

Studying the Gendering of Organizational Culture Over Time: Concerns, Issues and Strategies

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Beginning with the premise that 'organizational culture' is a useful heuristic for the study of gender at work, this article focuses on the problem of studying the culture of organizations over time, setting out to demonstrate how the social construction of corporate history has, until now, lent itself to gendered notions of business practices. Arguing that history itself is but one of a series of discourses about the world, the article outlines a feminist strategy for the study of organizational culture over time that includes: (i) feminist historiography as history written from a feminist point of view; (ii) a commitment to the notion of history as discourse rooted in the present; (iii) a view of women's rights development as a paradoxical process of progress and regress; (iv) a gender focus approach that studies the impact of discrimination on the social construction of masculinity/femininity and sexual preference; and (v) an approach that is sensitive to the contextualization of gender. British Airways is used as a case study to illustrate some of the problems of historic re/construction and feminist historiography.

Keywords: corporate history, gender, organizational culture, feminism, British Airways

Introduction

In recent years a number of feminist scholars have been drawn to the concept of organizational culture as an heuristic for the study of discriminatory practices in the workplace (Gherardi, 1995; Maddock, 1999). It is argued that a holistic approach to organizational realities, focused on 'norms, values, beliefs and ways of behaving' can generate insights into how

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workplace practices become discriminatory (Helms Mills and Mills, 2000). As Wilson puts it:

Organizational culture is generally written about as if it were gender neutral ... [However] the gendered nature of organizational culture is demonstrated daily by a multitude of differences and differentiations predicated on gender, for instance, job segregation, pay, promotion and status. (2001, p. 168)

The on-going debate has gone through three paradigmatic stages. The first stage involved challenges to the gender-neutral approach embedded within mainstream theories of organizational culture (cf. Mills, 1988). That this issue is still being contested can be seen by the fact that numerous studies of organizational culture still fail to include issues of gender (see, for example, the recent collection by Ashkanasy *et al.* 2000), and feminist studies of organizational culture still feel compelled to make the argument (Wilson, 2001). The second stage saw the development of a number of feminist explorations of organizational culture that drew on a combination of existing theories of culture, and feminist theories of gendered processes (e.g. Korvarjarvi, 1998; Morgan, 1988; Wilson, 1997). These studies have drawn attention to the often mundane, yet deep-rooted, cultural processes that give rise to discrimination at work. Currently a third stage of debate on gender and organizational culture is underway. This stage involves the generation of new theories and methods for studying the gendering of organizational culture. It promises to raise questions not only about the problems of studying organizational cultures but the viability of an organizational culture framework for studying gender issues (Aaltio-Marjosola and Mills, 2001). It also promises to engender debate on many of the underlying assumptions within feminist organizational analysis (Alvesson and Billing, 2001).

This article sets out to contribute to the emerging debate on the problem of studying the gendering of organizational culture. Through a case study of British Airways, the article explores several key problems involved in developing a feminist analysis of the culture of an organization.¹ Through the development of strategies for constructing a feminist account of the culture of an organization the article also contributes to the gender versus women debate within feminist theories of organization (cf. Billing, 1994).

Organizational culture over time

The on-going debate both within mainstream and feminist studies has generated numerous definitions and approaches to the study of organizational culture (Martin and Frost, 1996; Wilson, 2001). In this article, 'organizational culture' is viewed as a 'root metaphor' (Smircich, 1983) that is characterized as being 'primarily composed of a particular configuration of

"rules", enactment and resistance' (Mills, 1988, p. 366). The theory has been discussed at length elsewhere (Helms, Mills and Mills, 2000; Mills, 1988; Mills and Murgatroyd, 1991). Thus, it is not the purpose here to explore the theory further but rather to use it as a framework to explore the problems of undertaking a feminist study of the culture of an organization.

In the study of organizational culture, a primary issue for mainstream and feminist studies alike is whether a 'snapshot' should be taken of the culture in time or whether it should be studied over time. Some feminist scholars focus on contemporary events (cf. Wilson, 1997) while others argue for analysis of the long-term (cf. Morgan, 1988). Both approaches are valuable for generating insights into discriminatory practices. The contemporary focus helps to illuminate current workplace practices and associated attitudes and feelings. The longitudinal focus helps to illustrate how those practices developed and the rooted understandings that keep them in place. It is this latter approach, I would argue, that provides insights into how gendered practices can be changed. Arguably, if we can understand something of the processes that shaped particular workplace practices then we may be able to understand how to change them, and how to prevent them from occurring elsewhere. In short, organizational culture should be understood as dynamic, developing and changing and, as such, should be studied over time and in social context (Dellheim, 1986; Kieser, 1989).

Studying the culture of an organization over time, however, brings with it a number of unique problems, not least of which is the question of what constitutes a particular organization. For example, a snapshot of contemporary practices, symbols, and beliefs has to cope with the legal, structural, and psychological boundaries that mark out one organization from another, or one part of an organization from other parts, at a point in time. This issue is compounded for studies over time. British Airways provides a good illustration of the problem. In studying the 'existing' culture of the airline the feminist researcher has to decide, for example, whether to focus on the overall policies of the formally constituted management, the practices within selected sites (e.g. telephone sales, engineering or particular cabin crews), or a combination of both. To study the airline over time the feminist researcher has to decide not only which boundaries to work within but also whether those boundaries can be meaningfully traced over time. For instance, British Airways, drawing on corporate histories, traces its lineage back to 1919 and the amalgamation of four small airlines. Those airline companies merged in 1924 to become Imperial Airways. In 1935 a number of other small airlines merged to form British Airways Ltd, which, in turn went on to merge with Imperial Airways in 1939 to form the British Overseas Airways Corporation (BOAC). In 1946 BOAC was divided into British South American Airways (BSAA), British European Airways (BEA), and a truncated BOAC. In 1948 BSAA was merged into BOAC and in 1974 BOAC and BEA were merged to form British Airways (BA). Since then BA has taken

over several other airlines, including Dan Air and Caledonian Airways in the 1990s. Thus, as a legal entity, the BA of today is very different to that of the BA of the 1980s, and clearly different to that of the early 1970s when it did not exist in name. Yet, arguably, in this case, a number of practices, symbols and beliefs can be traced back to processes, people and events over 80 years.

In part, this problem is overcome by the focus of the research. However defined, concern with the impact of cultural processes on gendered outcomes steers the traces of culture to those factors thought to have shaped selected discriminatory practices. Organizational boundaries are less important than processes thought to have influenced practices within a particular organization. For example, the ending of prohibitions against female pilots in BA can be traced back, among other things, to the establishment of BOAC- and BEA-supported flying clubs that accepted male and female employees.²

Another potential difficulty in studying organizational culture over time is the problem of existing histories of a particular company. Rowlinson and Procter (1999) contend that the utilization of an organizational culture perspective can provide 'theoretical relevance for business history' but conclude that this potential 'has not been fulfilled' due, in large part, to the 'conventions that divide business history from organizational culture studies'. As Rowlinson and Procter note: 'the chosen approach is not a function of what is being studied but *represents the preferences of the researcher for how research should be done*' (ibid, p. 389, emphasis in the original). The problem is magnified if we consider the issues and concerns that divide feminists from business historians and mainstream approaches to organizational culture.

The company historian focuses on a selected company in terms of its stated purposes (e.g. the provision of an airline service), setting out to document how well it met its objectives over time. Business history, thus, can be described as 'the systematic study of individual firms on the basis of their business records' (Tosh, 1991, quoted in Rowlinson and Procter, 1999, p. 380). In a similar vein, the mainstream organizational scholar, sets out to uncover the cultural antecedents of an organizationally defined problem (Schein, 1985), or the roots of organizational 'success' (Deal and Kennedy, 1982; Peters and Waterman, 1982). This presents the feminist researcher with three levels of problem: (i) the framework of organizational histories; (ii) the cues used to construct those histories; and (iii) the outcomes, or histories, themselves.

Through an ultimate focus on the formal purposes of an organization, business history and mainstream accounts of organizational culture legitimize the study of some elements of organizational life (e.g. efficiency, productivity, growth) at the expense of others (e.g. self-esteem, identity, discriminatory practices). This is problematic for feminist research in that it

marginalizes certain areas of concern and focuses on issues and developments that historically have been associated with masculine endeavour. Histories of British Airways, for example, are invariably about the *men* who founded and ran the company, each being judged by some standard of how well they managed the airline's success (Penrose, 1980). This in itself references such things as entrepreneurship, management, and organizational strategy which, until recently, have been imbued with masculine associations (Chaganti, 1986; Harriman, 1985; Kerfoot and Knights, 1993). This makes it easier for women to be 'hidden from history' (Rowbotham, 1974) by naturalizing masculine reference points.

The problem for the feminist researcher is exacerbated by the fact that the legitimate cues for the construction of a corporate history or culture then draw on selected discourses (e.g. competition) that have also been shaped in contexts of masculine dominance (Ryan, 1979). Penrose (1980, p. 271), for example, focusing on the competitive nature of the airline business, states that in 1973 'on the home front British Airways remained in open conflict with British Caledonian who had applied for licences to points already served by the State airline or within its presumed exclusive preserve'. BA had what Deal and Kennedy (1982) refer to as a 'strong culture', and was eventually able to 'take over' British Caledonian.

Ultimately this presents the feminist researcher with histories that exclude and marginalize the study of the relationship between organizational culture and gender, and make it difficult to unravel the boundaries and some of the key processes that impact on organizational experiences. Histories of British Airways, for example, use various devices to construct the notion of a company as having been continually in operation since 1919. Although British Airways' own reports on its history make reference to over fifty predecessor airlines (*British Airways News*, special anniversary issue insert, August, 1994) histories of the airline focus on very few of those predecessors. Though a focus on such things as volume of sales, operating budgets, number of employees, and socio-political status, histories of British Airways exclude all but the largest or 'more important' predecessor airlines from their accounts. Those exclusions draw on cues that may or may not be of direct interest to a feminist study of gender and culture but which tend to obfuscate organizational boundaries that have a bearing on gendered practices. For example, Railway Air Services, one of the predecessors of British Airways, receives little or no attention in histories of BA yet its 'chairman', Sir Harold Hartley, played an important role in the post-war development of BOAC and BEA. In particular, Hartley, as 'chairman' of BEA and BOAC during the mid- to late 1940s, played a key part in the employment of the first female flight attendants ever to be hired by a major British airline.³ He also played a key role in the associated policy of equity and 'desexualization'. Both BOAC and BEA were at pains to stress that female flight attendants were not hired for their 'glamour' but for their

ability to provide a service, equal in every way to their male counterparts (see Mills, 1997).

Of course, the construction of business histories and organizational cultures over time can provide useful clues for feminist research but those accounts need to be treated as problematic not only for what they selectively focus on but as gendered world-views that impact on current understandings of social phenomena. Arguably, accounts of organizational culture over time amount to the construction of a plausible story that depends more or less on certain extracted cues (Weick, 1995), which rely for their plausibility on a number of underlying gendered assumptions. It is argued that studies of corporate histories and mainstream accounts of organizational cultures over time are retrospective accounts of events, designed to enact the current purposes of corporate managers and/or of historians (Douglas, 1986), and are strongly influenced by on-going discourses (on gender, race, business, and corporate history).

Feminism and the re/writing of history

The problem of studying organizational culture over time will vary with whatever feminist approach is taken. For instance, there are various feminist historiographies, including history by women, history about women, and history written from a feminist point of view (Humphreys, 1994, p. 87; see also Scott, 1987).

The first approach focuses on bringing 'a woman's point of view' to the analysis of history. According to Humphreys (1994, p. 87), this approach is closely linked to the consciousness-raising polemics of the women's movement but 'there are now signs of increasing awareness that history written exclusively about, by and for women can never achieve more than ghetto significance'. This approach, nonetheless, characterizes the 'women in management' (WIM) perspective that includes several studies of organizational culture by and for women (Asplund, 1988). This 'women's voice' perspective has focused attention not only on the role of organizational culture in the marginalization of women at work but also on the valuing of masculine at the expense of feminine characteristics in such things as leadership and management style (cf. Harriman, 1985). Despite raising the profile of women at work, this approach has been criticized for essentializing female and (male) characteristics (Calás and Smircich, 1996).

Part of the problem of the WIM perspective is that it attempts to 'feminize' aspects of organizational culture rather than question its fundamentally masculine framework. Fondas (1997), for example, by focusing on some of the language of Total Quality Management (TQM) and Business Process Reengineering (BPR), argues that management practice is becoming 'feminized'. But this characterization is only achieved by assuming that certain

qualities are essentially feminine and ignoring the masculine discourses (e.g. competitiveness, control) which still frame current management practice (Maddock, 1999). In analysis of organizational culture the WIM perspective is particularly susceptible to the problem of masculine framing discussed above. For example, unless the focus is on the absence of female employees, there is little scope for a history of women in British Airways in the period from 1919 to 1924, when less than a handful of women were employed in all the airlines combined.

The second approach focuses on 'including women in the historical record' (Davis, 1994, p. 85). As Humphreys (1994, p. 87) argues, women's history 'faces the challenge of showing that it can transform and enrich the mainstream historical tradition which it accuses of bias, rather than merely filling in some intestinal gaps in the picture'. This is a perspective shared by Scott (1987, p. 22), who contends that 'women's history will always remain ... a subdepartment of History, unless its practitioners are able to point out its relationship to History or the rewriting of History'. For Scott, a separate women's history 'tends to confirm the notion that women belong in a separate sphere', thus legitimizing 'the existing lines of sexual difference — and the inequality associated with them' (ibid). The problem can be illustrated through reference to British Airways prior to 1939 when less than 10% of the employees of Imperial Airways and British Airways Ltd were females. Unless analysis of airline culture is shifted from its contribution to productivity, profitability and growth, then the record of women's involvement may serve to legitimize, rather than question, their support roles throughout this period.

The third approach, and the one adopted in this article, defines women's history as 'the history of conceptions of gender (i.e. of "men" and "women" as social, rather than natural beings) and of the social relationships and experiences to which gender ideologies are tied, rather than as the history of "women" in isolation' (Humphreys, 1994, p. 87). This approach focuses on explaining how the cultural features of an organization contribute to the social construction of 'womanhood' and 'manhood'. Thus, for example, the development of British Airways from 1919 to 1924 could more fruitfully be analysed in terms of the associations between male-only staffs, the construction of masculinist processes, and the exclusion of females from a range of jobs and management levels. Here masculine discourse is seen as arising out of a particular combination of cultural features rather than as an inevitable (or essential) aspect of business practice (cf. Mills, 1994).

Concerns, issues and strategies

The choice of feminist historiography is an important starting point for the study of organizational culture over time but a starting point nonetheless.

Several other issues need to be confronted, not least of which include questions about the nature of history, progress, subjectivities, context, and cultural traces.

History as discourse

Clearly the starting point of the feminist researcher (e.g. the gendering of organizational culture) will lead to a set of questions that is markedly different from those of the corporate historian, and will be different again from the mainstream scholar of organizational culture. Each different research project will ultimately lead to a different social construction of the history of organizational culture. Arguably, History (i.e. the outcome of historiography) is a process of social construction that says more about the present than the past (cf. Foucault, 1980; Gordon, 1994; Jenkins, 1994). For example, *Aerial Milestones*, a film made by Imperial Airways in 1939, uses selective developments of the airline — told in chronological style — to present an image to contemporary audiences of a progressive company and its contribution to a far-seeing nation. Similarly, Pudney's (1959) history of BOAC is a narrative of the progressive character of an airline and of the times (i.e. the late 1950s), while Corke's (1986) brief history of the management of British Airways appears designed to explain the 'success' of current management of the airline. Mills's (1997) study of the gendering of organizational culture over time is aimed at addressing current discriminatory practices and, as such, constructs a history of British Airways framed by present-day employment equity concerns. As these examples suggest, 'history' is 'one of a series of discourses about the world' (Jenkins, 1994, p. 5), and historiography is a 'manifestation of the historian's perspective as a "narrator"' (ibid, p. 12).

How does this approach to History influence feminist analysis of organizational culture over time? To begin with, it serves as an antidote to the inherent problem of framing and cues within existing histories of a particular organization and its culture; allowing the feminist researcher to see the limitations of such histories by identifying their underlying purposes. It can also discourage any tendency to objectify events by reminding the feminist researcher that any particular study is a selective marshalling of events and ideas to illuminate current practices and concerns. And it can increase sensitivity to different discourses over time and their influence on the viewpoint as well as the subjectivities of those involved.

In practice this approach to History needs careful strategies of enactment. First, the History needs to be unravelled from the purpose of the study. The purposes behind studies of contemporary cultural processes are relatively easy to decipher. Wilson's (1997) study of a UK National Health Service Trust, a leisure services department, and a financial sector company,

for example, had the clear purpose of revealing the different ways that organizational cultures contribute to discriminatory practices. It is when a study is done over time that History can get in the way. This can take the form of existing histories confronting the feminist researcher or it can be the problem of attempting to construct a new History.

The easy part is uncovering the underlying purposes of existing histories. For example, in his 'inside story of British Airways' Reed explains the ending of barriers to female pilots thus:

After long years of heart-searching, during which the view was heard from some managements and some pilots that the only place on board an airliner for a woman was on the other side of the cockpit door, BA opened its flight-decks to women in 1987 ... By summer 1988, the number of women pilots flying for BA had increased to fourteen ... BA's pilot management expressed itself keen to obtain more girl cadet recruits (there is no male/female quota in the airline) but was disappointed by the small numbers which initially came forward. (1990, p. 121)

This is a story constructed around Reed's (1990) concern to explain how the 'regeneration' of BA, from 'the "take it or leave it airline" ... to "the world's favourite airline"'. The hiring of female pilots is seen as a small, albeit problematic, part of the enlightened management that is being highlighted. The negative aspects of the exclusion of women are dealt with in part through reference to 'some' managers and pilots (i.e. by inference, the un-enlightened sector of leadership), and in part through blaming the character ('girls') and motivations ('failing to come forward') of the women themselves.

A little more difficult is the construction of alternative histories. Morgan's (1988) excellent study of the gendering of public service culture in Canada, for example, is at one and the same time an indictment of current practices, an analysis of the role of organizational culture, and a history of female civil servants. The problem is that this seems to combine a historiography focused on conceptions of gender (i.e. the role of organizational culture) with a historiography concerned with including women in the historical record. On the one hand, womanhood is seen as a socially constructed concept, yet, on the other hand, women are seen as biologically distinct. A similar problem can be found in Mills's (e.g. 1994) study of the gendering of British Airways culture over time. The starting point of the research is to uncover the impact of organizational culture on the hiring and treatment of 'women' in the airline. Yet that very starting point cues the reader to the notion of some pre-existing and universal features that distinguish 'females' from 'males'; presupposing characteristics the cultural roots of which the researcher is setting out to find.

Second, this brings us to the question of the objectification of people and events. The question of 'women's voice' versus post-modernist feminism

has been discussed at length elsewhere (cf. Calás and Smircich, 1996), but that does not make the problem any easier. Where women are objectified in time and place, as in the following example, it contributes to the very notion of 'difference' that feminists set out to address:

In 1991 British Airways (BA) took part in an initiative, Opportunity 2000, aimed at improving the number of women at all level of British management. This was a welcome move considering BA's, not untypical, history of sexual discrimination. Founded in 1919, British Airways did not employ women — in any numbers until the late 1930s; to positions of authority and non female-typed jobs (e.g. stenographer) until the early 1940s; as flight attendants until 1946; and as pilots until the late 1980s. Less than a handful of women have served on the Board of Directors and no women have held the key positions of 'Chairman', 'Chief Executive', or 'General Manager'. (Mills, 1994, p. 11)

On the other hand, the further removed from the narrative is the idea of males and females as embodied persons, the further removed is the possibility of political challenge to discriminatory practices. The experiences and feelings of the reader need to be engaged by the narrative and that may only be possible through some reference, however broad, to gender identity. There are no simple answers except to engage in research that brings the conundrum to the fore, simultaneously questioning discrimination against 'women' while problematizing the notion of 'women' (and 'men'). Thus, in the following passage 'men' are simultaneously referenced as persons whose embodied experiences differ from females but who, as a result, help to create new images of masculinity and femininity in the fledgling British airline industry in 1919:

Those who founded, managed and staffed the new airline industry not only brought new ideas with them but created new practices and new images in the process of running the business. With their particular combination of backgrounds they established a hybrid entrepreneurial-military (RAF) organization — small workshops replete with ranks, hierarchy, and military symbolism — which was still evident ... sixty years later ... Reinforced through numerous male interactions, BA became a bastion of masculinity that excluded women from the top jobs through to the present time. (Mills, 1994, p. 10)

Change versus progress

A key problem to be addressed in reading the cultural history of an organization is the question of time, change and progress. An inherent problem within histories is the Modernist tendency to present History as a

progressive unfolding of events (Jenkins, 1994). Indeed, as the following passage from Pudney's (1959) history of BOAC attests, it is hard to resist:

This airline which has become a household word by mid-century, linking the Commonwealth and circling the globe, carrying the Queen on her duty and schoolchildren eight thousand miles home for the holidays, has yielded its heroes and men of ideas. Yet its achievement, its flexibility and goodwill rely upon an almost fortuitous pattern of people of diverse talent, character and training. It is the pattern rather than the individual which has created an air service which can be reckoned as a force in the contemporary world, a force that is so much more than a mere assembly of efficient aeroplanes. (1959, p. 11)

Pudney's account provides a prime example of what was said earlier about gendered discourse. Here the notion of a progressively developing company, rooted in a particular 'pattern' (or cultural process), gives character not only to the airline itself but to the type of masculinity that 'built' the company.

The long-term character of workplace discrimination makes it less easy for feminist researchers to view history as progressive but they are not immune to this process. The issue of progress is a difficult one that depends as much on the researcher's political agenda as it does on her/his notion of time, gender, and the construction of historical accounts. Here we should distinguish between a standard for judging whether things can be said to have 'improved' and the more mythical notion of a universal sense of progress. Clearly, it is possible to say that things have improved for women without implying that the change is progressive or fixed. Indeed, it is hard to challenge discriminatory practices without reference to alternative (i.e. 'better') practices. Nonetheless, there is no shortage of accounts that suggest a progressive advancement of women over time (Calás and Smircich, 1996). Yet, even if a standard of female advancement could be agreed, there is evidence that the history of female employment has not followed a path of linear development (cf. Ehrenreich and English, 1974). Higonnet *et al.* (1987, p. 4) argue that 'gender systems are not fixed, but respond and contribute to change'. As such, from the perspective of 'women's rights', gender can be characterized as going through a paradoxical process of progress and regress, or a 'double helix' (Higonnet and Higonnet, 1987).

The double helix can be glimpsed in the study of British Airways. If we take the employment of women as one measure of 'progress' we find that the percentage of women employed in BA's predecessor companies grew from 9% in 1939 to 34% in 1942 but then fell back to 13% in 1946. Even as late as 1991 the percentage of female employees in BA, at 33.5%, had not equalled the wartime peak (Mills, 2001). If we take the range of jobs open to female employees then things did change considerably between 1938 and 1988, with women moving from a narrow range of support roles (e.g.

stenographer, secretary, typist, telephonist, etc.) in the pre-war era to a range of jobs (e.g. ticket clerk, pilot, flight attendant, etc.) and job levels (e.g. manager, senior manager, etc.) at the approach of the 1990s. Here again, though, there have been some 'up' and 'downs'. For example, the first ever female member of the board (of BOAC) was appointed in 1943⁴ and served until 1946. No other woman was appointed to the board of either BOAC or BEA until 1966, when Alice Munro served on BEA's board until 1973. By the late 1980s women were once again absent from the board of (now) British Airways. At other levels of senior management during the Second World War women held only four of 112 posts, and only one of 19 heads of department. Yet, by the late 1940s there were no female heads of department and there was only one female senior manager. It took many more years before the number of female managers returned to and exceeded the wartime era. Perhaps the most dramatic illustration of the double helix involves the hiring and imaging of female flight attendants. In 1946 the managements of BOAC and BEA reluctantly hired female flight attendants. In an era of austerity it was feared that the hiring of female flight attendants would be seen by many as an attempt to sell 'glamour'. To head off that concern, both airlines engaged in a publicity campaign that portrayed the female flight attendant as 'a full and equal member of a hardworking flight crew'. For the first time in the airline's history women were hired (and portrayed) as equal to men. Nonetheless, less than a decade later the airline was marketing eroticized images of female flight attendants to sell its service. Why this rapid change occurred has been discussed at length elsewhere (Mills, 1997), but it does point to the problem of assuming that certain changes signal 'progress'.

In confronting the problem of 'progress', 'time' itself is an issue that needs to be unpacked. The idea of 'progress' is closely associated with the notion of time as a continuous process. Here is an example from Reed's account of British Airways:

International air travel was born on 25 August 1919 when one passenger climbed into a converted First World War bomber to be flown from London to Paris ... Seventy years on, one billion passengers fly on the world's airlines in each twelve-month period ... By any yardstick, this has been a remarkable progress over a relatively short period of time. Inevitably, such galloping expansion has not been achieved without problems ... British Airways ..., which can trace its lineage back to that first flight in 1919, has had its crises, but has now emerged to be one of the world's leaders in a volatile industry whose profitability can be affected more than most others by the cyclical trends of travel patterns influenced by the strength of currencies, oil prices, wars and rumours of war. (1990, p. 7)

Reed's narrative, while raising the issue of breakdowns and crises, gives the impression of a process that links events in time, a progression that is

achieved *by* or *through* time. Yet, it may be the crises rather than the 'progression' that tell us more about the organization. Weick (1995) argues that such 'organizational shocks' are in fact challenges to ongoing sensemaking and the precursor of new ways of making sense. This notion of organizational shocks and changed sensemaking offers the feminist researcher the possibility to identify how gendered understanding can change and can be changed again.

Thus, it might be suggested that a potentially fruitful way of studying time is not as a continuous process but as a series of 'junctures'. A juncture can be defined as a 'concurrence of events which create a moment in time — a series of images, impressions and experiences which act to give the appearance of a coherent whole and which influence how [an] organization is understood' (Mills, 1994). In other words, the history of a given organization should not be seen as a series of progressively changing events but as a series of key time frames, which shape how things were viewed at a given period of time. To understand a particular time frame we need to piece together the various factors — rules, actors, discourses, and formative contexts — which shaped the world-view of organizational members at the time (Helms Mills and Mills, 2000). In brief, while a particular set of factors may come together to create particular ways of viewing the world a change in those factors can lead to a change in the subjectivity of those involved — creating different ways of viewing the world over time. To understand a particular juncture we need to understand not only the main features involved but also the particular subjectivity of the time. Arguably, through longitudinal study of an organization it is possible to understand not only how its culture becomes discriminatory but how it changes or can be changed. The research question here is, what specific cultural differences can be noted over time and what configuration of social and organizational factors appear to be associated with each difference (i.e. what distinct junctures can be identified)? This approach could, for example, help to explain the tremendous change in the portrayal of female flight attendants (and other female employees) in BOAC and BEA between 1946 and 1960.

Focus on gender

Another problem in the study of the relationship between discriminatory practices and the cultures of organizations is the question of the subject. A focus on 'women' and organizational culture over time can, importantly, reveal the ways in which women are discriminated against, serving to uncover the roots of particular practices. This focus is essential⁵ if people are to be galvanized to act against discrimination. It is problematic, on the other hand, in that it appears to over-determine biology at the expense of social construction. It can encourage the under-theorization of men and masculinities (Collinson and Hearn, 1994), and of sexual preference (Hearn, 2001).

Arguably, a focus on 'gender systems' (Higonnet *et al.*, 1987) moves beyond study of the impact of events *on* women to analysis of the role of gender representations in the creation *of* gendered identities. It moves beyond the politically important question of discrimination *against* women to consider the impact of discriminatory practices on the social construction *of* women (Humphreys, 1994); beyond consideration of women and femininities to include analysis of men and masculinities (Collinson, 1988; Maier, 1997); and beyond a narrow focus on heterosexualities to include homosexualities (Weeks, 1990).

Hufton (1994, p. 82) contends that in examining the 'gender dimension' we are looking 'not merely at how men conceived "the sex" but also themselves. At this point, the history of women becomes the history of mentalities'. Davis's (1994, p. 86) essentialist approach suggests that 'women's history must always be comparative, women's experience compared to men'. Kimmel (1987, p. 14) makes a similar argument from a social constructive perspective, that 'definitions of masculinity are historically reactive to changing definitions of femininity'.

Collinson and Hearn (1994, p. 18) argue that 'men and masculinity are frequently central to organizational analyses, yet they remain taken for granted, hidden and unexamined'. More controversially, they go on to argue for the study of 'multiple masculinities' in the development and maintenance of different gendered outcomes (see also Fuller, 1996; Mishkind *et al.*, 1987; Mills, 1998). They conclude that 'More research studies are needed that critically examine the conditions, processes and consequences through which the power and status of men and masculinities are reproduced within organizational and managerial practices.'

In terms of sexual preference, Weeks (1990, p. 1) argues that the centrality given to this concept of sexuality as a definable and universal experience 'constitutes a problem for historians, for it ignores the great variety of cultural patterns that history reveals, and the very different meanings given to what we blithely label as "sexual activity"'. In other words, a key part of the process of the construction of gendered identities includes the assignment of specific forms of sexual preference that say something profound about the 'man' or 'woman' so labelled.

Through a focus on masculinities, femininities and sexual preference the organizational construction of gender can be explored in all its complexities (Hearn and Parkin, 1987). This means interrogating historical materials and accounts to identify the influence of gender on the events described, and on the construction of the narrative itself (cf. Hufton, 1974).

The hiring of female pilots and flight attendants by BA and its predecessors illustrates the points being made here. The airline did not hire females as flight attendants until 1946 and as pilots until 1987. At one point in time both stewarding and piloting were seen as exclusively male professions yet stewarding was opened up to female employees 40 years

before piloting. To understand why each profession excluded and then finally opened its doors to women, and why there was a significant time lag between the two sets of decisions, we need to know something of the factors that served to construct specific images of masculinities and femininities, and at different times. To take but one point of masculine identity construction. Stewarding and piloting were both sustained as masculine professions by several reference points, including male-only hiring policies, the nature of the task, institutional links (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991), and discourses of masculine identity. Piloting became imbued with masculine connotations through such things as an emphasis on unique skills, technical knowledge and centrality to the organization, links with military flying, and discourses of warfare, danger, and adventure. This made it particularly difficult to unravel piloting from masculine identity and served as a deep-rooted barrier to female entry. Stewarding, on the other hand, mainly drew its masculine reference point from the first-class travel business, where white-coated male stewards could be found serving the elite in railway dining cars and ocean-going liners. While the job was seen as solely in the purview of men, the actual task — of service and care — was tenuously linked to masculinity through its institutional connections. During the Second World War the associations between piloting and masculinity were heightened while those of stewarding were weakened. Warfare — through the role of the all-male Royal Air Force pilots — increased the link between piloting, danger and masculinity. Many Air Force pilots ended up working for BOAC after the war. Stewards were released from BOAC to join the armed forces and were replaced by young boys aged between 14 and 16. If anything, this undermined stewarding as a 'man's' job. Following the war, and competition from US carriers which did carry female flight attendants, BOAC and BEA managements did not find it incongruous to hire women to perform service and caring tasks.

Studying gender in context

An understanding of gender 'requires sensitivity to contextualization' (John, 1994, p. 90). Hufton (1994, p. 82), for example, contends that we need 'to locate [women] in the social, economic, religious, political and psychological *monde immobile* of traditional society'. This means that any reading of historical accounts and archival material must be understood in context; that to understand the gendered subjectivities of the actors involved we need to understand the discourses in which they were located and the relationships in which they were involved. To do otherwise is not only to judge a particular period by our standards alone (Thompson, 1977) but to misjudge the nature of some of the processes under study.

To take the example of flight attendant uniforms. In 1946 the uniforms of female flight attendants were designed to stress the 'desexualization' policy

of BOAC and BEA.⁶ To that end, the women were issued with a military-style uniform. The female uniform was designed in part to resemble that of her male colleagues — dark blue, with white shirt, collar and tie, and in part to avoid suggestion of impropriety — the shirt length prevented any sign of flesh, the skirt hem was well below the knee. The outfit was ‘rounded off’ with a hat modelled closely on that of the World War Two Women’s Royal Naval Service (WRNS). By 1969 the desexualization policy had given way to an eroticization policy focused on the selling of female bodily sexuality. Now a variety of uniforms complemented this new policy, including a paper mini-dress, which was white with cerise and purple flowers and green leaves, and a hem that, at most, ended three inches above the knee.

Taken out of context, we might be tempted to surmise that the male-dominant managements of BOAC and BEA were ‘enlightened’ and equity-minded in the late 1940s but crudely sexist two decades later. This was not the case. Indeed, if we compare the two eras there were very different ‘men’ running the airlines but that alone does not explain the change in policy. Explanation lies in part in the fact that Britain was going through a period of austerity and post-war reconstruction in the late 1940s and a so-called ‘sexual revolution’ in the late 1960s. The policy of desexualization arose out of a general concern to avoid the appearance of frivolity avoided with the (US) image of the ‘glamour hostess’. BOAC and BEA, as State-owned airlines, had to fall in line with government policies of rationing, ‘belt-tightening’, and cost cutting. Interviews with people who worked for the airlines and analysis of corporate documents and practices of the time indicate that the airline managements had a fairly traditional view of women and womanhood focused on marriage and motherhood. The equity policy was a strategy rather than a deep-rooted concern with the female employee (see Mills, 1997, 2002).

Thus, in short, an understanding of the significance and meanings of practices and artefacts needs to take into account the social and organizational discourses in which they were located. ‘Contexts’ are, of course, themselves problematic and return us to the original purposes of the article.

Cultural traces

Finally, understanding specific contexts in time is far from easy as many of the ‘traces’ of corporate history are on the whole developed by those in privileged positions (e.g. managers, editors, corporate accountants, marketing personnel, film producers) for specific ends.

In the construction of corporate histories accounts inevitably draw upon ‘memories’ or ‘traces’ from a variety of sources, including corporate documents (e.g. internal memoranda, annual reports, advertisements, press statements, in-flight magazines, in-house journals and newsletters) and

films, artefacts (e.g. physical structures, stories, language), and 'informants' (e.g. interviews, observations, letters, biographies). These accounts are usually framed within the context of organizational memories in which some 'memories' are privileged over others. That is, they are selected representations of events that have been given prominence by more powerful members of the organization (from editors to executives).

In the archives of British Airways corporate memories appear in several forms, including documentation of the activities of selected individuals; potted histories of selected aeroplanes, airline services, and corporate offices; official corporate histories designed for public presentation; and organizational practices developed to celebrate and encourage long-term organizational commitment.

Reviewing these historical traces, it is clear that corporate memories are highly selective. They are framed by the context and needs of the corporate managers. Sometimes, as in the case of annual reports, they are constructed for specific reasons (e.g. legal requirements) and audiences (e.g. shareholders), thereby excluding a range of people and activities not deemed central to the focus. Other times they may arise, as in the case of in-house newsletters, out of the broad pursuit of building a sense of organization and commitment.

For the feminist scholar these 'memories' are problematic in several ways. Primarily they focus on men and male-associated activities that are framed by concerns with the 'development of the company' (e.g. efficiency, growth, profitability, etc.). In part this is useful in providing insights into the role of masculinity and organizational development (Collinson and Hearn, 1994), and to the character of the dominant corporate discourse of the time (Tinker and Neimark, 1987). But it is also problematic in that excluded from corporate memories are a number of mundane events, processes, and informal rules that contribute to the gendering of organizational culture.

In the words of Mary Douglas:

When we look closely at the construction of past time, we find the process has very little to do with the past at all and everything to do with the present. 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. History emerges in an unintended shape as a result of practices directed to immediate, practical ends. (1986, pp. 69–70)

Douglas goes on to suggest that 'to watch these practices establish selective principles that highlight some kind of events and obscure others is to inspect the social order operating on individual minds' (ibid, p. 70). That is true to a certain extent. Corporate images are often powerful in their impact and may not only reflect but create an organization's discourse. To that end, the study of corporate culture can draw on corporate materials to reveal a powerful

element of the imaging process to which people were exposed over time. However, a final note of caution is required:

We cannot simply accept at face value the written records or people's memories; we cannot assume that women's experience lies outside officially constructed contexts, as a definably separate, 'purer' commentary on politics. Instead we must read the evidence we accumulate for what it reveals about how people appropriate and use political discourse, how they are shaped by it and in turn redefine its meaning. (Scott, 1987, p. 29)

Conclusion

This article argues that 'organizational culture' is a useful theoretical lens through which to explore gender discrimination at work, and that the study of organizational culture over time provides valuable insights into the development, maintenance, and changing of discriminatory practices. Through a case study of British Airways, some concerns and issues were raised about the study of organizational culture over time, including problems of identifying appropriate organizational boundaries, unravelling the gendered nature of existing corporate histories, and dis/locating the theoretical framework from/within masculinist discourses on management and business. It was then argued that strategies⁷ for dealing with these concerns primarily depended on which feminist approach informed the study. This raised, in different form, the debate within feminism around the issue of women's voice versus post-feminist constructionism. Here it was contended that the women's voice perspective was more limited in its potential for uncovering the root causes of discrimination. Following a perspective focused on 'the history of conceptions of gender', strategies for developing the study of organizational culture were proposed, including history as discourse, time as junctures, a focus on gender rather than 'women', and a cautionary approach to cultural traces.

Through discussion of the concerns, issues, and strategies involved in the study of organizational culture over time, the article set out not only to provide answers but also to raise questions about the problematic of feminist organizational research. Further debate still surrounds the problem of avoiding the essentialization of women while finding ways to galvanize embodied persons against discrimination. There is also the troubling issue of the potential loss of a woman-centred focus in gender-focused research. There is always the danger that women, even 'women', will be marginalized in studies concerned with explanation of how persons become gendered. At the level of strategy further debate is needed on the problem of history as discourse and the ultimate usefulness of organizational culture as a feminist heuristic. There is the danger that the argument that history as discourse

will be seen as an argument for relativism. That is debatable. Yet it is hard to escape the idea that all histories are the construction of plausible stories. Finally, while convincing arguments can and have been made for using an organizational culture lens, questions about organizational boundaries and context call attention to some of its limitations, while questions about masculine discourse on business and management raise questions about its ultimate viability as a feminist framework (Hearn, 2001).

Notes

1. British Airways provides an interesting case study as it was prominently engaged in a widespread culture change in the 1980s (cf. Hampden-Turner, 1990) and has been the subject of gendered practices (cf. Beavis and Weston, 1991; Mills, 1995).
2. Yvonne Sintes was one of many female employees who joined the company's Airways Flying Club. She joined BOAC as a stewardess in the early 1950s and joined the flying club. She gained her pilot's licence and eventually left the airline, going on to become a flying instructor. She became Britain's first ever female commercial airline pilot when she joined Dan Air on 1 January 1969. Sintes and several other female members of the flying club had an influence on BA management's decision to employ female pilots (see Mills, 2002).
3. The first ever female flight attendants were hired in 1930 by Boeing Air Transport (a predecessor of United Airways). Imperial Airways and BOAC steadfastly refused to hire female flight attendants until 1946.
4. Pauline Gower.
5. The pun is deliberate and serves, yet again, to focus on the tension between the need to both avoid essentializing and to galvanize 'women' and 'men'.
6. Airline publicity actually used the phrase 'we had to desexualize the stewardess' (see Mills, 1997).
7. I am conscious that the term 'strategy' is a military metaphor that invokes masculinist references. I would argue that by recontextualizing such words within feminist debate we may ground them in new reference points.

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