

‘Institutionally sexist’: how inclusivity strategies are undermined in organisations that aim to embed them

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Abstract

Our paper addresses a conundrum: organisations that develop policies for inclusion and diversity may engage in actions that diametrically oppose those intentions and undo their own work. This paper explores how and why these organisations break their own espoused strategies, with the aim of developing better understanding of ensuring those strategies’ success. We use a case study of UK trade unions, focusing on one that, over a 25-year period, espoused but undermined its own, hard fought-for equal opportunities policy. Our inspiration was a report (Monaghan, 2020) that exposed the ‘institutionalised’ sexism operating within another of the UK’s largest trade unions. The report described practices very similar to those experienced by this paper’s first author when working in a trade union two decades earlier. Monaghan’s investigation indicated little or nothing had changed, hence the question: ‘what undermines organizations’ espoused major anti-discrimination policy initiatives and helps perpetuate the very practices they aim to eradicate?’

Our paper has two major contributions. Firstly, if trade unions and other representative organisations are to lead successful challenges to corporations that are driving precarity and exploitation they must be above reproach. Secondly, by developing understanding of the ‘stickiness’ of embedded discrimination even in organisations that aim to eradicate it we can provide resources and methods for more robust strategies for challenging neoliberal capitalism.

The ‘data’ for our paper is the first author’s memories, provoked by the Monaghan Report (2020), of sex discrimination when working for a trade union. It uses the feminist methodology of memory work (Gilmore and Harding, 2021; Harding, Gilmore and Ford, 2021; Haug, 2008; Kuhn, 1995), that justifies using one person’s memories to inform a study. Memories here are studied in their own right because meaning does not lie *in* the experience, rather experiences *become* meaningful because of being grasped reflectively (Arnold, 1985, cited in Bain, 1995).

We also adhere to Marilyn Strathern's advocacy of returning to earlier (field)work to discover contents that can only later be brought to consciousness.

Data analysis was abductive, iterative and recursive. The study's theoretical location is in psychoanalytical theory that helps us understand unconscious motivations and conscious experiences. We found a strong resonance with the intersubjective theories of feminist psychoanalyst, Jessica Benjamin (1988). Building on Hegel's thesis of the modern Western subject, she argues that all encounters encompass the potential for domination and subordination. Workplaces are inescapably places in which relationships of domination and submission are played out. Benjamin's arguments have clear implications for organizations engaging in diversity and inclusion activities that are undermined, we will show, by unconscious processes. Following Benjamin (1998, 1995), we argue the necessity of confronting this continuing denial of the other to ensure mutuality of recognition is not unconsciously undermined. Key to this is Benjamin's idea of the 'third' - a relational, transitional space between one subject and an *other* in which one is not completely determined by the other (Benjamin, 2004). We use this concept to theorise the 'ways through' for organizations to ensure they do not undermine their own espoused strategies and practices.

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