The Gendering of Air Canada: A Critical Hermeneutic Approach

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Abstract
Through the use of critical hermeneutics, the paper provides a deep analysis and offers clues as to how management, through the power of communication, can contribute to producing and reproducing embedded gender-based assumptions and values through organizational culture, which can both enable and constrain organizational members. It examines gender discrimination as it relates to employment equity in a well-known airline. We show how an organizational culture, supported by society and communicated through language, can impede progress within an organization through the power of language, and highlight a number of clues as to the processes of gender discrimination at work. Copyright © 2011 ASAC. Published by John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

JEL Classification: M14

Keywords: Air Canada, gender, critical hermeneutics, employment equity, culture

Power plays a key role in the development and maintenance of an organizational culture. Within the literature not enough has been done to describe the extent to which organizations encourage gender-specific attitudes and behaviours that, as a result, diminish the achievement of a variety of equality and antidiscriminatory goals (Aaltio & Mills, 2002). Although everyone participates in the creation and maintenance of culture, not everyone participates equally (Phillips & Brown, 1993). Leaders in an organization often play a key role in the process of defining behaviour, discriminatory or otherwise, and this influence is evident in a variety of arenas. Without a component addressing the relationship between culture and power, the symbolic conception of culture has no way of explaining the impact of cultural manipulation by the powerful. Therefore, this paper’s objective is to conduct a deep analysis and provide clues as to how management, through the power of communication, can contribute to producing and reproducing embedded gender-based assumptions and values through organizational culture, which can both enable and constrain organizational members. In this vein we view organizational culture as a configuration of rules that serve to provide a framework in which people make sense of the organization themselves, and others (Albert J. Mills 1988). This analysis is facilitated by examining a well-known national airline, Air Canada. We look at gender discrimination as it relates to employment equity within the organization, using critical hermeneutics as our lens. This is facilitated by examining the

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airline’s reaction to two reports produced by two separate Royal Commissions, established in 1970 and 1984, to assess the status of women and equality at work in Canada during that timeframe. Our aim is to provide a better understanding of how the social construction of male and female roles continues to be reinforced in the organization through the power of language. As demonstrated here, the power of language and communication allows management to represent events, contradictory or otherwise, in ways that contribute to the ongoing maintenance of favourable organizational images. We see how structural constraints on communication can help organizations manage to construct and maintain positive images, without the support of actual change, for the internal and external public—people that are paramount for the production and flow of needed resources. We see how an organizational culture, supported by society and communicated through language, can impede progress, whether intentional or unintentional, and how it highlights the extent to which habit and tradition can act as the primary road block to creating a more equitable and nondiscriminatory work environment.

**Critical Hermeneutics**

The hermeneutic tradition holds that texts are cultural artifacts that represent the values and beliefs of those who created them (Dilthey, 1976). Ricoeur (1980) considered hermeneutics as the task of successfully unearthing the symbolic meaning of communication, which forces one to go beneath the surface meaning of the text to its “symbol,” which he defined as “any structure of signification in which a direct, primary, literal meaning designates, in addition, another meaning which is indirect, secondary, and figurative” (p. 245).

Through the existence of philosophical hermeneutics we saw the rise of critical hermeneutics (Arnold & Fischer, 1994). Habermas (1980) argued that if we accept the uncritical we run the risk of perpetuating the exclusion of suppressed interests. Critical hermeneutics is “concerned primarily with uncovering the relations of power and domination that go into the very formation of a text” (Prasad, 2005, p. 34). In this case, as in many others, the structure and culture within Air Canada at the time of the analysis, and to some extent today, has arguably served to inhibit women from rising beyond the lower echelons of the organization (Abella, 1984). This imbalance relates directly to issues of employment equity because despite legislation, these programs appear to have had limited impact on the position of women in traditional male occupations (Falkenberg & Boland, 1997) such as those of management or piloting positions within the airline. Therefore, it is important to examine power interests in any analysis of text. This tradition is particularly relevant to business communications. Viewing this with a critical lens will help expose “hidden power imbalances and challenge the status quo” (Prasad & Mir, 2002). Put differently, we have the choice of looking at a piece of communication on a literal level or, alternatively, on a deeper, more symbolic level. Hermeneutic analysis of communications is concerned with the latter (Prasad & Mir, 2002).

**Hermeneutic Circle**

The hermeneutic circle recognizes that the whole cannot be simply reduced to its parts for analysis; rather, the context sheds light on the text and the text sheds light on the context. When coupled with the symbolic or metaphoric meanings and the social-historical perspective of context, additional meanings surface. In analyzing a text or situation we have recognized that they are embedded within a context with situationally specific particulars; therefore, it is a matter of recognizing that we stand in a specific place and time while conducting analysis. This interpretation is an iterative process where the parts are continually related back to the whole and vice versa (Hirschman, 1990). From a critical hermeneutic perspective, business texts such as Air Canada’s newsletters can only be interpreted by taking a broad level view of the historical and cultural contexts that were in existence during that time.

According to Prasad (2005), “text is not solely the product of an individual author’s personal intentions and desires, but is the outcome of multiple socio-cultural and political forces reflecting broader institutional relationships and ideologies more than individual authors’ mindsets” (p. 38). Although the process of a hermeneutic study can take on a variety of unique forms, all studies should have a strong focus on the context of any text under examination and its latent meaning, and should take note of the complex set of issues of author intentionality (Prasad, 2005).

**Methodological Approach**

The framework used for this analysis is based on Thompson’s (1990) method for investigating the management of culture using three interpretive moments. The sociohistorical moment, consisting of the intentional, referential, and contextual aspects of the text, involves an examination of the producer of the text, its intended recipient, its referent to the world, and the context in which the text is produced, transmitted, and received. The formal interpretive moment, consisting of the conventional and structural aspects of text, aims to separate the text from its context and be analyzed as an expressed structure produced according to some set of conventions. Finally, the moment of interpretation-reinterpretation involves the interpretation of the results of the first two moments. We then introduce meaning back into the text and make some statement about it and how it related to its context and to the individuals who produced and received it. These aspects form the foundation.
of the critical hermeneutic method (Thompson, 1990). The approach is critical as it is concerned with the role of communication in the ongoing maintenance of the asymmetrical relations that characterize a particular organization.

In order to properly investigate the issue, we used various texts. Included in these texts is the company in-house newsletter “Horizons” (formally known as “Between Ourselves”), retrieved from the organization’s archive housed in the National Aviation Museum in Ottawa, in addition to a number of company histories. The period selected from the archival data ranges from 1975 through to 1986. For a present day comparison, these pieces will be compared to contemporary pieces taken from the media along with internal company documentation.

In an effort to manage the perceptions of important stakeholders, organizations produce a variety of texts through which they seek to structure the understanding of stakeholder groups (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975; Ran & Duimering, 2007). Similar to external communication delivered to a customer, in-house newsletters can generate the same type of messages to its employees. In order to maintain the flow of necessary resources, organizations strive to construct and maintain positive images for their various internal and external members (Pfeffer, 1981; Ran & Duimering, 2007). Newsletters can play a role in communicating corporate culture and management’s philosophy, and can create a common focus throughout the organization (Glick, 2007; Gorelick, 2002). Critical hermeneutics is particularly relevant to business communications because of its impact on its intended audience—in this case the employees of Air Canada. Company newsletters can play an important role in communicating discriminatory texts and images in a way that audiences tend to see as “normal” (Mills, 1995). The structural-symbolic view of culture provides a basic frame for approaching instances of organizational communication as texts. It emphasizes the importance of the texts themselves and the environments in which they occur for understanding the texts’ role in the production of an organization at a symbolic level (Phillips & Brown, 1993). In examining the in-house newsletters, we consciously approached them as texts that play a role in the ongoing production and reproduction of the organization and its members. We understood them as corporate leaders’ active attempts to manage the organization’s interaction with its environment (Neilsen & Rao, 1987).

**Cultural Artifacts**

The material examples that form the basis of this paper arose out of an extensive archival research and textual analysis of several written histories. In order to conduct this archival research, between 1999 and 2002 we made several research trips to the Air Canada archive collection housed in the National Aviation Museum in Ottawa. Focused on the gendering of organizational culture over time, this phase of the research generated literally hundreds of documents, drawn from various corporate sources, including in-house newsletters, memoranda, letters, advertisements, and annual reports. This generated a number of insights into the way organizational cultures become gendered (i.e., establish discriminatory rules) through such things as competing masculinities (Mills & Helms Mills, 2006), employment rules and imagery (Helms Mills, 2002), and mimetic isomorphism (Mills & Helms Mills, 2004). Analysis of the material also suggested that Air Canada’s corporate responses to gender inequities more often than not followed sociopolitical concerns (i.e., parliamentary studies and reports) and, in the process, were constructed in a seemingly reactive rather than a problem-solving fashion. It is to that issue that we address our study — namely the whole of corporate media in shaping views of women’s roles in the organization.

The basis for this analysis stems from two interviews that appeared approximately one and half years apart, between 1975 and 1977, in addition to two articles that were published in June of 1975 and October of 1986. The four primary pieces of text were supplemented by a number of articles that appeared before, in between, and after the chosen publications took place, and which further illustrate the main arguments presented in the paper.

**Key Texts of Analysis**

“The World of Women” article (June 16, 1975)

This article, which was published in June of 1975, was printed on pages six and seven of the newsletter. The purpose of selecting this one and a half page article was to provide a lens into the past, present, and future of a woman’s world, due to the fact that the same year, 1975, was named International Women’s Year. Specifically, this article focused on why International Women’s Year was established, what women actually want, the myths surrounding stereotypes placed on women, reasons to promote women, and finally, where the company started, its progression up until 1975, and where it intended to go in the future. The article included two cartoon pictures, which depicted:

1. A man standing in front of a sink washing dishes with a woman standing behind him tying up his apron with the caption “Behind every great man…”
2. A man interviewing a woman with her head tilted and slightly down, eyes wide open, her hands placed in her lap, and shoulders rounded. The caption reads, “Let’s see now; MA, MBA, lectured at Cornell, wrote treatise on the impact of societal and environmental change on the organization of tomorrow….but it says nothing here about your shorthand!”
“Air Canada’s World of Women” Interview
(December 15, 1975)

The first interview appeared approximately six months after the “World of Women” article was published. This article was published at the close of International Women’s Year and its purpose was to voice some views on the role of women in the company, as expressed by senior management. The managers that were interviewed were Claude Taylor, Vice President of Public Affairs, Phil Chartrand, Head of the Personnel & Organization Development Branch, and Maurice d’Amours, Group Vice President of Sales and Services. In addition, there is a profile piece with a number of quotes (not presented as a direct interview) from Lillian Yeoman, Manager, Systems Marketing Communication and Production, Monique Paradis, Lillian Yeoman’s secretary, and Lillian Rayson, Manager, Bilingual Development. The interview includes photos of all the aforementioned people as well as two cartoon pictures, depicting:

1. Two men looking at an abstract picture that slightly resembles a woman with a caption reading, “You know Chuck, I don’t think I’ll ever be able to figure women out.”
2. Two men standing outside a building with a sign on the outside that reads “W.R. Smith & daughter Hardware” and the caption reads, “Her son? Oh, he’s a dress designer.”

“Equal Opportunity – What’s Happening?” Interview
(May 16, 1977)

This is an interview with Margaret Hamilton, Manager, Human Resources Analysis, which appeared in May of 1977. She talks about the status of women in general and about their status in the company in particular. She goes on to define the corporate objective that was established to improve the status of women and describes how Personnel, working with branches and regions, plans to implement it.

“Equity Issue Addressed” Article (October 31, 1986)

A follow-up article was written in response to the government introducing legislation requiring all federally-regulated employers and federal contractors to implement Employment Equity programs. This legislation was imposed as a direct response to the recommendations of the Commission of Employment Equality (Abella Commission).

Social-Historical Moment

Contextual Aspect

Air Canada, originally founded in 1937 as Trans Canada Air-Lines (TCA), is an organization that, since its inception, transitioned through a number of periods with respect to a woman’s role. The early days of the airline provide the foundation for the gendering of the airline’s culture in the sense that what was known as “women’s work” provided the basis for which the norms for the treatment of women were established that still show signs of life today (Helms Mills, 2002). The perception of certain occupations as feminine or masculine and as primarily dominated by one sex is mainly the expression of social conditions, which in turn can be maintained if the gender segregation is regarded as normal and originating from women’s and men’s own “natural” characteristics (Mackie, 1987). In the early years of TCA, for example, masculinity was the norm, where most aspects of the work became associated not only with men but different masculinities (Mills & Helms Mills, 2006).

The airline began with an all-male staff of 126, including clerks, stenographers, and secretaries. The first women to be hired were stewardesses in 1938 and, almost without exception, women were hired solely as flight attendants. In fact, as of December 31, 1940, only two percent of TCA’s employees were women and an even smaller percentage held posts in management, which was the case until much later in the airline’s history (Helms Mills, 2002) As such, from its inception, TCA’s culture was gendered (i.e., work divided according to assumed sex differences). For example, women were well-referenced in the company newsletters and promotional material; however, it was not in a professional light, as the data reveal that the role of women in Air Canada had been historically used to sell the airline, and that women’s employment was seen as temporary and even as a stepping-stone to marriage (Helms Mills, 2002). In 1946, with the end of World War II and in order to make jobs available for returning servicemen—a company directive stipulated that all married female employees be terminated, a rule that stood until the early 1950s. However, by 1941 the number of women outside of stewardess posts had increased to 10% and continued to grow, under wartime conditions, to 35% by 1943 (Smith, 1986). Things changed slowly. In 1962, personal pass regulations were altered to provide married female employees with the same privileges as married male employees. In 1973, female flight attendants won the right to bid for in-charge positions, including that of Flight Service Director.

Key events. In 1967, Prime Minister Lester Pearson established the Royal Commission on the Status of Women (Bird et al., 1970), made up of a seven-member commission consisting of five women and two men. The Commission’s mandate was to “inquire into and report upon the status of women in Canada, and to recommend what steps might be taken by the Federal Government to ensure for women equal opportunities with men in all aspects of Canadian society” (Bird et al., 1970, p. vii). The establishment of the commission was not a proactive decision by government to address women’s issues; rather it came in response to repeated demands by a committee...
representing 33 organizations with a membership totalling two million women. In addition, public sessions were conducted the following year to accept public comment for the Commission to consider as it formulated its recommendations. It was discovered that in 1970 only 3.9% of managers were women and although eight out of 10 provinces had equal-pay legislation, women were still paid less than men for doing the same work. In 1970 a report came out with 167 recommendations to ensure that men and women were given equal opportunities.

The year 1975 was named International Women’s Year, sanctioned by the United Nations, in order to intensify the action required to advance the status of women. More specifically, its aim was to promote equality between men and women, and to ensure women’s responsibility and important role in economic, social, and cultural development at the national, regional, and international levels.

In 1984 the Royal Commission on Equity in Employment reported on widespread discrimination in Canadian workplaces and commented that the means for rectification were inadequate. Among the major corporations examined at length by the Commission was Air Canada, with the report indicating that the airline’s female employees consisted of less than 30% of the total, far below the war time high of 35% over forty years earlier; of the female employees, the great majority were either employed in clerical or service positions; and that three percent of the airline’s upper-level managers and seven percent of its middle managers were women. The Royal Commission, also known as the Abella Commission after its chair Judge Rosalie Abella, was mandated to determine the most efficient way of promoting employment equity, a term that originated as a result of this report (Mentzer, 2002), for eliminating discrimination against women, visible minorities, aboriginal peoples, and the disabled (Abella, 1984). The main cause of workplace inequities, as seen by the Abella Commission, was systematic discrimination. The Commission argued that the problem of workplace discrimination resided with “the structure of systems designed for [white able-bodied males],” and “practices based on white able-bodied males’ perceptions of everyone else” (Abella, 1984, p. 9–10). The Commission recommended that all federally regulated employers be required, by legislation, to implement employment equity, which, as a result, would improve the equality of women in Canada. A number of the recommendations that were adopted subsequent to the Commission’s report dealt specifically with removing the barriers that restricted women’s entry to various occupations and institutions, and to removing policies that treated women in an unequal manner in the workplace.

Intentional Aspect

The in-house newsletter, Horizons, is a biweekly communication intended for employees and their families written by management. Internal newsletters provide management with a good communication source for the sharing of very timely news in addition to strengthening the culture by providing a way to showcase employee profiles, celebrate birthday and work-related events, announce firm activities, offer invitations to firm events, and respond to suggestions made by staff (Glick, 2007). Air Canada’s intentions are no different with its in-house newsletter for its employees, as evident by the plethora of articles covered in each publication.

The four highlighted pieces of communication attempted to help employees understand the change of direction the company was making with respect to the role of women in the organization.

Referential Aspect

Along with the intentional aspect of the texts presented above, the symbolic aspect of the text produces an alternative meaning. The four pieces of communication address employment equity within Air Canada in an attempt to react to the reports of the two separate Royal Commissions on the Status of Women (1970) and Equity in Employment (1984). Employment equity programs are defined as a “comprehensive planning process by an employer to identify and remove discrimination in employment policies and practices, and to ensure appropriate representation of target groups throughout the organization” (Falkenberg & Boland, 1997, p. 964). The first article provides a textual timeline and a brief history of Air Canada in terms of where the company has come since its inception from an equity perspective. It also indicates where the company hopes to go in the future. It creates an image of a socially responsible company. The two interviews differ, apart from specific aspects of the text, in who was chosen to provide the interview(s). In the first, the majority of those represented were male managers in various areas around the company. In the second interview, published in 1977, the editors chose to focus on the perspective of a female manager. This suggests that the company may have intentionally selected the representatives in order to reinforce the change process by showing to both its internal and external audiences the steps being taken to improve the representation of women in the higher ranks of the organization.

Summary

The articles and interviews are communication pieces written on behalf of airline management for the men and women of Air Canada and their families. Much like any internal piece of communication, these pieces were used, along with other informational purposes, to create a particular image of Air Canada to its stakeholders and to reinforce the culture visible to its employees (Ran & Duimering, 2007). The image is one of progress that supports the equality of all its employees. Images conveyed
by organizations through their formal structures tend to emphasize the positive aspects for the intended audience. What constitutes “positive” is defined contextually (i.e., within a social, spatial, and temporal context) in terms of the demands placed on the organization by those who exercise some legitimate authority or power over it (Duimier & Safayeni, 1998). Important points to make about its context reside in the women’s movement of that time including International Women’s Year (1975) and the reports published by the Royal Commissions of 1970 and 1984 (Abella, 1984; Bird et al., 1970). The level of discrimination within Canadian workplaces was revealed and, as a result, a set of recommendations were brought forward in order to address the issues. The communication pieces can be seen as a result of these events and are an attempt to address the concerns going forward in the organization regarding gender discrimination by demonstrating a shift in attitudes and culture amongst those decision-makers in the higher ranks of the company.

**Formal Moment**

The second moment represents the formal analysis of the conventional and structural aspects of the text. In this stage, the text is separated from the contextual elements and analyzed as a structure produced according to some set of conventions (Phillips & Brown, 1993). In this case, we have analyzed the text using the semiotic approach of Barthes (1988). Texts can be analyzed at the level of denotation (signifiers and signified), connotation (what the text says about some referent), and at the level of myth (how the text draws on complex cultural understanding to support statements about the referent).

**Conventional and Structural Aspects**

**Denotation.** At the level of denotation, texts have a literal meaning (Barthes, 1988, p. 174). The role of a company newsletter in communicating corporate culture and information is extremely important (Glick, 2007; Gorelick, 2002). Taking these pieces at face value communicates to its audience that the airline is committed to providing a workforce that is equitable and nondiscriminatory. This is demonstrated in a number of excerpts including one noted by the Head of the Personnel and Organization Development Branch when he was asked about the company’s attitude or policy on the promotion of women: “We have one promotion policy covering all employees, male or female, and that is to promote the best person for the job. The person with the best qualifications for the position should get the promotion” (World of Women, 1975, p. 4).

Another senior manager was cited as saying: “By all means, I really don’t see any difference [for the advancement of women versus men]. In the last year we spent a lot of time identifying people who could possibly be managers in the future. In Air Canada approximately 30 percent of our people are women” (World of Women, 1975, p. 4).

In the 1986 article, the company further expresses its “long time” commitment to equality by stating that “Air Canada has been committed to the principle of equal opportunity since 1973” (Equal Issue Addressed, 1986, p. 3).

The gendering of a culture can undoubtedly have influence in a number of ways. The commitment of top managers to a program of employment equity, for example, has proven to be an influential factor (Agocs, Burr, & Somerset, 1992). Much like most theories of organizational culture, we generally look to the senior managers of a company to analyze their roles in the process of culture development (Pettigrew, 1985). Without that support it is nearly impossible to change the attitudes of its employees.

Air Canada appeared to embrace the changes and proceeded to set objectives to ensure that the airline stayed on course. Margaret Hamilton, Air Canada Manager, Human Resources Analysis, was cited as saying that Air Canada’s objective in 1977 for equal opportunity was “To promote and ensure equal opportunity for women in Air Canada during 1977 in all phases of employment such as recruitment, selection, promotional opportunities, developmental activities, and all functions and at all levels” (Equal Opportunity, 1977, p. 5).

Hamilton reported that Air Canada had such an objective each year since 1973: “In 1972, Project Coordinators responsible for the status of women in each branch were appointed. In 1977, these coordinators, who are personnel representatives, intended to integrate the objectives closely with other personnel objectives, such as the identification of high potential and career planning programs” (Equal Opportunity, 1977, p. 5).

When equal opportunity for its female employees was first brought to the attention of management at Air Canada, it was discovered that while women constituted around thirty percent of the company’s workforce, only three percent of the management ranks were female, there was only one woman in the senior ranks, and only four at the middle management level. Hamilton was asked to comment on these statistics and she said: “Two or three policies discriminated against women. These have been changed. Today 8.9% of the management work force is female, although the majority of women are still at the junior level” (Equal Opportunity, 1977, p. 5).

After the 1970 report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women was published some people went as far as to question whether or not the airline really needed a policy in place with a purpose to “give effect to the principle that every individual should have an equal opportunity with other individuals...without being hindered or prevented from doing so by discriminatory practices based on race, national or ethnic origin, color, religion, age, sex, or marital status” (Equal Opportunity, 1977, p. 5). When asked, Margaret Hamilton embraced the ideas when she noted:
The Royal Commission on the status of women, reporting in 1971, found evidence of discrimination against women in the work environments such as unequal pay for equal work, women refused jobs, etc. and it made 167 recommendations aimed at rectifying these situations. Social attitudes do not change overnight and while cases of open discrimination may be uncommon today, some people still believe that women work only for frills, that they take jobs away from men, the “breadcrwiners.” Other common attitudes are that women should stick to “women’s” jobs, that they don’t want responsibility, have higher rates of absenteeism and turnover than do men, that women are not as mobile as men, and so on. (Equal Opportunity, 1977, p. 5)

Within the cultural arena, a major barrier to employment decisions is gender stereotypes (Kennedy, 1994). The article that was published on June 16, 1975 aimed to dispel these myths that had been long believed by Air Canada employees, as well as those outside the organization. Management’s intention was to help employees understand the “truth” about women in order to change the attitudes in and around the organization. Some of these socially constructed myths noted in the article were that women are too “emotional” for management work, women cannot “cope with the role of wife, mother and manager,” and that women have a “greater absenteeism rate than men.”

Due to the Royal Commission’s report in 1970, the airline stated that it took it upon itself and reviewed, with senior management, the company’s situation with respect to its policies, practices, and general philosophies. This resulted in:

Implementation of equal medical and dental insurance coverage for male and female employees, implementation of maternity benefits insurance for female employees, revised employment/placement policies to include “quality of treatment regardless of sex, marital status” and that managers were encouraged to improve opportunities for female employees and to be sensitive to the career potential of all employees. (World of Women, 1975, p. 4)

Margaret Hamilton was asked to comment on the potential obstacles that women could face with respect to their progression within the organization. She stated that “The most serious stumbling block is job shortage. All of us are living in a restrictive economy and the number of job vacancies is decreasing, especially in the management ranks. Promotions are hard to come by these days” (Equal Opportunity, 1977, p. 5).

This point was supported by Charlie Eyre, Vice President of Personnel when he said: “As we are in a period of no growth, together with a reduction of management numbers, entry into management [for women] is very limited at this time…we are stepping up our search for possible female candidates for those few vacancies which do arise” (Equal Opportunity, 1977, p. 5).

Connotation. At the level of connotation, we have attempted to understand why this information was presented in the way that it appeared. The text, as a whole, takes on another meaning entirely, which is the connoted meaning. These meanings depend on the cultural understandings surrounding the text.

Managers’ perceptions of the values displayed by organizational members can be viewed as reflections of embedded notions or taken for granted beliefs that shape organizational beliefs (Mills, 1988). An organization with strong values can be an impediment to change. Put another way, habit, history, and tradition may be the primary barriers to creating more equitable workplaces.

A number of clues can be gathered from the interviews that were selected from the internal newsletter. First, because employees of the airline were the audience for this newsletter, it provides evidence that the management team is attempting to convey a certain message to its workers. In this case, managers have been selected to convey first-hand opinions in the interviews, as opposed to presenting it in a second-hand, report-type format. It also provides a sense that the head of the organization may be including these both for informational purposes and with the hope that the reader will evaluate the opinions of management in a favourable manner and in a way that is consistent with their own beliefs and values.

In the first article, we can infer that Air Canada recognized the changes happening outside of the organization and took a proactive stance by moving in a similar direction and contributing to the welfare of its female employees. In the first interview, the connotation is that Air Canada is showing that the company’s new stance on equality is supported by its management team.

In the final interview, we can connote that Air Canada is trying to be socially responsible by providing a checkpoint on employment equity. This time the editors employ a female manager to represent management’s opinions on the status of employment equity by communicating the objective for the company and its implementation plan to meet its goals. The two interviews are very similar in their intent, highlighting women as a body to promote into the higher ranks of the organization. The last interview follows along the same vein. With an article title of “Equity issue addressed,” it again conveys the notion of a socially responsible employer that is proactive in its approach to any issues impacting its employees.

However, the actionable steps taken on behalf of the airline are not evident. In each of the pieces, the underlying theme speaks to the airline’s proactive nature in dealing with issues of employment equity, creating an image of a socially responsible airline that aims to produce, or socially construct, a new image of a woman’s role in the organization. However, even in 1986 the airline continues to talk about how, after an evaluation period, the airline will look to correct underrepresentation, where necessary, for women in the organization. On the surface it appears that Air Canada is being proactive and socially responsible in the
eyes of its audience; however, by looking slightly deeper, one must question why, if committed to this initiative for 13 years, the necessary change had not occurred. One must also question whether the airline is simply trying to create a new image rather than genuinely trying to change its organization. As an example, 15 years after the Abella Report, women were still largely concentrated in the clerical and service areas of the airline—constituting three-quarters of Air Canada’s clerical workforce.

It is useful, in this case, to compare such facts from a contemporary viewpoint to evaluate the organization’s progress. There is no doubt that the organization has taken steps in the right direction. In fact, as of 2004, Air Canada had received an “A” rating for upholding the standards of employment equity with respect to women, which points to superior performance in indicators such as representation, salary, hiring, promotions, and terminations. However, other indications provide points of contradiction. In 2005, that rating dropped to a “B,” indicating good performance but persistent problems within the organization, where it stayed until 2008 when it finally dropped to a “C” rating, indicating moderate to less than average performance. In addition, based on a study known as the Corporate Gender Gap Report, produced in 2010 (Zahidi & Ibarra, 2010), we also compared representation of women in the airline to the national representation based on results from the 100 largest employers. According to this report, Air Canada was well below the national result, with 38% of its workforce being female, whereas nationally, the average is 46% (Zahidi & Ibarra, 2010). Looking more specifically at the travel and tourism industry, the representation of women is 49%. Therefore, clues from the past tell us something about what is happening in the present.

**Myth.** Finally, the level of denotation and connotation join at the level of myth. If successful, themes and symbols will be linked in such a way that it will actually change an individual’s interpretive frame of reference. Culture is a social product; it is constituted and maintained by the ongoing communicative interaction of the organization’s members. Culture is therefore a product of communication and it is the ongoing communication of organizational members that produce the fabric of myths and symbols through which those actors, and to some degree extra-organizational actors, come to understand the organization and its place in society (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Pfeffer, 1981, pp. 24–26).

Within the context of these pieces of communication, space and time were devoted to conveying and understanding change that was developing in and around the organization. In three of the four pieces, a great deal of space was devoted to talking about the new direction and opportunities for women. The company was trying to change the strong societal myth that women do not belong in management. This was attempted by incorporating top management’s opinions and support of the change, communicating their proactive approach through established objectives, and by highlighting a female manager communicating her opinions about the current situation. By including a female manager in the final interview, it appears that Air Canada is trying to change the myth that women cannot succeed in higher level positions of the organization.

The frame of reference that the company is attempting to change in the minds of its employees can be summarized according to the following themes. First, Air Canada is future oriented. All four pieces are speaking to the future direction of the company with respect to the roles that women will play in the company. They do this in the first article by highlighting International Women’s Year, rectifying the “misunderstandings” that many people have long believed about women and by referring to the progress that the company has made already, in addition to the steps that Air Canada planned to take to further the equality of women. In the second text, an interview with senior level managers attempts to provide different perspectives on the changes happening within the organization. They speak about how it would impact the company and its culture in general as well as their personal opinions on supporting the initiative. Finally, in the same interview, equal opportunity for women is highlighted by outlining the company’s objective for the year and its tactical plan to achieve those goals. The message they are trying to send is that they are hearing what women are saying and they recognize that equality must be achieved. Air Canada is communicating that they are taking the appropriate steps to achieve this. What is clear is that these changes are in the hands of the powerful players in the organization and on the surface, it appears as though these powers are communicating a position of support for that change.

Next, Air Canada is socially responsible. The four pieces of communication selected for this analysis attempt to show its audience that it is concerned for the women in its organization and support the changing direction of the airline with respect to employment equity for this group. They are trying to portray a proactive image that shows they are taking it upon themselves to make the appropriate changes on their own terms. By using a woman in a management position as the interviewee in the second interview and by profiling a woman and her climb to a top place in the organization, they are communicating that they are fully aware of the current situation and are “already” taking the appropriate steps. It is attempting to create an adjusted corporate image through language to show its commitment to its employees by providing opportunities for those that have had minimal access to those opportunities in the past. It reveals their commitment to their policies. They also do this indirectly in the article. They provide a company history outlining that Air Canada has continually improved the status of women in the organization since its inception. The airline tries to convince its audience that it is proactive by immediately reviewing its operations to rectify any discriminatory actions within the
organization. However, again fast forwarding to 1986 does not reveal the commitment they might want its audience to believe. It talked in 1977 about stepping up the search for possible female candidates for management positions; however, in 1986, nine years later, it talks again about “possibly” implementing special measures to remedy the underrepresentation of women in nontraditional roles. Looking at the Employment Equity Act of 2004, the company has come a long way but is still falling short across the board with respect to women within their organization (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2004).

Third, Air Canada is perceptive in its goal of rectifying the misconceptions established about women. They make the effort to set the record straight and demonstrate that they should not be placed in a stereotypical box that characterizes women as emotional and unstable. They also attempt to demonstrate that if they set the example from the upper levels of the organization and highlight a woman that is not characterized in this way then it makes sense for the attitudes and culture around the organization to change. Organizations are like miniature societies with unique configurations of heroes, myths, beliefs, and values (Brown, 1998). Once norms have been established within a culture it may be difficult to change the attitudes of its members.

Interpretation-Reinterpretation

The final moment of the critical hermeneutic analysis is the act of interpretation-reinterpretation. The goal of this moment is to produce some understanding of how an actor (management) in a particular social situation and with access to particular resources produces a text (interview) that is communicated to a particular group (employees) to deal with some set of issues the actor faces. In this case, the Royal Commission was mandated to determine the most efficient way of promoting employment opportunities for and eliminating systematic discrimination against women (Abella, 1984). After determining that discrimination in Canadian workplaces existed and the means for rectification were inadequate, the Commission recommended that all federally regulated employers be required by legislation to implement employment equity, which as a result would improve the equality of women in Canada.

The end goal is to understand how the producer of these texts attempt to structure understandings in a way that is a positive self-reflection of the producer. In order to facilitate this analysis, we looked at the information presented in the text and then noted any excluded information, as explained below. We then outlined the conflicts behind particular aspects of the text. In the following section, we discuss how these two pieces contribute to the change in attitudes within the organization, drawing attention to the power and social relations central to the critical hermeneutics approach.

Information Content

The first step in interpretation-reinterpretation is to outline what is missing from the text. In the 1977 interview, it was briefly stated that objectives to improve the status of women in the organization were put in place in 1973. At the end of 1974, however, Air Canada employed 15,327 men and 6,506 women (i.e., approximately 70% male, 30% female). Eighty six percent of the female employees worked as passenger agents, flight attendants, secretaries, and clerks. Of the total management force of 3,822, only 7.9% were women, equalling a 1% increase over 1973. Looking ahead to 1984, this number had increased only minimally to 8%. In other facets of the company, the organization was still slow to change. According to Lori Perdue, a Winnipeg-based professional pilot, in 2003 women were still drastically outnumbered by men in piloting positions. She indicated that “Air Canada has around 60 or 70 female pilots out of about 3,500” (Montgomery, 2003, p. A1).

In 1977, Margaret Hamilton outlined the company’s objective for the upcoming year. In addition, she included a tactical plan that would be implemented in order to achieve it. The first piece was communication and awareness, where each branch has a coordinator to carry out the objectives. She stated that “…we want the corporate policy to be known within the company and through communications such as [this] interview; we hope all employees become aware of the objective” (Equal Opportunity, 1977, pp. 5,11). She also indicated that there would be information sessions as required. The second step in achieving its objective was through an appraisal process to ensure the use of uniform criteria in existing assessment systems. She stressed that these assessment exercises be carried out objectively and that promotable women be identified as such. Finally, the objective would be met through “deployment.” Both nonmanagement and management promotable female employees will be considered for known and anticipated position vacancies over the next two years. In order to measure progress, she indicated that at year end, management would report the number of women in management and would follow up on the number of men and women in each employment category to see if any changes had occurred during the year. They indicated that they would also look at the quality of any changes and at movement within groups and management levels. What is missing from this “plan” is any concrete action plan on making the needed changes to create an equitable working environment.

Air Canada, in light of International Women’s Year and the ruling of the Royal Commission, attempted to show its employees that they were taking matters into their own hands in order to address the issues of employment equity. What is missing from the four pieces of communication is representation of the “voice of women” from around the organization. In the first interview, women were not interviewed in the same manner as the men who were...
senior directors from around the company. Rather, a small number of quotes from a female manager that made it to “middle management” were recorded. They even reported that she did not run into any discrimination on her way up the career ladder. Although the second interview was with a female middle manager, she was of the opinion that discrimination was “uncommon” today. We did not hear the opinion on the “changes” from the representative women in the organization that had been discriminated against. This is a further indication that those women represented are actually validating the gender-based assumptions that existed in the culture of the company at that time, as opposed to trying to change them in the so-called new direction that the company was taking.

Interpretive Frame

A number of conflicting aspects were evident in the text. The commitment of managers to a program of employment equity has proven to be an influential factor (Agocs, et al., 1992). It seems ironic that the only female manager being interviewed on the state of employment equity within the organization believes that “discrimination is uncommon today.” When the Vice President of Public Affairs was asked, based on the current statistics, whether or not she saw women’s role in the company increasing, he replied:

There is no question that their role will increase. There is evidence that more women now want careers and they are preparing themselves to take on more rewarding work. Perhaps the more controversial aspect is whether or not the remaining 92 percent (males) can get themselves into a mood to accept this change. (World of Women, 1975, pp. 4–5,7)

He appears to assume that the problem to date has been the attitude of women toward work, rather than organizational recruitment practices. The difficulty in changing the attitudes among men regarding an idea that has been ingrained in the corporate culture of the airline for 40 years is evident. This type of communication coupled with the lack of buy-in from managers illustrates the seeming futility of progress at the airline. Discriminatory identities are social constructs that are clearly under human control, something that could be altered through human intervention. Social constructionism suggests that whatever is oppressive to women is not inevitable and can be improved by people acting differently (Friedman, 2006), especially those in powerful and influential positions. Although there may be some powerful forces acting to eliminate gender discrimination in society and within organizations, there are other more powerful forces intensifying it (England, 1994). Language must be backed by action, which is not supported within the selected texts.

Two separate people during two different interviews commented on the state of the economy and the difficulties that women (and men) would face in gaining top management appointments. However, after examining the company newsletters from the period of May 31, 1977 to December 7, 1979, it was revealed that there were a total of 15 senior-level ranking positions with the title of Director or higher named. It was also noted that apart from one, all postings were filled by men. Therefore, it is evident that, although management’s intentions were to increase the opportunity for women in management positions, in actual fact the protocol of the past was still being reproduced years later. Contemporary evidence speaks to the same issue. For instance, a complaint was filed back in 1991, which is still unresolved today, against the airline for not paying its predominately female flight attendants fairly when compared to the wages of its predominately male pilots and mechanics (Cote & Lassonde, 2007). The airline’s argument is that these groups of employees do not work within the same “establishment.” According to Cote and Lassonde (2007), this is like saying that “the pilots and flight attendants do not work in the same place” (p. 5). Although the Supreme Court of Canada ruled in favour of the workers, the airline appealed the decision and according to the company’s 2008 Annual Report the company is appealing to the Canadian Human Rights Commission claiming that they have abided by all equal pay provisions of the Canadian Human Rights Act (Air Canada, 2008, p. 78).

In order to address the idea of representation we must address the comments made by a senior level manager in the first interview. When asked if he would have a problem working for a woman, he replied:

Certainly not, providing she was qualified. Recently, we have been emphasizing objective setting and Marion Kellogg, a VP with General Electric has worked with the Chairman and every Branch Head and most of the directors. She is a highly experienced person who is well accepted in Air Canada. Senior managers learned a great deal from her and consequently the acceptance of a woman at that level is extremely high. Incidentally, Marion is on the front page of one of the November 75 issue of Business Week. She states that one of the reasons she has been successful in management is that she is a “workaholic”. That’s one aspect of management that people, male or female should not lose sight of. While it can be very satisfying it usually takes a heck of a lot of hard work. (World of Women, 1975, p. 4)

In addition, the one appointment at the Director level was announced in the July 14, 1976 newsletter. Anne Bodnarchuk was appointed to the position of Senior Director, Computer & Systems Services. Readers of Horizons were informed that Anne “entered Queen’s University at the age of 15 (graduating three years later), and went on to McGill University and the University of Michigan for her graduate studies. In her first job, she went on to set up the first commercial computer operation in Canada” (Air Canada is people, 1976, p. 3). The message this is sending is that in order for you to be promoted to...
equal levels of men within the organization, you have to be extraordinary. In fact, when the Group Vice President of Sales and Services was asked if women have to be twice as good as a man to succeed, he responded: “In theory, no; in practice, I believe a woman must be the outstanding candidate to get the job—really superior. It is easy to find excuses not to choose a woman. It is so important to have women in good jobs and demonstrate they are an asset” (World of Women, 1975, p. 5).

A number of the cartoons housed within the articles and interviews send a conflicting message. For example, in the 1975 “World of Women” article, the purpose is to dispel the myths about women and show how their roles are changing. However, one of the cartoons depicts a man interviewing a woman and the caption reads, “Let’s see now; MA, MBA, lectured at Cornell, wrote treatise on the impact of societal and environmental change on the organization of tomorrow...but it says nothing here about your shorthand!” Her body language is also telling as her head is tilted slightly down, eyes wide open and her hands placed in her lap, and shoulders rounded. The expression on her face is one of fear. It is conflicting in that it is sending two entirely different messages, one that says women should be given an equal opportunity, and the other is putting women right back into the box that they have found themselves in the past.

Finally, in the 1986 article it states that the airline would potentially implement special measures in order to remedy representation where women are currently under-represented. This may be problematic and conflicting with the goals of an employment equity program. Myths about employment equity include the notions of reverse discrimination, which ignores merit by enforcing quotas and stigmatizes minorities who have moved into desirable positions (Henry & Tator, 1992). This may be attributed to the mistaken notion that the hiring or promotion of any woman into nontraditional roles is linked solely to gender and is not based on any objective criteria. In many situations, the success of a woman in an organization is viewed by men as a concrete example of playing into the women’s movement rather than an acknowledgement of the qualifications of the individual to do the job. Thus, the inaccurate stereotypes surrounding women interfere not only with the notion that women can make valuable contributions, but conversely, that when they do overcome the barriers, some still attribute their success to employment equity programs rather than merit. This further reproduces the social construction of women in its most primitive state.

Discussion

Summary

Critical hermeneutics can and should be used in analyzing communications aimed at creating or maintaining the symbols through which a group understands an organization’s identity. Texts in an organization are intentionally produced to send a prescribed message (Phillips & Brown, 1993). The critical hermeneutics tradition focuses on the role of particular texts in the ongoing creation and re-creation of social relationships (Phillips & Brown, 1993). How powerful actors within an organization work to shape the understandings and behaviours of its employees are the primary phenomena of interest from this perspective.

Power and social relations. Management used the power of language through its in-house newsletter in an attempt to create an organizational image that would present Air Canada in a progressive, socially responsible light. It was also a way to help structure the understanding of and change the attitudes that had existed for many years. They wanted to demonstrate to their employees their support for the notion of gender equity and that they were taking the appropriate steps to address the gender equity issues. They tried to produce a new myth or understanding that cast the organization as one that sees both men and women as equals. Corporate image is a particularly interesting aspect of an organizational culture in that it helps us to understand something of what and who is valued in the organization (Mills, 1995). The newly created myth would be one of awareness, corporate support, and changed attitudes amongst Air Canada’s employees and management.

We should not simply reduce these communications to the company’s proactive approach to equalize the rights of women. Management may have felt as though their job was done and that the outcomes were outside their control. However, what we can learn from this is that words can also speak as loud as actions. Corporate culture and individual attitudes are difficult entities to change or adjust; however, when support from the top of the hierarchy is not demonstrated it makes it near impossible. This is important for generating insight into discriminatory practices, as well as current workplace practices coupled with affiliated attitudes and feelings. It appears that Air Canada, then as well as now, is more concerned with its image rather than real progress.

The literature illustrates the use of ineffective strategies such as setting women up for failure and thus reinforcing the belief of women’s lack of competence, the sabotaging dynamics inherent in tokenism (Kanter, 1977), and what has been termed management by avoidance (Vince, 1991). In establishing the reasons for management by avoidance of equal opportunity initiatives, Vince (1991) stated:

What we do in an organization as white men is conditioned by a limited framework of interests. That is to say, our own interests...We have the power to be enabling and supportive of the development of different values but we use that power to be defensive, dismissive and blocking...Through inaction we have maintained our power while pretending a sympathy for change...We have suppressed and ignored the development

Discussion

Summary

Critical hermeneutics can and should be used in analyzing communications aimed at creating or maintaining
of effective forms of evaluation, consultation, and accountability...because we have a greater investment in non-change. (p. 53)

There is significant evidence that selection and promotion decisions are still made on the basis of gender and membership in the “old boy’s network” and not according to merit (Sloane & Jain, 1990).

For women, this means that new strategies must be developed to ensure that accurate information about their performance and potential is being communicated through the informal networks, and that cultural, political, and social systems do not limit the transmission of accurate information about their abilities and skills.

Contributions to Scholarship

Not enough has been done in the literature to describe the extent to which organizations encourage gender-specific attitudes and behaviours (i.e., through communication, policy, etc.) that diminish the achievement of equality and antidiscriminatory goals. If we can highlight the methods that shape workplace practices and the conflicting issues associated with the development and implementation of corporate policy, we can better understand how to change them and provide insight so that it does not happen elsewhere. It is understood that while communication is only one piece that contributes to this reinforcement, it provides us with a clue to its important contribution.

Applied Implications

This analysis provides a number of clues as to the processes of gender discrimination at work. First, the use of corporate communications to convey particular but partial messages suggest that such means of communication, particularly in-house newsletters, are one source of influence and as such need to be more open to a range of ideas including those that may be potentially conflicting. Second, the analysis of rhetorical techniques can be used to alert those involved to ways of “reading” corporate texts (e.g., emphasis on future, rather than immediate orientation). Third, the critical reading of texts suggests a potential “training” tool to encourage organizational communicators to be more aware of the contextual influences (viz. constraints) on reactions to external events (such as the deliberations of a Royal Commission and results from the Supreme Court of Canada’s ruling on the pay equity dispute and how they are likely to be perceived in the context of a particular organizational culture).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

There are a number of limitations associated with this study. First, the nature of the information used was archival data. Although extremely useful and informative, future research may be done by supplementing the archival materials with firsthand accounts from employees at Air Canada who either currently work for the airline or who worked for the airline during the 1970s and 1980s. Both groups would provide a rich perspective on the issues addressed in this study.

This study has provided evidence as to management’s contribution to discrimination through the use of internal communication. However, what this study has not explored is the impact on the employees within the organization and on its culture. Future research could explore this impact.

As we have argued, culture is a social product; it is constituted and maintained by the ongoing communicative interaction of the organization’s members. Social constructionism suggests that whatever is oppressive to women is not inevitable and can be improved by people acting differently (Friedman, 2006), especially those in powerful and influential positions. The above analysis and implications assumes a certain degree of goodwill and trust. It is quite evident that the airline has come a long way since the 1980s with respect to employment equity; however, there is still work to be done. Without proper consideration, we can see quite clearly how the attitudes and beliefs that are produced and reproduced within organizations will be slow to change.

References


