valuing of difference. Benefits are seen to derive from different perspectives and approaches and these should be nurtured and rewarded rather than suppressed. Feminists have long argued about the extent to which women are the same as, or different from, men, and about the political consequences of adopting these positions. Recent theoretical developments have led to some novel solutions to this dilemma. These include asserting claims to both 'sameness' and 'difference', the deconstruction of 'difference', and the reconstruction of 'sameness' on women's terms. This paper explores approaches to equal opportunities through both established and novel theoretical perspectives. It argues that existing practice cannot be fitted neatly into the conventional distinctions between 'sameness' and 'difference', and explores the potential characteristics and strengths and weaknesses of equality initiatives based on the new theoretical perspectives.

INTRODUCTION

What form of equality are workplace equal opportunities initiatives intended to achieve? What form of discrimination are they supposed to overcome and in what ways? Does it make sense to talk about women as a unified group facing the same problems in the workplace and likely to benefit from the same solutions? These questions have been relatively unexplored in the UK context where the literature on equality measures within organizations has been located largely within a policy, rather than a theoretical, framework.

In contrast, legal scholars have treated these questions more extensively. There has been considerable debate, particularly in the USA, about the consequences

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of adopting different legal stances towards the elimination of discrimination. Various known as the equal treatment/special treatment or sameness/difference debate this has focused, although not exclusively, on employers' treatment of pregnancy and maternity leave (Bacchi, 1990; Minow, 1990; Vogel, 1990). The debate arose from a number of high profile cases where feminists found themselves arguing on opposing sides. So for example, in relation to pregnancy, some argued that women could best be protected by laws which classified pregnancy as a 'temporary disability' and thus defined a group of non-pregnant workers with whom pregnant women could compare themselves to claim 'equal treatment'. Anything else, it was argued, would disadvantage women by making them appear as less desirable workers, or unworthy of equality in other spheres. Others rejected this approach, arguing that pregnancy had to be seen as a situation requiring special treatment. Trying to force what most would see as a basic gender difference into a false gender-neutrality was said to denigrate women's procreative abilities and not provide a basis for women's broader equality in the workplace.

Later commentators have not been content with a forced choice between equal or special treatment. They have drawn on post-modern and post-structural approaches to argue that 'sameness or difference' is a false dichotomy. The terms are inter-dependent, in that one can only be different in so far as one is not the same as the other, and both embody the notion of a male standard against which 'sameness' or 'difference' is judged. Furthermore, discussions about whether women are the same as, or different from, men construct unitary categories which suppress differences between men and between women and ignore similarities between men and women that would be highlighted by categorizing them differently (e.g. by class or ethnicity). Some reject the category of 'being a woman' altogether on the grounds that it cannot avoid being essentialist or normalizing. These latter arguments have become highly abstract, losing any clear link with legislative or policy interventions.

Where workplace equality measures have been considered in the light of these debates they have been assumed to follow the dominant legal approach by having the objective of ensuring equal treatment. This has been seen to involve a disregard of gender (and ethnicity) in managerial decision making. 'Managing diversity' – currently promoted as a new approach to equal opportunities, particularly in North America – suggests a very different approach. It argues that far from pretending workplace differences do not exist, managers should be trying to actively manage and value diversity.

Assessing the potential of this new approach provides an opportunity to consider organizational approaches to equal opportunities within an analytical framework based on sameness and difference. It will be argued that the current range of initiatives cannot simply be categorized as just granting equality on the basis of sameness or equal treatment. Initiatives exist which aim for equality despite difference and many company policies (and indeed aspects of the law) combine the two approaches. Diversity strategies can also be seen to involve a mix of approaches. Through this analysis it becomes possible to explore the type of initiatives which might go beyond the limitations which have been identified for those based on sameness or difference and to understand the likely strengths and pitfalls of such approaches.

EQUALITY BASED ON SAMENESS

Legislation against sex discrimination in the UK dates from the 1970s. It drew on but is not identical to that in the USA (Dex and Shaw, 1986; Meehan, 1985). This legislation and other influences such as labour market changes has stimulated the development of equal opportunity policies at the organizational level. In the UK such policies are now widespread, particularly among large organizations (Marginson et al., 1993), and tend to follow a common format (which will be discussed in the course of the paper) based on the advice of the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC). Equality policies in the UK tend to be initiated and controlled by personnel/human resource departments.

This dominant approach to gender equality at work is most commonly characterized as 'equal treatment' and is said to be enshrined within the liberal legal tradition of treating like as like. Anti-discrimination legislation provides the right, on an individual basis, to be treated the same as another person of a different sex in the same circumstances. Jewson and Mason (1986) extended this analysis to equal opportunities initiatives more broadly, calling the dominant policy approach 'liberal'.

The way that anti-discrimination legislation has interpreted treating 'like as like' is that people should be judged independently of their gender, focusing instead on job-related characteristics. In practice this has led 'liberal' policies to focus on the development of techniques to ensure that women are assessed in the same way as men. These include reviews of recruitment and selection tests, awareness training for selectors and appraisers, and reviews of payment structures.

As feminists have pointed out, all policies based on sameness/equal treatment require women to deny, or attempt to minimize, differences between themselves and men as the price of equality. This, it is suggested, is neither feasible nor desirable. Such an approach can never adequately take account of problems arising from, say, women's domestic responsibilities or their educational disadvantage. Nor does it take account of those who want to spend time with their children without this costing them advancement at work. Sameness is being judged against a norm of male characteristics and behaviour. It is this type of analysis which has led some to designate what is offered by the legislation and associated policies as 'formal equality'. Equal opportunities policies are said therefore to take an over-simplistic view both of the problem of inequality (seeing it as a managerial failure to treat like as like) and its solution ('equality' can be achieved by treating women the same as men).

This critique provides important insights into the limitations of some equality initiatives. It is, however, a position which is difficult to sustain across the range of activities being pursued under the label of equal opportunities. Even the anti-discrimination law which seems to be straightforwardly about treating women the same as men would be treated in the same circumstances, arguably goes further in some circumstances. This legislation relating to sex includes provisions against indirect discrimination. This occurs when a condition is applied equally to all but in practice a considerably larger proportion of people of one sex find it difficult to comply with than people from the opposite sex. This is unlawful unless it can be shown to be a necessary job requirement. Here equal treatment of men and

women (the same condition is applied) is seen to be insufficient to produce 'equality'. The law recognizes that there are differences between people based on social group membership which can be used to deny equality in situations where it 'should' be granted. For example, this provision has been used to remove age restrictions on entry to certain civil service grades since women who had been out of the labour force because of domestic responsibilities were being disadvantaged by age profiles based on men with continuous work histories.

Is this a breach of the principle that men and women should receive equal treatment when they are in the same situation? It would seem to be so if it is saying that men and women should be given equal treatment despite their differences. A more usual interpretation, however, is that certain differences are closely associated with gender and hence should also be treated as irrelevant for workplace decision-making. This account serves only to emphasize the ambiguities inherent in equal treatment. More (1993) following Westen (1982) argues that the legal definition is indeterminate since it does not specify along which dimensions likeness is to be assessed (if two things are alike in all dimensions there is no basis for systematic inequality). Case law has established that characteristics such as length of service and hours of work can involve indirect discrimination, showing that no simple division can be made between 'social' and 'work-related' criteria.

The Equal Value amendment to the UK Equal Pay act goes even further. The original legislation provided for equal pay on an equal treatment basis, that is the same pay for doing the same job. Since occupational segregation meant that women were relatively rarely in the same situation as men this had little effect on pay differentials. The equal value amendment rules that people in different jobs should, in circumstances where these are judged to involve comparable skill, responsibility, working conditions and effort, get equal benefits in terms of pay. Since jobs can be judged to be of equal value while being very different in terms of more obvious characteristics such as type of work or qualifications required, it is difficult to see this as a case of equal pay being awarded to people in the same situation. Alternatively it could be said that differences in jobs should not lead to disadvantage if equivalent (but not the same) inputs were involved.

There are similar tensions in trying to fit the range of equality initiatives seen in many organizations within the 'equal treatment'/'sameness' definition. In practice many go beyond formalizing selection and other personnel procedures to ensure equal treatment for women who, in all aspects apart from their gender, are the same as men in terms of their suitability for a post. Organizations which are proactive on equality issues have stretched and reinterpreted the equal treatment model in a number of ways.

One set of initiatives could be said to be aimed at reducing the barriers which prevent men and women being in the same situation. Here we could include the provision of childcare and other measures to reduce the difficulty of combining waged work with domestic commitments. Also in this category one could include single sex training schemes to provide women (or men) with the skills required to gain entry to occupations in which they have traditionally been seriously under-represented. Many people object to such schemes arguing that if women have to be 'helped' to be like men then such initiatives constitute not equal treatment but an unfair advantage. Even so, all these things can lawfully be provided (although, of course, they are not required).

In other cases organizations are examining job requirements and terms, in more radical ways than is required by indirect discrimination clauses, in an attempt to ensure that women are able to fulfil the requirements. Such initiatives include the removal of certain formal qualifications, such as a degree, unless it can be proved that the job could not be done by someone with a different set of experiences. In other cases jobs which were traditionally worked on a full-time basis have been opened up to those wishing to work part-time or job share. The argument here is that it is very difficult for women to gain equal treatment because job conditions are constructed around men's skills and patterns of work (Webb and Liff, 1988). These changes aim to make requirements more 'neutral' so that women are more likely to be in the same situation (able to satisfy job requirements) and thus qualify for equal treatment (access to jobs). Again, studies (Cockburn, 1991; Salaman, 1986) report that men experience these initiatives not as equal treatment but as a lowering of standards, or rewriting the rules to suit women.

The way organizations are encouraged to evaluate their equal opportunities policies also displays ambiguity. Most guidance (for example from codes of practice or personnel texts) involves some monitoring of the achievements of members of different groups; for example, the proportion of women at a particular occupational level or whether women are being short-listed and appointed in the same proportion as they apply for a particular post. This is at best an indirect measure of whether equal treatment is being granted to like individuals since it appears to be making assumptions about the lack of difference between men and women. The EOC Code of Practice does not say that unequal outcomes are incontrovertible evidence of unequal treatment (that is unlawful practices). Rather it suggests that managers need to investigate the reasons for such outcomes to ensure that they are the result of genuine, job-related, rather than irrelevant, sex-related, differences. It does not, however, provide any detailed guidance on how organizations are supposed to distinguish one from the other.

Current anti-discrimination legislation and equal opportunities initiatives draw heavily on an equal treatment/sameness notion of equality but there are at least elements within them which show an awareness of the limitations of a naive application of such a perspective and some that begin to suggest a different perspective on equality.

EQUALITY BASED ON DIFFERENCE

An alternative to providing equality only to those who are alike would involve finding a way to encompass differences between people. In North America, and increasingly in Britain, a set of initiatives whose intention is to value or manage 'diversity' appear to be aiming at this type of equality. Proponents of this approach argue that businesses are limiting themselves by continuing to employ only people in same image as those already in place. Women and ethnic minorities, it is argued, can bring new strengths to a workforce and help organizations maintain their competitive edge. Rather than being rejected, difference should be managed effectively.

Compared with over 20 years of 'equal opportunities' initiatives, 'managing diversity' strategies are still in their infancy and it is not always easy to tell the reality from the rhetoric. In an early article Copeland (1988a) describes ten measures typically included in a 'valuing diversity' programme. Most of these would not be out of place in any broadly based equal opportunity policy. They focus on initiatives to recruit people from under-represented groups, activities in the community to get a good public image with these groups, providing 'high flying' women and minorities with access to career development track jobs, mentoring, and executive appointments to get under-represented groups through the 'glass ceiling', training for managers to counter stereotypes and increase their understanding of organizational barriers, and ensuring organizational provisions such as holidays and food are inclusive of the needs of all. In the case of the others, the language may be different but the underlying concept is not. For example, diversity training for employees is said to 'improve employees' understanding of corporate culture, success requirements, and career choices that will affect their advancement' (Copeland, 1988a, p. 48); 'diverse input and feedback' is about assessing employees' needs directly rather than assuming what they are; and 'self-help' is about encouraging the development of support networks. Responsibility for these changes and their success rests with line managers.

There does appear to be a move away from the conventional approach to equal opportunities towards initiatives which are more individualistic and line manager-based. There does not, however, seem to be any significant change in the ways in which access to scarce resources such as senior jobs should be granted. Initiatives aim to get the best out of people, overcome barriers, and ensure that minorities get the same advantages previously granted to the dominant group. It is difficult to see a focus on equality based on difference rather than sameness as a key aspect of this new equal opportunities approach despite the 'diversity' label.

Instead, at least part of the interest seems to come from the compatibility between diversity approaches and some of the ideas that have been characterized as 'new industrial relations' or 'Human Resource Management' (Guest, 1987; Legge, 1989; Storey, 1989). Conventional equal opportunities approaches are deeply rooted in the old approaches to managing labour in that they are bureaucratic in style and tend to see the workforce as a collective. They rely on setting rules for managers to follow and policing whether they do so. In contrast, Human Resource Management, at least in some of its versions, stresses the role of the individual and the importance of involvement and commitment. An approach based on diversity appears to fit much more comfortably with this style than do conventional approaches to equal opportunities, since it recognizes differences within the workforce and sees it as the responsibility of the individual to grasp opportunities assisted by an empowering organization.

There are other strands to this debate which do seem to challenge the 'sameness' notion of equality in a more radical way. In another article, Copeland (1988b) argues that the objective is to make people feel comfortable and motivated so that they can work as effectively as possible. The lesson for managers is that people will work better if they do not feel they are being squeezed into a narrow mould. Others have gone further and argued that mixed work teams will understand a wider range of customer needs and hence help the organization to

be more competitive (Gordon et al., 1991; Greenslade, 1991). In the area of women and management this type of argument has blurred into one that argues for a new form of homogeneity by claiming that a different style of manager will be more appropriate to organizations in the future (e.g. Fierman, 1990).

These cases do challenge the equal treatment model. People may not want to be treated the same with respect to all aspects of their work lives. Instead they might value different working arrangements, or benefit packages, and by successfully managing this diversity employers might expect to get benefits. What is less clear is what is being said about the basis on which access to scarce resources (such as a job) should be decided. If, as is being implied, it is possible to do a job successfully in a number of different ways how should candidates be compared? On the equal treatment model equality is ensured by developing job criteria against which all candidates can be compared without regard to their gender. For the diversity model to be able to defend a different kind of fairness it would seem necessary to develop some way of comparing approaches which are different but equivalent. The only model which tries to do this is the equal value approach discussed earlier.

There are other examples of a range of approaches to the treatment of 'difference' in the workplace. Some of these grant equal benefits to all regardless of differences. The European Community has been developing initiatives to extend workplace rights to 'atypical' workers (for the most part those who work non-standard hours) (Dickens, 1992). This seems to be underpinned by a notion that differences which have been seen by employers as negating the demand for equal treatment in the past should no longer be an abandonment of the right to equivalent benefits. The provision of maternity leave also ensures that a significant difference between men and women should not be used as a reason for denying women the same rights as men to job security. As we argued in the last section, it is possible to recast these within the equal treatment approach.

Many writers concerned about women's equality have been extremely cautious of approaches based on the acknowledgement of difference. One argument is that women will be seen as less attractive employees if their different needs are stressed. Another is that men will see women as getting extra benefits and this will lead to resentment. On the other hand, there is an attraction in looking for new bases for equality. Equal treatment approaches do not seem to have made much impression on job segregation or pay differentials. Studies have shown that selectors continue to hold stereotypes of women and men which affect their decision making and have difficulty conceptualizing job requirements in gender-neutral terms (Collinson et al., 1990; Curran, 1988). All these issues make the search for a different approach worth pursuing.

SAMENESS AND DIFFERENCE?

As the last two sections have shown, there is considerable overlap between approaches usually considered as part of the 'equal treatment' approach and those which claim to be about a new approach to equality based on difference. Is it possible that both have something to offer?

Women, it is sometimes claimed, want it both ways: they want to be treated as

the same when it suits them, and as different when it doesn't! The experience may be rather different with claims to 'sameness' rejected and claims to 'difference' used against them. As Cockburn (1991) expresses it, 'the dominant group know you are different and continue to treat you as different, but if you yourself specify your difference your claim to equality will be null' (p. 219). She argues that women's answer to men who ask what type of equality they want should now be: 'If we say so, as women, we can be both the same as you *and* different from you, at various times and in various ways' (Cockburn, 1991, p. 10, her emphasis). This may appear capricious, but does not need to be if we explore the sense in which each approach might be appropriate. As Bacchi (1990) stresses, the way to emerge from the vicious circle of sameness or difference approaches is to focus on the real problem for women workers; that they are disadvantaged.

If one starts from this perspective then it is possible to see that sometimes women are disadvantaged by being treated differently when in fact they are the same (e.g. denied a job for which they are perfectly well qualified) and at other times by being treated the same when their difference needs to be taken into account (e.g. having their absence to look after a sick child treated the same way as a man who is absent with a hangover).

Employers will need to *cease* certain activities, such as preferring male to female employees because of assumptions about women's character or domestic responsibilities. On the other hand employers will be obliged to *undertake* certain activities to encourage women where encouragement is appropriate and to consider their particular requirements, given the distribution of domestic responsibilities in most families. (Bacchi, 1990, pp. 178-9, her emphasis)

The attraction of such an approach is that it is less about rejecting previous approaches and more about recognizing their relevance to particular situations. Thus we can see that the equal treatment/liberal approach is entirely appropriate for tackling some types of discrimination and can be expected to have brought benefits. Here the best way forward is for women to be treated the same as men, for example by ensuring that selection and appraisal methods are free from bias. In other cases, where women have been excluded from certain types of experience or qualification, or where they have specific demands placed on them from the home which impinge on their work, this difference should be acknowledged. Appropriate equality initiatives in this context would include targeted training courses, childcare or the opportunity for men and women to work different hours.

When phrased in this way, however, those managing equal opportunity policies could rightly claim to be doing all these things. They may not be discussing policy choices in terms of appropriately applying sameness and difference initiatives, but that is what they have been doing. So why is there still a problem? Is it just that these different types of initiatives are insufficiently understood and communicated? Improvements in these areas are doubtless needed and might well reduce resentment and conflict around equality measures. Experience suggests, however, that the problem goes deeper.

Two issues remain problematic. The first is the lack of any clear criteria for assessing the circumstances in which a particular approach should be chosen. As

has already been argued, neither problems nor policies neatly divide between 'sameness' and 'difference'. Indeed it could be argued that they are merely two sides of the same coin. Treating men and women in the same situation the same requires agreement about what constitutes the 'same situation' or, in other words, what differences to ignore. Treating people who are different differently is merely the obverse of equal treatment rather than a different approach. The other problem is that there is only limited evidence that the policy initiatives from either perspective have led to a reduction in inequality between men and women. Managers continue to make decisions on the basis of stereotypes, value people in their own image, and hold strongly sex-typed views of job requirements and high performance (e.g. Bevan and Thompson, 1992; Curran, 1988; Jenkins, 1986; Townley, 1990).

BEYOND SAMENESS AND DIFFERENCE

The limits to both sameness- and difference-based initiatives have led to some writers arguing that we are asking the wrong sort of questions, and to a growing interest in moving beyond these divisions. Feminist theorists have argued that there are two things wrong with the sameness/difference argument. First, 'difference' is constructed only in relation to the category of the other. We understand male and female characteristics in relation to each other rather than as independent categories. More importantly the construction of 'woman as different' embodies a notion of 'different from male'. To talk about women's differences is inevitably to engage in what has been called 'a phallogocentric discourse'. The second argument is that the presentation of a single binary division between men and women both polarizes the difference between them and exaggerates the homogeneity of each category. As such, the common concerns of, say, black men and black women are obscured and those of black and white women exaggerated. These criticisms draw theoretically on post-structural analyses but they also reflect the concerns of policy makers and disadvantaged groups.

There have been some attempts to respond to these points through, for example, the promotion of career breaks for purposes other than child rearing in some organizations and the establishment of separate race and gender equality units in some local authorities. However, they are not part of the mainstream of equality approaches. There are also questions about their effectiveness in practice. Black women may feel their interests are lost between separate race and gender equality initiatives (Liff and Dale, 1994).

Can those who suggest that we go beyond sameness and difference offer a better way forward? Scott (1988, p. 172) argues that 'the only response is a double one: the unmasking of the power relationship constructed by posing equality as the antithesis of difference, and the refusal of its consequent dichotomous construction of political choices'. What this seems to involve in practice is a stress on multiple differences shared by people, both men and women. Taken to its logical conclusion this approach would appear to deny any coherence to the category 'women'. In this context it is not clear what the gender equality project would mean since the collective disadvantage on which it is founded has been undermined.

The post-structuralist answer seems to be that we need to 'insist continually on differences – differences as the constant challenge to the fixing of those identities, ... differences as the very meaning of equality itself' (Scott, 1988, pp. 174–5). One explanation of what this might mean is given by Minnow (1990) in her discussion of pregnancy provisions. Here she argues that we can avoid men being seen as the norm and women as deviants if we construct the norm as 'the experiences of both women and men, people who become pregnant on occasion and people who do not' (p. 154). That is the construction of a category of 'people', but not one based on a false unity where "Man's" story was supposed to be everyone's story' (Scott, 1988, p. 174). Rather, it is one that includes diversity and change to represent everyone.

How could this be translated into practical initiatives? In terms of equality statements one might replace those that specified particular differences which were to be considered irrelevant when making employment decisions (currently sex and race) with a more inclusive approach. An equal value statement developed on this principle might say that any person is entitled to claim equal pay with any other person if their jobs are evaluated as equal. While the current formulation only allows women to compare themselves with men and vice versa, this new version would also allow men to compare themselves with other men, and women with other women. An equal opportunity statement could say that jobs should be structured so that they were equally open to all and the suitability of all applicants should be evaluated solely in relation to the requirements of the job.

This clearly has appeal and does respond to the arguments of those who have said that equality measures are inherently limited because they take the construction of work as given. It would remove some oddities from the current legislation, for example that part-time women are unable to claim equal pay with women working full-time on the same job. It would also avoid the need to extend rights by adding new pieces of legislation to address the needs of the disabled or of older workers. At the same time it would recognize that at one time a person might be facing disadvantage as a woman, at another time they would feel they had more in common with black men than white women, or in another instance feel that their situation was attributable most clearly to their age. 'Mobile subjectivities' (Ferguson, 1993) could thus be better accommodated.

But there are also potential areas of difficulty. First, it seems likely merely to shift the terrain to arguments about what are 'necessary' job requirements and conditions and how compliance with them can be demonstrated or to 'equivalent' skill requirements and how they can be measured. For example, some employers have justified their different treatment of part-timers and full-timers in terms of their different contribution, others argue that older people are slower learners. The spectre of constantly changing reference groups might make such assertions even harder to contest than they are now.

Second, the 'naming' of specific types of discrimination has been an important spur to understanding the processes of discrimination. Some practices which are now accepted as indirect discrimination by sex or race were far from obvious when first raised. These insights can be compared with our relative lack of understanding of the processes through which, say, gays and lesbians are disadvantaged at work. A more diffuse approach to equality might push an investi-

gation of processes of discrimination even further on to the shoulders of individuals.

The links to the third, and perhaps most fundamental point. Gender is not just a characteristic which divides people into two categories, 'men' and 'women'. Rather, it is 'a major organizing principle . . . in our perception of the world and everything in it' (Cockburn, 1985, p. 251). Managers' perceptions of job requirements and procedures for assessing merit have been shown to be saturated with gendered assumptions. How will this be changed by deconstruction of the category of gender? Feminists can argue (as they have for years) that not all women get pregnant, but it seems unlikely that this will stop managers thinking 'yes, but no men will'.

A different type of concern relates to the possibility of mobilizing a political consensus for such a major shift in approach. While there is a substantial difference between the UK political parties in terms of their commitment to the extension of equality laws to new groups, there is little evidence of any more radical thinking about the issues, or of equality as a major priority. For many organizations, increased competition and a continuing recession have led to radical restructuring. Equality measures have remained as a formal element within human resource policies but have not been a guiding principle or concern. Individuals faced with job losses may well 'choose' to keep their heads down rather than demand new equality measures.

SAMENESS ON WOMEN'S TERMS?

A stronger way forward might be to argue for a form of equality based on a sameness on women's terms, that is to redefine the norm in terms of women's needs and interests. 'A social model which *includes* women in the human standard could' make it 'possible to speak about women as women, in their own right, and not as "not men"' (Bacchi, 1990, p. 266, her emphasis). This argues for the retention of the category of women but one moved from the margins to the mainstream.

Clearly, such an approach depends on finding a way of continuing to talk meaningfully about the category 'women'. If the arguments about diversity within categories and commonality across them are accepted then we cannot simply return to talking about 'women's needs and interests' as though this was unproblematic. A number of writers have attempted to resolve this dilemma. One approach is to argue that what women share is their current marginality, '[i]n the face of this, the assertion of the feminine may be an important political tactic' (Pringle and Watson, 1992, p. 68). On this view, establishing the legitimacy of 'women's needs and wants' in their own right (rather than in opposition to men's) does not preclude, and indeed may well be a necessary stage in the direction of, treating women as a category of shifting and diverse identity. In another context Douglas (1987) argues that 'institutions create shadowed places in which nothing can be seen and no questions asked. They make other areas show finely discriminated detail, which is closely scrutinized and ordered' (p. 69). This occurs in part through the creation of identity. Until women are removed from the shadow that is 'not men' it will be difficult to recognize their diversity.

These arguments are persuasive in relation to the need for a focus on 'women' but make the most minimal case in relation to what defines them as a category. This avoids criticisms of essentialism but does not provide a strong basis for defining priorities for gender equality. A richer approach is provided by Young (1994). She draws on Sartre's distinction between a group (who define themselves in terms of a shared identity) and a series (who are constructed through social structures and processes). On this view women do not share specific attributes. Instead their unity arises

through the material organization of social relations as enabled and constrained by the structural relations of enforced heterosexuality and the sexual division of labour. . . . Saying that a person is a woman may predict something about the general constraints and expectations she must deal with. But it predicts nothing in particular about who she is, what she does, how she takes up her social positioning. (Young, 1994, p. 733)

It is not clear how far women of different classes and ethnicities can be said to be constructed through the same social processes. The *expectation* of incompatibility between women's waged work and domestic lives is a shared aspect even if it is seen to have different significance and consequences for different women. So what would equality measures in this area look like? The way in which 'full-time' work is defined and currently structures most work opportunities clearly represents the dominance of the 'male model' since it is very difficult to combine such work with domestic commitments (this could be seen in terms of expectations about men rather than as representing the interests and needs of all men). The opportunity to work full or part-time, an aspect of progressive equality programmes, appears to recognize different needs. However, in leaving in place full-time work as the dominant option it constructs part-time work not merely as different but also as inferior. Rethinking work from women's perspective could involve a change to, say, a 30-hour week/6-hour day for all. This norm would then be a pattern that could be managed by people (both men and women) with other commitments.

This is intended as an indication of the potential of looking from a new perspective as opposed to the more familiar approach which retains the status quo and makes special arrangements for those who cannot fit in. It is clearly not an unproblematic approach even in its ability to respond to women's needs. On current wage levels there is a danger of disadvantaging many of those who live outside two-wage-earner households (which includes many single mothers in low paid jobs).

As with the approaches considered in the last section it might be said to be unrealistic in the current context. While such ideas are starting to enter the arena of British political debate (e.g. Hewitt, 1993), actual hours of work continue to be the most diverse and unregulated in Europe (Watson, 1992) and even limited moves to introduce parental leave through the EC have been blocked. There is recognition both of the significance of the issue, and of the barriers to change, by policy makers. A NEDO (1990) report on women managers starts by saying that a visitor from Mars could be forgiven for thinking that management jobs have been specifically designed for men married to full-time wives and mothers who

shoulder the burden of family life. In its third annual report *Opportunity 2000* (1994), the UK business-led equality body highlights 'the "working all hours" culture' as a major block to progress, arguing that 'many men and women believe part-time work is not a realistic option for the career-minded manager' (p. 4). Despite the rhetoric of a 'business case' for equal opportunities there is little evidence that organizations will see such changes as a priority for the majority of their female employees (Dickens, 1994). Nevertheless, an approach which builds on, but reformulates, current policies and which responds to acknowledged concerns about existing approaches seems likely to command more support than a completely new approach. In a hostile climate, the rejection of women as a category in favour of a more diffuse notion of shifting individual identities also risks reverting to a notionally neutral version of equal treatment. For these reasons a woman-centred strategy, for all its difficulties, seems the most plausible way forward.

Other countries have made progress in this direction. In Sweden extensive leave provisions and other support for parents (both men and women) are established and explicitly linked to equality initiatives. What is important about this is that it provides a basis for challenging men's behaviour both inside and outside the workplace. 'Commonsense' explanations about men's absence from childcare are undermined as are arguments which say that certain jobs are so demanding they are incompatible with family responsibilities. There is no automatic link to changed behaviour and men might work shorter hours without using this newly released time to make an enhanced domestic contribution. If this happened, the uneven division of labour in the home would continue to advantage them and disadvantage women. There are different assessments of the effectiveness of the Swedish initiatives in reducing inequality in workplaces and homes (Cohen, 1991; Eveline, 1994; Lewis and Åström, 1992) reinforcing the view that policy measures cannot succeed in a vacuum. But their existence does indicate that it is possible to move towards an equality strategy where typically female patterns of working are treated as the norm.

A more fundamental criticism is that such an approach privileges gender over other social divisions such as class or race. Why should work be organized around women, particularly women conceived primarily as mothers and carers, rather than say around black people or the working class? Accepting multiple identities one would have to say that it provides the basis for a partial political project rather than a total solution. Parallel policy frameworks would need to be developed around other interest groups to fit their experiences and needs. This can only contribute to a transformation of working conditions to be more generally inclusive of diversity.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

We are not suggesting an uncritical restatement of the liberal perspective which currently underpins equality initiatives. Reformulating equality demands based on appeals to 'sameness' from women's perspective is intended to disrupt views of the gender neutrality of the structure of work and concepts of merit. As such it should also help to challenge men's behaviour. Nor are we claiming to have dis-

covered an unproblematic set of 'women's needs' which can form the new basis for a gender equality project. Without a sense of what makes women different from men a specific gender equality project has no meaning. But simply submerging all women into norms adopted by those who are white, able-bodied and middle class would only produce another model which claims to treat everyone equally but in fact disenfranchises significant numbers of those it claims to represent.

We are concerned with pointing to opportunities for progress rather than to faultless solutions. As such it may be necessary to hold on to creative tensions. The two approaches, sameness judged from women's perspective and a notion of equality based on multiple identities, are apparently contradictory. However, their interaction may be productive (Ferguson, 1993). An awareness of 'women' as a shifting identity makes us aware of the partial construction of centring work around women. At the same time trying to think from 'women's perspective' should enable us to remember that recognizing diversity among women and shared interests between men and women is not an end in itself but has the purpose of changing jobs and work to be more fully open to all.

Feminists have never simply argued that women are the same as men or that they are different. Through the exploration of specific disputed issues in the USA, Australia and Britain, Bacchi (1990) shows that feminists have been forced to argue on this ground only in particular political circumstances, and that even in these cases there have always been competing views. The development of a new perspective requires that we 'stop writing the history of feminism as a story of oscillations between demands for equality and affirmations of difference' (Scott, 1988, p. 176).

This article is intended as a contribution to that project. It shows that workplace equality initiatives have never simply been about granting equality to women who could prove that they were the 'same' as men. Even when they have been constructed primarily around that concept they have left space for a different type of approach. That approach has been primarily based on claims that women's difference (in relation to job segregation and childbearing) should not be a bar to equal benefits. But there have also been initiatives which acknowledge a more contradictory set of interests and which have presented a more radical challenge to the way work has been organized around male norms. We are arguing that these need to be brought centre stage. The argument is that a clearer recognition of these different types of initiatives and their potential strengths and pitfalls can contribute to a subtler understanding of the theory and practice of equal opportunities. We are under no illusions that this will in itself provide an instant route to gender equality, but would hope that it can help to build alliances, win support, and generate imaginative initiatives, which should all ease the journey.

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