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From Here to Eternity: Making Sense of the Gendering of Organizational Culture

The idea of multiple overlapping discourses ... problematizes sharp distinctions between self and other ... undermining oppositional rhetorical strategies.

Steven R. Corman (2000: 10)

Recognizing our differences and using those differences to push our own and others’ understanding does not mean that we must reject the notion of a common ground for organizational theorizing; instead, it suggests that any common ground we do develop will be provisional, partial, and subject to continual critique [...] A politics of affinity recognizes that there is ‘nothing about being “female” that naturally binds women’; rather identities are conceived as the result of ‘contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism, racism, and capitalism’... Feminist interested in creating knowledge for social change are left with the responsibility of building unities rather than naturalizing them.

Angela Trethewey (2000: 201–02)

Introduction

As was made clear at the beginning, this book is and is not about British Airways (nor for that matter about Air Canada and Pan American Airways). Clearly, the book is about these airlines in that it attempts to analyse the companies over time, but as case studies designed to shed light on the gendering of organizational culture per se. Certainly there is no intent to single out BA, Pan Am or Air Canada as exemplars of bad organizational practice; there is no evidence to suggest that any of these airlines has a worse than average track record on sex discrimination. BA, for example, appears to have been less willing to hire female clerical staff than other major companies in the 1920s, more advanced than many in the late 1940s with its equity imaging of female flight attendants, more willing to exploit eroticism in the
1960s, and yet among the 1990s leaders in adopting employment equity strategies. Rather, BA's value as a case study depends on methodological issues, including the length of time that it has been in business; the fact that it is still in operation; its prominence as a major, internationally known company; the existence of a corporate archive; and the fact that it has been the subject of several written histories (see Chapter 1). On the other hand, the notion of organizational culture is only useful as a heuristic where it is able not only to identify processes common across organizations but also to make sense of localized realities. In that regard BA, Air Canada and Pan Am are not simply stand-ins for organizational culture but an important study of localized practices in an organization. As they are prominent organizations in the world of organizational realities, study of these airlines is also important in their own right for the light it can shed on the gendered influences of the major corporation.

So, what can we learn from the study of an airline over time? The study has pointed to three key areas for discussion and reflection – the character of sex discrimination and change, methodological issues and concerns, and strategies of change. How we answer this question and deal with the areas of discussion will depend in large part on the perspective we take to (or against) feminism.

This book has, from the beginning, taken an ‘aspirational feminist’ approach, studying the gendering of organizational culture to identify ways of addressing workplace discrimination. But, as a number of feminists have suggested, there are many feminisms, with roots in different philosophical traditions. Calás and Smircich (1996), for example, outline six major feminism perspectives that provide a useful framework for a review of airlines over time: liberal, radical-cultural, psychoanalytic, socialist, poststructuralist, and (post) colonial feminism. Rather than revisit the particular strengths and limitations of each approach, this chapter takes a multi-lens approach, examining each in turn, for what insights they can collectively generate. To that end the chapter focuses on selected features of each perspective. To avoid the creation of several straw women, it should be pointed out that the simplification of each approach masks the complexity of concerns that characterize each approach. For example, a focus on radical-cultural feminism’s concern with the social construction of women does not imply that liberal feminists do not share similar, albeit differently framed, concerns.

Liberal feminism

In its characterization of discrimination and equity, liberal feminism focuses on numbers. This perspective quite literally counts inequity as the comparative differences between men and women in terms of positions held and incomes received. From this approach, it is relatively easy to measure social