

Lost in liberalism: A case study of the disappearance of the gender agenda at a South African university

Lesley Shackleton

Introduction

The concept of institutional culture is complex and difficult to define. As Gherardi (1995) points out, the culture of an organisation is not something that is overtly noticed by its people, as it is just part of what is natural and normal. Institutional culture is the norm of experience lived by people in and working with the organisation, and while each person's experience is individual, the assumption is that there are common threads and themes that run through these experiences, enabling a broad description of aspects of the organisation's culture. Without individuals being overtly aware of it, institutional culture guides behaviour and beliefs and thus influences every aspect of the institution's functioning. Because of its elusive pervasiveness institutional culture is difficult to map. In this paper I describe a feminist study that uses an analysis of responses to a gender-based change initiative to provide insight into a university's gendered institutional culture.

My case study focuses on an initiative to increase the number of women in leadership positions in higher education in South Africa. Analysis of the responses of purposively selected people within the institution in which the initiative started reveals much about the culture of the institution, and provides insights into how deep-seated gendered attitudes can persist in maintaining the androcentric *status quo* even in a liberal higher education environment.

Gender in academia

Numerous studies across the world have highlighted gender inequities in academia (e.g. the work of Bagilhole, Blackmore, Heward, Kwesiga, Mama, Morley, Thiele, and others). Among the most visible consequences of these inequities is a vertical gender stratification, with women becoming increasingly

scarce in increasingly senior positions. Mama (2002: 1-8; 2003: 101-125) describes the under-representation of women as intellectual leaders in African universities, with women comprising fewer than 6% of the professors. Singh (2002: 41) states: "Generally, women's status in African universities left much room for improvement."

Despite a progressive national policy environment, recently analysed data from South African universities shows a similar pattern (Sarah Riordan, personal communication, 2007) with only three of the 23 vice-chancellors in the country being women, and women filling fewer than 30% of the senior positions (deans, executive directors and deputy vice-chancellors). Many reasons have been suggested for the 'glass ceiling' that women encounter which prevents them from achieving their promotional aspirations (Bagilhole, 1993; Barres, 2006; Blackmore and Sachs, 2000 and 2001; Currie *et al*, 2000; Dines, 1993; Harris and Thiele, 1998; Heward, 1996; Kettle, 1996; Lawler, 1999; Smulders, 1998; Wenneras and Wold, 2001) and it has been noted by Lawler (1999: 1272-9), Hearn (2001) and others that the more 'prestigious' the institution, the fewer women there are likely to be in senior positions. A number of initiatives have been established in different countries to break this gendered stratification.

In 1999 I was privileged to be working in one of South Africa's more prestigious liberal universities when an American donor organisation offered to provide assistance to improve the institution's gender representation at senior levels. Beyond a verbal welcome of this offer, the university leadership took no follow-up action. Although unrelated to my professional position, my interest in gender equity led me to seize this opportunity and, with the benign tolerance characteristic of the liberal¹ university environment, I was allowed to informally develop programmes that would provide professional development opportunities for women within the university. Over the years, these programmes spread to include women in other higher education institutions, and eventually what became known as HERS-SA² moved off campus and was formalised into an independent, non-profit organisation aimed at improving the status of women in higher education in South Africa (Shackleton, 2006b).

As this research uses the interactions around the development of HERS-SA within the case study university as a means to gain insight into its gendered institutional culture, I shall briefly introduce the university, and outline HERS-SA's philosophy and approach.

The university

The case study institution is among the older, historically white universities in South Africa that were established along the lines of liberal western universities to provide education for the young men in the colony (Phillips, 2003: 122-7). In 1948, when the Nationalist Party came to power in South Africa and started eroding institutions' rights to admit or employ whoever they chose, the case institution, along with other mainly English-speaking universities, slowly became involved in a campaign of civil disobedience centred around the government's legislated racial separation of staff and students. This opposition to apartheid served to position white English-speaking universities within the higher education structure in the country. They were tolerated outsiders within the country, who, through maintaining international connections, saw themselves as part of the global community of scholars. While there was pride in challenging the policies of the apartheid government of the day, which gave the English-speaking universities a self-image of being liberal institutions fighting for the rights of the masses, there were also outspoken criticisms from those 'masses' who saw universities as benefiting from apartheid policies and being complicit in maintaining the white supremacist status quo. In more recent years the case university, like other South African universities, has been adapting to the new democracy, to the pressures brought about by significant restructuring of the higher education landscape, and to increased government demands for equity (including gender equity) and accountability.

The case institution is arguably one of the most diverse campuses in South Africa, having students from all over South Africa, from many different countries around the world, and from a variety of cultures and religious persuasions. At present around half of all students are black, and half are women. Some 2400 permanent staff work at the university, 32% of whom are academic staff. Just over half the total staff (but only 22% of the academics) are black, and women comprise some 53% of the total staff and 34% of the academic staff. Only one of the six most senior leadership positions (vice-chancellor, deputy vice-chancellors and registrar) is occupied by a woman, but recent significant progress is evident among other senior ranks, with 50% of the deans and 43% of the executive directors now being women. The institution has gender equity and transformation policies and goals, and, like all other universities in South Africa, is required by government to submit an employment equity report annually to the National Department of Labour.

The feminist initiative

Like other similar programmes,³ HERS-SA is centred in the belief that there is value in creating a women's-only space in which to explore professional issues in the context of the gendered power structures in higher education (Shackleton, 2006b). While leadership and hierarchical position are not necessarily synonymous, the stated focus of these developmental programmes has been to get more women into senior leadership positions. The rationale for this approach recognises the need to have visible gendered change within the patriarchal core of the institutions, and it recognises the importance of role models. Not only does the role model catch attention, she provides an example for others to follow, and in so doing there is reinforcement of the role being modelled.

The HERS-SA approach includes several of the main approaches to achieving gender equity identified by Ely and Meyerson (2000: 103-51). There is clearly a belief that there is value in 'fixing the woman' to overcome gender-specific socially-imposed limitations, and in providing training to better equip women to take senior positions. Beyond this HERS-SA's professional development philosophy shows a strong radical feminist understanding of the higher education environment, believing that professional development of women requires safe spaces; that is, spaces away from male-dominated power interactions. There is recognition that women often do not realise the power of networking and the role it plays in maintaining the patriarchal environment. The total programme is aimed at increasing personal and professional confidence to enable women to challenge the gendered climate in their institutions and to break through glass ceilings they might have encountered which prevent them from entering the most senior ranks of academia.

A feminist qualitative approach

The research outlined here forms one part of a larger study on gender-based change and institutional culture (Shackleton, 2007). This paper focuses on what the interactions around a case study of a feminist change initiative reveal about the institutional culture. Yin (1994) outlines how a single case study is useful in a situation where previously difficult-to-capture phenomena are to be observed and described, and can provide revelatory information. I take a feminist qualitative approach that integrates a number of sources of data, and allows me to include my personal experience both as researcher and as the instigator of the initiative. In this I have a clear political motive

to raise the profile of gender, and more specifically women, in the discourse around transformation. A feminist approach allows me to locate myself in the research process. The topic of my research arises from my many years of experience in higher education and my growing awareness of the role of gender in this supposedly neutral environment. To quote Harding (1987: 9), "...the beliefs and behaviors of the researcher are part of the empirical evidence for (or against) the claims advanced in the results of research." She claims that bringing in this subjective element increases objectivity by exposing the standpoint of the researcher as information relevant to the research. Taylor (2001), Hartley (1994), Harding (1987) and others point out that the feminist qualitative approach recognises the impossibility of separating the researcher from the research. The influence of the researcher on the selection of the research topic and on the data collection and analysis cannot and should not be ignored. In my research, rather than ignoring this influence, I consciously build on and integrate my knowledge of the case institution into the study. Beyond this I also recognize that not only am I integrating my influence as a researcher into the research, but that as an insider, I am able to provide personal cultural and institutional insight.

Accordingly, as the researcher, it is important for me to highlight my familiarity with the universe being studied. I am a white woman whose 40 years of experience in higher education has led me to believe that women are more significant players in the higher education environment than their official representation would suggest. My epistemological approach recognises that women's voices and issues can be suppressed by the hegemonic patriarchy in the higher education environment but that it is possible to bring these into the debate through the process of feminist research (Luke, 1994; Morley and Walsh, 1996; Petersen and Gravett, 2000; and others). I bring to this research a particular positionality. As a white person in an historically white institution, I have been an 'insider'. As a white woman (not a man) in an historically white university in the 'new' South Africa, I am now also an 'outsider' and a part of the 'designated groups' identified by the state for equity intervention. Being a woman manager in a male-dominated academic environment also makes me an 'outsider'.

In addition to drawing on my personal experiences in establishing HERS-SA, the main sources of data described here are from semi-structured in-depth interviews with purposively-selected participants in the university. Although most of those interviewed had participated in one or other of the HERS-SA

programmes, some were selected because of their positions in the university, positions from which they might reasonably be expected to be aware of leadership development initiatives for women in the institution. The perspectives of the eight participants range from those involved at the start of the initiative that would develop into HERS-SA to individuals who only encountered HERS-SA some five years later when they attended one of the programmes.

Participants include those whose career within the university has been as an academic, and those who (although they have academic qualifications and in some cases are still studying) have a career in the administration. Four of the participants interviewed have professional responsibility in the human resources or employment equity areas. Three of the participants, one of whom is a woman, hold executive leadership positions. Three of the participants are black women.

An interview schedule formed the basis of a semi-structured interview, within which I explored each participant's positioning within the university with respect to the development of women and their relation to HERS-SA. Questions about the latter covered what they knew about the establishment of HERS-SA, its integration into the institution, and its impact on the institution. In responding to questions about HERS-SA, even participants who knew very little about it revealed gendered attitudes that provided valuable data on the institutional culture.

With the permission of the participants, all the interviews were taped, and, after transcription, all were analysed in the same way with the assistance of Nvivo coding. Gender and power interactions were revealed by exploring the location of the individual within the institution and with respect to HERS-SA, his or her perspective of the gendered climate in the university, his or her views on HERS-SA, and the ways in which participants illuminated the meanings of gender and institutional change through interaction with HERS-SA. Insights were gained around how each individual perceives the university to be relating to HERS-SA, and what opportunities the university, as an institution committed to equity, is accepting from HERS-SA.

Insights

Insights into the gendered culture of the institution were gleaned from two main sources of data: personal experiences as a long-time member of staff of the university and the initiator of HERS-SA, and interview data. These are discussed below.

Personal reflection on the development of HERS-SA

During the apartheid years, the case institution had undertaken a number of initiatives to counter racial discrimination, many of these being funded by overseas donor organisations. Post apartheid, donor funding has continued to support several institutional transformation initiatives, and within this context it is interesting to note that the impetus for developing women in leadership came from an American donor agency, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, which had in the past contributed towards a similar programme in the USA, the HERS Mid-America programme. Following a site visit to the university by representatives from Mellon and HERS Mid-America, an extract from their report stated:

The situation for women is particularly difficult. There are only seven women in senior management... and 96 women in middle management... out of a total of 256 administrators in these grades. Everyone we talked with agreed that it was important to take special steps to help women move into higher levels of administration. Our efforts to identify the major reasons for the current situation and the barriers to women's advancement yielded surprisingly diverse views. In general the male (and some female) section heads and higher administrators suggested that women had low self-esteem, that they sought "comfort zones" and preferred not to make tough decisions... and that many women, especially those in academic faculties, had no interest in administrative work. Women... had a very different take on the situation. They expressed the view that men often assigned them tasks... and then failed to recognise their contributions or permit them to participate in meetings relevant to their work. Many of the women we spoke with... were quite frustrated by the limited roles they were permitted to play (Emerson, 1999).

As mentioned above, in the absence of any formal university response to the Mellon offer, I took the initiative to ask the Mellon Foundation for funds with which I developed what became known as HERS-SA. Until late 2001 a part-time HERS office funded by the Mellon project and comprising one part-time administrator working under my guidance was based in my department at the university. Although not part of my formal responsibilities, these activities were undertaken with the tacit approval of my line manager and I ensured that I included reports on my HERS activities in my regular meetings with him. The donor funding was channelled through and administered by the university, but the institution took little, if any, interest in my involvement

in these HERS activities. No-one objected to my spending time on my 'women's programmes' or questioned what I was doing. Despite this, from this early stage I felt that it was important from a lobbying perspective to let the executive leadership of the university know that there was an initiative for women members of staff, and I ensured that invitations to nominate women for both local seminars and the overseas professional development opportunities went to the vice-chancellor.

The symbiotic relationship that developed between HERS-SA and the university is worth commenting on here. Theoretically, funding is a key indicator of institutionalisation. But in this instance the funding did not come from the institution, and was not obtained using institutional fund-raising procedures. However, because of the university's historical relationship with the Mellon Foundation, and the tacit support I had been able to negotiate from my line manager, the institution was prepared to receive and manage the funding, essentially for a project over which they exercised no control and which was to be spent at first on women from my university and later extended to women from other higher education institutions in the region.

In spite of subsequently relocating its office and becoming an independent non-profit organisation, HERS-SA has maintained a connection with the university, mainly through my joint responsibilities and the support of women in the human resources department. The university continues to allow HERS-SA to access donors through its structures, and over the years – in response to invitations from HERS-SA – the university has supported the participation of over 150 of its women in the various HERS-SA programmes. In addition, seven members of the university executive have made presentations in HERS-SA programmes. The institution has allowed individuals to encounter HERS-SA as something outside of its boundaries, but it has not taken the opportunity to embrace HERS-SA as part of its transformation initiative. The interview data suggests that this lack of interest has nothing to do with HERS-SA; rather, it is because the patriarchal culture of the university has not allowed the university to regard gender as a serious issue beyond the counting of statistics.

Interview data

The interviews provide insight into the university's rhetoric around gender and participants' perceptions of the gendered culture, and reveal a lack of focus on gender in institutional transformation programmes. They also show an institutional culture that 'others' people into groups and 'disappears' gender

issues. The latter is clearly illustrated in the language used when talking about the HERS-SA initiative and by the naivety displayed regarding gender issues.

Gender forms part of equity policies and values and is cited in the institutional mission statement, along with race and disability. Despite this, none of the participants were aware of any university programme, beyond HERS-SA, that focused specifically on women. Several of the participants suggested that gender issues are addressed as part of the several institutional transformation programmes, but through the language used regarding these programmes, it emerged that they also tended to ‘disappear’ gender into the rhetoric of transformation and diversity and have an emphasis on numbers.

I have been arguing this, [we] don't have any concept paper or, or, or clear understanding of women's position... besides the figures, the stats. And the university has based its employment, its transformation strategy on numbers. Chasing numbers in a, in a, in a way that has been totally unstrategic, I think... One really needs to understand what the specific positional problems are of the designated groups. (black woman administrator).

Discussion of the institutional transformation programmes also reveals some of the complexity of effecting change in this liberal, individualistic environment. People do not want to be told how they should change their behaviour, and they do not wish to be put into ‘groups’ or to coalesce (and be identified as part of a ‘group’) to take up a common cause:

...the culture at [the university], I think it's also a question of being labelled, to belong to the group. People are very concerned... for some individuals it doesn't matter to be identified as this or that, you know, for others it, they find it fearful or unacceptable, or whatever it is and I suppose we, with the women issues, we fall in that thing. I don't know... (white woman administrator).

I think that in this place, at the places where I am, there is certainly a, a gender awareness, academically almost, I think. There is a, there is an awareness of that, its politically sensitive, one of those topics, and it comes under the banner of all the other things you know, previously disadvantaged groups, disability, gender, homosexuality, you know, it falls into that frame of, I don't know, that that *group* that we have to deal with... (white woman administrator).

All the participants verbalise a need to improve the gendered culture of the institution:

We have not reached a stage of gender equality in higher education. Look at the stats, look at the imbalances in rank. You take the academics for example, I mean there is a huge way to go, huge way to go... (white male administrator).

The interviews suggest that academic women experience the gendered institutional culture more favourably: "I found it was difficult to establish my credibility, but having done that, I feel quite comfortable" (white woman academic). This contrasts with the strong negative feelings expressed by two of the black administrative women. One said: "I always found that the marginalisation in the way is somehow double if you are in the [administration], in a way. Or not necessarily marginalisation, but the opportunities are fewer." And another, who describes herself as "not taken seriously as a person", also says: "I, I, it's the only job I have ever worked in where my, I feel like everything has been taken from me for it, nothing's been put back."

It was evident that the women, particularly in the administration, experienced the university environment as pressurised and complex and there is a latent discourse of struggling to survive or fit in: "...the environment we work in is so complicated and so totally difficult in a sense, and fast and furious... (white woman administrator).

Describing a discriminatory experience, one of the participants explains that she did not perceive her treatment as deliberate discrimination, but attributes it rather to a naivety, a culture that is unaware of how it is discriminating against women:

The most wonderful comment that was made to me: it also came to my attention that I was far more poorly paid than any other professor, and again I was doing the comparison to a male colleague and I was saying, "But you know I am far more productive" and whatever. And my dear dean, who I am very fond of, looked at me and said "Because we had to put him on a par with the salaries of other professors." And I said, "And what am I?" [laughter]. And it's a, it's a, it's a complete naivety, I, I know my dean would be mortified at the idea that he could, um, [not notice that it was happening] ja, ja (white woman academic).

Despite describing a negative gendered environment, the lack of any action or involvement, particularly by the women, suggests that in the reality of their daily experience in the institution, this is not a priority. A contributing factor to this is likely to be the vanishing of gender in the university discourse, a vanishing that became evident as participants spoke of their experiences.

This was demonstrated by perceptions of the institutional responses to addressing gender issues, and in the participants' use of language:

I think there is a sensitivity that gender issues are important and... we need to address them, but I don't experience a deep grappling with what that really means... I have not been in a conversation that interrogates directly what that issue is... I have not seen Council consider a change strategy to, to, I have not seen a, the [Institutional Forum] do it, I have not seen committees make a discussion around it, you know, and as I say, I don't think its particularly that they don't, they aren't aware or they they're anti it, I think we are just in that block of things that we all know we should address at some point but its not. (white woman administrator).

The way participants respond in the interviews suggests that gender issues are a cause of some discomfort within the university community and this also results in gender being 'disappeared' and not taken seriously. At the leadership level, this disappearing takes place by conflating gender into the institutional rhetoric of diversity and excellence.

I don't think its simply numbers. We are strengthened by diversity and diversity adds to excellence, and gender diversity must add to excellence as much as racial diversity and other forms of, not in a simple numbers game, but in terms of the value of diversity in a place like this, in a university. (white male executive).

This disappearing is also evident in individuals' use of language in the interviews. Despite making such remarks as: "[HERS-SA] seems to me a really excellent programme, quite innovative... people have come away energised and empowered", language is repeatedly used to reduce the impact of HERS-SA. An analysis of the interviews with almost all the participants reveals underlying discourses that suggest an attempt to contain and diminish HERS-SA. Participants associate the initiative with the non-academic, lower-paid sectors in the university, "women in the lower pay classes" and "... sort of middle management [administrative] women." A male executive uses ridicule as a technique to dismiss HERS-SA when he suggests that it might operate "as a bunch of women flying a flag." Descriptors such as "a very small programme" (this despite the fact that over 800 women from across the continent have participated in HERS-SA programmes) also serve to diminish the initiative. A senior male participant, while making positive remarks about the initiative, nevertheless felt compelled to diminish the programme by adding: "I am not sure what HERS actually is. Is it two persons and a dog?"

Most of the participants make suggestions as to how they feel HERS-SA could be more effective, reflecting a power dynamic that attempts to position HERS-SA as deficient both as a concept and an organisation, and which passes on the responsibility for institutional gendered change to HERS-SA. Despite saying that he knew very little about HERS-SA, one of the men interviewed was vociferous in his criticisms. He suggests that HERS-SA needs to “review itself and establish its real relevance, and its *real* contribution and maybe a change in direction”, otherwise he suggests it is “going to just become another bunch of women talking”.

A participant with responsibility for human resources, who would be expected to have approved the participation of the nearly 50 university women in the three major HERS-SA programmes (requiring them to be off campus for a minimum of a week), describes his knowledge of HERS-SA as “I also sort of listened to some of the conversations in the passage and so on, and it really was, for me, women living in a bubble isolated from the rest of the world.” This dismissive attitude speaks both to the low priority he assigns to a feminist intervention and shows a patronising tolerance which has allowed professional women in his university to have cumulatively spent well over two years of university time “living in a bubble”.

This attitude is echoed in institutional responses to positive individual experiences which reveal how these are downplayed in a way that limits their potential impact within the university. There is no evidence of any attempt to capitalise on an individual experience to benefit the university:

I don't feel that what should happen, that because you have been to HERS therefore you should be up for promotion, or whatever the case may be, but, but something happened to you. You did experience something very unique and, and, at least you must have a space to, to, to, to, to, um, I don't want to say it in a clichéd way, now plough back into the institution in some way. (black woman administrator).

She has subsequently left the university. Another participant also recognises that the institution is not gaining from the individual experiences: “... a lot of women are going for personal development, and then how is that integrated back into the work, into the environment? And I don't know to what extent it really is integrated.” (white woman administrator).

A human resources professional is happy to describe HERS-SA as “sort of plugged in on the side” and explains that “there isn't an interface with formal people development processes”. Individual women are allowed to participate

in a feminist initiative but their experiences are not integrated into the functioning of the institution.

The low priority accorded to gender issues is reflected in the considerable naivety regarding gender and effecting gender-based change shown by many of the participants, even on the part of professionals who might be expected to be responsible for moving the institution towards equity. One of the human resources professionals describes herself as having “an insight into women and their issues”, but also clearly states that “... I am fatigued by this kind of activism around gender and race issues, so I don’t think that it’s called for, activism around that.”

Another says: “I have never gotten a sense that HERS or anything for that matter, any programme for that matter, can suddenly heighten gender awareness.” (black woman administrator).

Despite most of the participants being careful to present themselves as having expertise of some sort, providing a revealing insight into the value hierarchy of the academic environment, the interviews provide no evidence of any serious theorisation about gender or implementing gender-based change, and proficiency in these is clearly not perceived as a requirement. This speaks to the priorities of the institution and suggests an inability to initiate or even respond to gender-based change. This is clearly illustrated by the complete lack of understanding of the HERS-SA philosophy displayed by one of the women human resources professionals, who complained: “Why can’t [your programmes] be for men and women?”

There is also a lack of understanding of the impact of the patriarchal environment on women’s career development, shown by the four participants with professional responsibility related to equity and human resource development. Although most of the participants speak of having knowledge about gender discrimination in the workplace, none of them describe this knowledge as leading to individual or institutional action. No evidence is provided in the interviews that either positional power or perception of the injustices of gendered power structures has stimulated any of them to take responsibility for bringing about a change in the gendered climate of the institution (despite five of the participants having participated in HERS-SA programmes!).

The gender phenomenon

The data reveals a university that most of the women interviewed experienced as stressful, particularly the non-academic women. Gender issues are a

component of this stress, and there is an awareness that something ought to be done about inequitable gendered power dynamics, but nobody knows what to do or wants to be seen to be associated with a gender-based initiative. Below I discuss a number of ways in which gender emerges from the data as an institutional dynamic.

Gender as rhetoric

Gender is named as a component of the university's equity rhetoric where it forms part of equity policies and demographic counts. The mission statement and equity policies include gender with race, religion, and disability, but interview data and analysis of university documentation leaves little doubt that the first and most important of these is race. The university leadership is clearly proud of its public stance against racial discrimination (Shackleton, 2006a). In contrast, there is no record of a public declaration showing a deep understanding of the impact of gender-based discrimination. In South Africa, where gender has historically received a lower priority than race, I suggest that the national context (in which gender is conflated into diversity) allows institutions to focus on the more politically hegemonic issue of race. This has the effect of weakening the institutional imperative for bringing about gender-based change. This is particularly the situation in previously 'white' institutions.

Despite being part of the liberal rhetoric and a component of the transformation that the university so desperately seeks, my research shows a remarkable ignorance of gender issues, particularly on the part of those with formal responsibility for human relations and transformation. People speak with confidence about gender but reveal a lack of serious engagement with the realities of gendered power relations or theorisation around gender in the workplace. Beneath the rhetoric, gender appears to be understood in terms of numbers of men and women; consequently, institutional efforts aim to bring about greater equity focus on increasing numbers of women. This shallow understanding of gender suggests that as an aspect of human relations in the workplace, gender has a low institutional priority.

The vanishing of gender

An important manifestation of the gendered climate is the pervasive vanishing of gender in the institution, which is revealed in a number of ways by my data. Institutional and individual lack of action portrays an institution in which gender relations are not considered to be an issue. There

is recognition of some inequity in numbers of women and men, particularly in senior academic positions, but unlike the gross legalised racial inequities of apartheid, the gender-based inequities in the civilised, liberal university environment are much more subtle. In the post-apartheid era, overcoming racial inequities and ensuring racial reconciliation are a national priority. Gender is also mentioned: however, my findings have shown little evidence in reality of any institutional attention being focused on gender as an issue, let alone a priority.

The interviews also reveal the very low profile of gender issues. There is remarkably little awareness of the influence of gendered power relations in the workplace, and individuals show very little commitment to doing anything about it. There seems to be a reluctant acceptance of the way that things are. People are too busy keeping up with the masculine, aggressive demands of the institution, or too wary of being seen to be associated with women's issues, to challenge the system or to attempt to bring about any changes. When specific gender challenges are made, there is an institutional reaction to neutralise them, as illustrated by my data, which revealed the micro-political processes that attempted to contain and diminish HERS-SA as an overtly feminist activity.

Mystification

In the strongly male institutional culture of higher education, the significance of gender as a factor influencing the working environment is reduced. This is achieved by the hegemony of the masculine norm and, as my data has shown, by the lack of any real engagement with gender, the low priority assigned to it as a transformation issue, and by a pervasive vanishing. At one level, interaction with my participants suggests that in the tolerant, liberal university environment, gender issues are not significant, yet both my women participants and I clearly experience the gendered culture as confusing and disempowering. I found this acceptance of the status quo and apathy towards improving the gendered culture mystifying and disturbing. Did it mean that the gendered culture of the institution was not as hostile as personal experience suggested? In an attempt to benchmark the gender sensitivity of the university, I undertook a visioning process to explore what a gender-sensitive campus might look like. I identified a number of changes that could eliminate gender-based power inequities and result in an environment where gender would not function as a determinant of allocating power and

resources, and would not define identities or trajectories. By comparing this ideal with my lived reality, I was able to see clearly the gap between what was possible and the current situation, and thus validate my experiences.

I report on this visioning exercise because I found it to be particularly valuable in revealing how I was seduced by the power of the university's liberal rhetoric and ability to vanish the gender agenda. Despite my years of experiencing the gendered climate of the institution, like my participants I was confused about my perceptions and had a compulsion to 'verify' my experiences. This uncertainty speaks strongly to the ability of the gendered institutional culture to disempower and mystify those embraced by it.

Conclusion

Parker (2000: 217) described institutional culture as "a process of making claims about difference and similarity between persons in an organization, making divisions between 'us' and 'them'". My feminist methodology has successfully revealed the fragmentation that takes place in the academic environment and the impact that this has on reinforcing the status quo. My results reveal a culture that, in common with many other international studies in organisations, and in universities in particular, dismisses gender as an institutional dynamic, thus perpetuating the hegemony of the male norm. This is despite the strong equity legislation in South Africa and the pressure being exerted on higher education for transformation.

The data revealed that women, particularly black women in the administration, experience the environment as strongly disempowering. This suggests that the intersection of gender with race and academic and non-academic standing is a determinant of an individual's alignment with the institutional culture. Most remarkable is the naivety and complacency exhibited concerning gendered power relations in the university environment, even on the part of people responsible for equity.

One can speculate on the influence of the liberal, individualistic discourse of academia: it results in a culture that isolates individuals and assigns them full responsibility for their situation. The atomisation and othering of people in the institution – caused by positioning as academic or administrative, division into faculties and departments, and the strong academic hierarchy, in addition to issues of race, gender, class and age – and their reluctance to be identified as part of a "group" precludes collective action to do with gender.

Thus, although women experience the gendered climate as uncomfortable, the institutional culture assists in helping them to disappear the underlying causes of their discomfort. A liberal, tolerant, paternal attitude makes activism seem ludicrous and pushing for change seem churlish. Clearly this has implications for bringing about change in the academic environment, suggesting that transformation initiatives need first to address the culture that exalts the individual, and thereafter need to explore ways to replace it with pride in a common collective identity.

My research has shown how the gendered culture of the case university reflects that of other, similar institutions described in the literature. I believe that my findings about factors contributing to the conservative patriarchal environment have a wider relevance. I suggest that my theorisation regarding fragmentation in the academic environment and the incapacitation of collective action within a culture espousing liberal, individualistic ideals provides new insights into forces maintaining androcentric hegemony.

References

- Bagilhole, B. 1993. "How to keep a good woman down: An investigation of the role of institutional factors in the process of discrimination against woman academics", *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 14(3): 261-274.
- Barres, B. A. 2006. "Does gender matter?", *Nature* 442: 133-6.
- Blackmore, J. and Sachs, J. 2000. "Paradoxes of leadership and management in higher education in times of change: some Australian reflections", *International Journal of Leadership in Education* 3(1): 1-16.
- Blackmore, J. and Sachs, J. 2001. "Women Leaders in the Restructured University", in Brooks, A. and Mackinnon, A. eds. *Gender and the Restructured University: Changing Management and Culture in Higher Education*. Buckingham and Philadelphia: SRHE and Open University Press.
- Currie, Jan, Harris, Patricia, and Thiele, Bev 2000. "Sacrifices in Greedy Universities: Are they Gendered?", *Gender and Education* 12(3): 269-291.
- Dines, E. 1993. "Overview: Women in Higher Education Management", in Mukherjee, H. and Kearney, M. L. eds. *Women in Higher Education Management*. Paris: Unesco.
- Ely, R.J. and Meyerson, D. 2000. "Theories of gender in organizations: A new approach to organizational analysis and change", *Research in Organizational Behavior* vol. 22: 103-151.
- Emerson, A.F. 1999. "Visit to South Africa, 22-27 August 1999". Submitted to the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, 30 August. Unpublished report.

- Gherardi, S. 1995. *Gender, Symbolism and Organizational Cultures*. London: Thousand Oaks; New Delhi: Sage.
- Harding, S. ed. 1987. *Feminism and Methodology*. Bloomington: Indiana University/ Open University Press.
- Harris, P., Thiele, B. and Currie, J. 1998. "Success, Gender and Academic Voices. Consuming Passion or Selling the Soul?", *Gender and Education* 10(2): 133-148.
- Hartley, J.F. 1994. "Case Studies in Organizational Research" in Cassell, C. and Symon, G. eds. *Qualitative Methods in Organizational Research*. London: Sage Publications.
- Hearn, J. 2001. "Academia, Management and Men: Making the Connections, Exploring the Implications", in Brooks, A. and Mackinnon, A. eds. *Gender and the Restructured University: Changing Management and Culture in Higher Education*. Buckingham and Philadelphia: SRHE and Open University Press.
- Heward, C. 1996. "Women and careers in higher education: What is the problem?" in Morley, L. and Walsh, V. eds. *Breaking Boundaries: Women in Higher Education*. London: Taylor and Francis.
- Kettle, J. 1996. "Good practices, bad attitudes: An examination of the factors influencing women's academic careers", in Morley, L. and Walsh, V. eds. *Breaking Boundaries; Women in Higher Education*. London: Taylor and Francis.
- Lawler, A. 1999. "Tenured women battle to make it less lonely at the top", *Science* Vol. 286 no. 5443. p. 1272-1278.
- Luke, C. 1994. "Women in the Academy: the politics of speech and silence", *British Journal of Sociology* 15(2): 211-30.
- Mama, A. 2002. "Editorial", *Feminist Africa 1: Intellectual Politics* p 1-8.
- Mama, A. 2003. "Restore, Reform but do not Transform: The Gender Politics of Higher Education in Africa", *Journal of Higher Education in Africa* 1(1): 101-125.
- Morley, L. and Walsh, V. 1996. *Breaking Boundaries: Women in Higher Education*. London: Taylor and Francis.
- Parker, M. 2000. *Organizational Culture and Identity: Unity and Division at Work*. London: Sage.
- Petersen, N. and Gravett, S. 2000. "The experience of women academics at a South African university", *South African Journal of Higher Education* 14(3): 169-176.
- Phillips, H. 2003. "A Caledonian college in Cape Town and beyond: an investigation into the foundation(s) of the South African university system", *South African Journal of Higher Education* 17(3): 122-128.
- Riordan, Sarah. 2007. "Career Psychology Factors as Antecedents of Career Success for Women Academics in South Africa", PhD dissertation, University of Cape Town.
- Singh, J. K. S. 2002. *Still a single sex profession? Female staff numbers in Commonwealth universities*. London: Association of Commonwealth Universities.

- Shackleton, L. Y. 2006a. "Leadership discourse on transformation and gender in a South African university", in Chesterman, C. ed. *ATN WEXDEV Conference Proceedings: Change in Climate? Prospects for Gender Equity in Universities*. ATN WEXDEV, CD-ROM.
- Shackleton, L. Y. 2006b. "*HERS-SA: Levelling the playing fields for women in higher education*". Paper presented at HESA Conference on Higher Education Leadership and Management, 19-21 November 2006, and submitted to *South African Journal of Higher Education*.
- Shackleton L. Y. 2007. "*Negotiating institutional transformation: A case study of gender-based change in a South African university*". Unpublished PhD thesis, submitted to University of Cape Town.
- Smulders, A. E. M. 1998. "*Creating Space for Women. Gender-linked Factors in Managing Staff in Higher Education Institutions*". Paris: Unesco International Institute for Educational Planning.
- Taylor, S. 2001. "Locating and Conducting Discourse Analytic Research", in Wetherell, M., Taylor, S. and Yates, S. J. eds. *Discourse as Data*. London: Sage.
- Wenneras, C. and Wold, A. 2001. "Nepotism and Sexism in Peer Review", in Lederman, M. and Bartsch, I. eds. *The Gender and Science Reader*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Yin, R. K. 1994. *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. London: Thousand Oaks; New Delhi: SAGE.

Endnotes

- 1 My use of "liberal" in this context incorporates the privileging of individual rights and tolerance of freedom of speech and thought. Government and other authorities are expected to have limited power to intervene in personal freedoms. The rule of law is considered important to protect equality of opportunity for all.
- 2 HERS-SA is not an abbreviation like the American HERS but the full name of the organisation.
- 3 For example, the Higher Education Resources Development (HERS) Mid-America programme in the United States, the Australian Technology Network (ATN) Women's Executive Development (WEXDEV) programme in Australia, the American Council on Education (ACE) Office of Women in Higher Education (OWHE).