Part I

Post-Equality? Analyses of Subtle Sexism
Introduction

Power and Discourse at Work:

Is Gender Relevant?

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encourages the analyst to look beneath the surface of the discourse strategies used in workplace interactions to identify systemic reasons for participants' use of particular strategies in particular contexts. In what follows I first identify some overt and explicit ways in which power is routinely instantiated in everyday workplace interaction, and then I consider in some detail the relevance of gender to an analysis of less overt ways of constructing power at work.

**Systemic power**

The definition of 'power' adopted in this chapter is post-structural. Rather than defining power in traditional terms as the ability of one person to influence the behaviour of another (for example, Dahl 1957; French and Raven 1959; Brown and Gilman 1960; Galbraith 1983: 2; Brown and Levinson 1987: 77), power is treated as 'a systemic characteristic' (Fletcher 1999: 16), a transformative and non-static feature of interaction (Wodak 1996; 1999). In the discussion below I attempt to uncover discursive evidence for the covert, systemic exercise of power, by identifying some of the unobtrusive, 'naturalized' conversational strategies through which power (and gender) relations are constructed and reinforced in everyday, unremarkable, workplace interactions (cf. Fairclough 1989; 1992).

Systemic power typically goes unquestioned because it is firmly based in conventional wisdom; its incontestable status is simply one of the taken-for-granted, self-evident truths or background assumptions of our everyday talk in which it is constantly instantiated. As Fletcher (1999: 17) says: 'The locus of power... is... systems of shared meaning that reinforce mainstream ideas and silence alternatives.' CDA provides a framework to explore ways in which systemic power is constructed and reinforced in interaction, to identify how the dominant group determines meaning and, more specifically, to describe the processes by which the more powerful person in an interaction typically gets to define the purpose or significance of the interaction and influences the direction in which it develops.

It is also worth paying attention, however, to what is achieved by less powerful participants in an interaction in responding to the subtle and not-so-subtle exercise of systemic power by superiors. Tannen (1987: 5) points out that the notion of power 'is always metaphoric when applied to interaction and discourse'. She highlights the variety of ways in which power may be manifested, and the fact that in any particular interaction different participants may have different kinds of power which they exercise in different ways. In other words, she suggests that it is impossible to identify the power in a situation. Rather, power is dynamically constructed and exercised, both implicitly and explicitly, in different aspects of a specific interaction; different participants manifest power in diverse ways as they construct their own identities and roles in response to the behaviour of others. Davis (1988: 99) similarly argues that power relations 'are always and everywhere contextual... Power, along with structures of domination, is implicated in concrete situated social practice.' In sum, while it is sometimes overtly manifested in the workplace, power may also be constructed in more subtle and complex ways. In the analysis below, I draw on research undertaken by the Wellington Language in the Workplace Project (LWP) team to illustrate first the range and complexity of the ways in which power gets done in different workplace contexts, and then the relevance of gender in the construction of workplace power relations.¹

**Doing power at work**

**Directives**

Although the main focus of this chapter is the more subtle systemic ways in which power and gender are constructed in workplace interaction, it is useful to acknowledge that explicit and overt manifestations of these social relations also play an important part in legitimating institutional authority structures. In all the workplaces in which we recorded, managers exercised their authority quite overtly, and even 'bald on record' (Brown and Levinson 1987: 60) on occasion. The form of directives, for instance, included unmodified imperatives, (check that out, ring them today, make sure that's booked, follow that up), as well as equally explicit 'need' and 'must' statements, such as I need these by ten, I need to see that file, you need to get that to me soon, and these letters must go today. Such forms can be regarded as very overt manifestations of authority; they did not, for instance, tend to occur 'upwards' from a subordinate to a superior, unless the participants knew each other very well. This caveat, however, signals the importance of attending to contextual factors in interpreting the social meaning of workplace language. As has been often noted (Brown and Gilman 1960; Holmes 1992; Tannen 1994a), the linguistic forms which express power are often identical to those which reflect solidarity or intimacy. Thus imperative forms were also frequent between workplace colleagues who were status equals. Nevertheless, in unequal relationships, explicit directives addressed
downwards are undoubtedly the most overt means by which power and authority are manifested. More importantly, however, our analyses indicated that a wider range of utterances produced by a manager to a subordinate in a transactional context could carry directive force (Vine 2001; Holmes et al. 2003). Analysing classroom language, Sinclair and Coulthard (1975: 32ff.) suggested that pupils tend to scan teachers' utterances for potential directive force. In the same way, in contexts where the relative organizational responsibilities of the participants are clear, managers can issue directives using very implicit forms, confident that their utterances will be interpreted as indications of what is to happen. So suggestions and hints (for example, you might like to find that file, what we need to do is send a confirmation note, it would be useful to have the timetable) were unambiguously identified by the managers' administrative assistants as instructions to be followed, and even forms which to an outsider appeared very implicit and vague elicited responses which indicated they were perfectly clear in context.

EXCERPT 2

Context: regular weekly meeting of a project team in a commercial organization

1. Clara: Okay well maybe start without Seth...he can come in and take the minutes from here...
2. Clara: Okay well without starting with "between your..."
3. Clara: I think we're only discussing who will take the minutes...from that previous meeting which he didn't realise he was assigned at the start of the document...

EXCERPT 3

Context: regular weekly meeting of a project team in a commercial organization

1. Sandy in the chair. Sandy: okay well we might just start without Seth...he can come in and take the minutes from the previous meeting which he didn't realise he was assigned at the start of the document...
1 Sandy: okay
[someone stops speaking to their neighbour]
2 what I want to do first was to run through the issues register
3 um just going through some of the dates that have already occurred
4 [drawls]: um: we've got number [clears throat] four
5 which was thirty-first of December last year

Making explicit in this way what they expect to cover, and in what order, is one strategy available to participants for asserting control of the meeting or ‘doing power’. Although in principle any participant can assert authority in this way, it is generally the formally or informally agreed ‘chair’ of the meeting who does so, as illustrated in Excerpts 2 and 3. In the organizations we studied, the person with most authority was usually the person who chaired the meeting, and taking control of the agenda was just one strategy in the on-going construction of their power and authority. In smaller, less formal meetings, the chair used strategies such as the following to achieve the same end:

- *what I'd like to do is…*
- *I've got a couple of things…*
- *I just wanted to finish off where we got to yesterday*
- *…and that's what this meeting is about.*

Our data also illustrates a range of related strategies for maintaining control and doing power in meetings. These include ratifying topics or alternatively labelling a discussion as a digression, bringing the meeting ‘to order’ or indicating that a digression has proceeded long enough, summarizing, and thus imposing one’s understanding of what has been agreed or decided, and indicating when the meeting should end (see Holmes, Stubbe and Vine 1999; Holmes and Stubbe 2003a).

Interesting insights into these manifestations of power occurred when there was a conflict between two different ‘authorities’ in a meeting. So, for instance, the fact that the agenda was sometimes a contested site indicates the relevance of control of the meeting agenda as one means of constructing power. In one organization, for example, there was an on-going ‘tussle’ between the designated chair (Barry), and the person assigned to take the minutes (Callum). The meeting was a relatively high-level gathering of (male) experts, each of whom was a manager in another section, and hence accustomed to running his own meetings. Excerpt 4 illustrates Callum’s take-over of the agenda after Barry’s opening statement.

EXCERPT 4

**Context**: regular weekly meeting of project team in a commercial organization. Barry is in the Chair. Callum is the minute taker.
1 Barry: okay
2 Callum: okay=
3 Barry: =we're going to do a focus session and=
4 Callum: =yeah we're um it's a focus session this week
5 so we haven't got any formal minutes to go through er
6 the subjects on the [drawls]: agenda: data release d w
7 release five progress
8 d w release bat and training um progress update on
9 the s-s-1a
10 and progress update on p g m two point one
11 plus any other matters that er might need to be discussed
10 (3) I've got some handouts [clears throat] (5)
11 Barry: thank you

Callum effectively takes over the opening of the meeting, identifying the topics on the agenda, and indicating he has material to discuss (line 10), until Barry re-asserts his authority first by leaving a marked five-second pause as Callum finishes (line 10), and then following up with the formal phrase ‘thank you’ (line 11).

As mentioned above, the most senior person usually chaired regular meetings of their section or team. In some workplaces, however, there was a practice of rotating the chair or, on particular occasions, a project team leader or deputy might chair a meeting. In such cases, conflicts of authority sometimes arose between the apparent authority of the chair of the meeting, and the institutional authority of the manager. The resolution of such an impasse indicated in every case the pervasive and ultimate authority of the most senior person in the organizational hierarchy. In our large database comprising more than 500 interactions, the temporary authority of the chair never prevailed on any issue of importance over that of a more senior person. Typically, in such cases, the most senior manager needed to merely indicate, sometimes very subtly, that he or she was unhappy with a decision, or with the direction the discussion was taking. Excerpt 5 provides an example: Dudley, a senior manager, is attending the meeting, and he
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Indicates that he is not happy with the suggestion made by Barry who is chairing the meeting.

EXCERPT 5

Context: regular meeting of project team in a commercial organization.

Barry is in the Chair. Dudley is the most senior person present.

IBarry: so/or so/a/f it to fat the tail end of that

2 Callum should start to kick into that those discussions

interms of// +

3 Dudley:/[inhales]

4 Barry:/[inhales] how/ Imean//()

5 Dudley:/yeah I[exhales]

6 Barry:' how to plug Callum in Call um hasnt been really involved

7 in this at all// um

8 Dudley: mo and I guess my concern is how does this thing get started

9 because I think its all very well to talk about saying

10 okay we need the document...

The project team is planning the steps in the next phase of their project. Barry suggests that when they reach a particular stage, Callum, another member of the project team, should be allocated the task of scoping the project. At this point, Dudley, who rarely contributes explicitly to the team’s discussions, simply draws in his breath (line 3). Barry responds by first re-orienting his comments specifically to Dudley is that how you mean (line 4), and then providing a rationale for his suggestion: namely, it is time Callum got involved in the project (lines 6—7). Dudley then proceeds to explain why he thinks they have not reached an appropriate point to involve Callum. Dudley’s speech is recorded in the following excerpt.

EXCERPT 6

Context: meeting between a senior manager and a policy analyst in

Tom’s[/Torn’s] office.

ILinda: yeah urn yeah I want to talk to you about um oh it’s a personal issue

2 urn well I the decision to make urn no I think

3 Jared acting manager

4 while I/Joseph is away

5 Tom:/mm

6 mm
6 Linda: and I wanted to get some
7 phone rings well I've been overlooked quite a few times
8 I wanted to find out specifically how I could do
9 Tom: / (mm) \ 
10 Linda: to help myself be considered next time=
11 Tom: /(mm)\ 
12 Linda: that's okay ...... [Tom takes phone call]
13 Linda: (well) I just want to talk to you about it
14 Linda: (well) I just want to talk to you about it
15 and I suppose [swallows] [tut] I just want to get
16 On what I could do to actually be considered favourably
next time

In lines 1–3 Linda states that her reason for seeing Tom is a personal issue, namely the decision to make someone other than her acting manager. At this point Tom could reasonably be expected to respond to Linda's statement as a complaint. He responds minimally, however, and Linda is thus forced to continue. Interestingly, the way she elaborates her complaint results in a much less uncomfortable position for Tom. She reframes her reason for asking to see Tom as an opportunity to seek his advice (lines 8, 10) rather than to make a complaint, and the interview continues and develops from this point predominantly within this revised framework.

In considering why Linda retreats from her objective of making a complaint and seeking redress to a much more systemically 'acceptable' goal of seeking advice, it seems reasonable to consider the power difference between her and Tom, and in particular to pay attention to some of the more subtle ways in which it is manifested. Consider first the fact that the meeting takes place in Tom's office, a space he 'owns'. This has a number of consequences for the structure of the discourse, including the way that Tom deals with the interruption of the telephone ringing. As the superior in this interaction Tom can choose whether to accept or to ignore the interruption of the phone. By comparison, if the interaction had taken place in Linda's office, one would not expect her to accept such an interruption to her interaction with Tom. Instead of leaving the phone to ring, Tom interrupts Linda's utterance with a (rhetorical) request for permission to answer the phone, as he lifts the receiver can I just grab th- just grab that phone (line 11). In other words, Tom has the power to halt the conversation in which he is engaged with Linda in order to attend to another addressee, while she has no right to act in this way, or to object to this marginalization and temporary demotion of her status as his addressee. One consequence of the interruption is that Linda is forced to repeat her reason for requesting the interview (lines 14–16). Her initial utterance (lines 1–3) provided a number of indications, in the form of hesitations and hedges (um, well), that she found the situation stressful and difficult; the demand for a repetition thus puts her at a further disadvantage.

Throughout the interview that follows, Tom 'does power' by drawing on the taken-for-granted assumptions about the way things operate in this organization. He repeatedly asserts his (status quo institutional) perspective of what has occurred as the definitive account, refuting Linda's argument that she in particular has been discriminated against.

EXCERPT 7

1 Tom: yeah I don't think it's a it's a question of er favourability
2 I mean it was a question more practicalities more than
3 anything else
4 um I was in urgent need of someone to fill in
5 and Jared had done that in the past already

Tom supports this assertion by arguing that appointing Jared as acting manager provided the simplest, safest and most efficient solution, and one which followed a precedent. Excerpt 8 illustrates Tom's repetition of this assertion at several points throughout the interview.

EXCERPT 8

1 Tom: er so from my point of view it was simply logistics
2 and what was practically easy that would create the least
3 amount of hassles
4 at that point in time......
5 Tom: and it was as simple as that
6 so it wasn't a judgement call on were you better or he w- he better
7 i- it was simply I saw precedents [drawls]:
8 and: that was the safest course of action in the short
9 time I had....
10 Tom: it was simply going on what was the safest ground
11 in respect of what the m- policy manager had done in
12 the past....
13 Tom: in lieu of a decision I'll take probably the last decision
14 that was made
15 I'm more prone to take the least path of resistance
Tom emphasizes the point that Linda should follow established procedures. 

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**Excerpt 8**

Tom: the issue [drawls]: probably: one that you could address directly with Joseph...

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**Excerpt 10**

Tom: there would be very little chance of me crossing paths with the policy manager... unless I thought it absolutely necessary to do that... and it's not like I have to wait weeks or months for a response. 

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**Excerpt 11**

Tom: that's really what it boils down to...
systemic understandings of the way power operates institutionally in order to manage the interview with Linda in a way that ensures she does not disrupt the organizational status quo.

Interaction 2

My second example illustrates (more briefly) similar processes at work in a different public service organization, one which at the time we undertook our research could be described as having a rather different, much more democratic and egalitarian workplace culture (Holmes and Marra 2002a; Holmes and Stubbe 2003b). Nevertheless, in the following encounter between a manager and a subordinate, the manager's discourse clearly emphasizes the power differential, and underlines the institutional rules and requirements of the organization in which they both work.

Kerry, a relatively junior staff member, is seeking approval from Ruth, a manager, to attend a conference on full pay, although she is about to leave the organization. Excerpt 12 illustrates the marked contrast between the manager's terse, succinct questions and Kerry's verbose responses.

**EXCERPT 12**

**Context:** meeting between a senior manager and a junior policy analyst in the senior manager's office

1 Ruth: when do you finish here
2 Kerry: well I'm not sure- [voc] well my contract goes till April
3 but [department name] rung me today and they’re trying to negotiate
4 sort of me to go over there and Jamie to come over here
5 and just do a swap while we change over to train each other
6 Ruth: yeah……
7 Kerry: and then + she said and then
8 because she said they were trying to set it up with my manager themselves
9 and then I'd (stay) over here to do- train Jamie type thing in what I do so
10 yeah and (I) imagine it’d be (in the) week after that so two
11 Ruth: okay so you you haven’t got that much longer here
12 Kerry: no……
13 Ruth: okay so you need to know today

Although Kerry talks most, Ruth is clearly in control of the discourse. Through her terse questions (lines 1, 11, 13) she constructs herself as the authority to whom Kerry must provide a satisfactory account of what she is proposing. Ruth succeeds in eliciting from Kerry an admission that she is leaving within a couple of weeks. Thus she has little right to expect the organization to pay her while she attends a conference from which the organization will receive no benefit. Indeed, as Excerpt 13 illustrates, Ruth confronts Kerry very directly with the nub of the issue which Kerry has devoted considerable effort to avoiding:

**EXCERPT 13**

1 Ruth: okay would you- would you still go
2 if [this department] says you can go but we won’t pay you
3 Kerry: no

Ruth then makes it very clear to Kerry that proper procedures must be followed. She indicates that she will not make a decision before considering what Kerry’s immediate manager (who is away) would want, and before ensuring that Kerry’s absence will not inconvenience any projects in which she is involved.

**EXCERPT 14**

1 Ruth: I need to think about what Leila might think ()
2 er how will it impact on the work that you're doing
3 and what Leila wanted you to have completed by the
4 time you finished here

Like Tom, Ruth is here ensuring that Kerry’s appeal is subjected to agreed institutional processes. Drawing on taken-for-granted assumptions about the appropriateness of the institutional rules, Ruth manages the interaction in a way that ensures that Kerry is fully aware by the end of the interview that it is unacceptable to attempt to bypass the organization’s recognized procedures.

* * *

These examples illustrate, then, the ways in which those in positions of power appeal to established institutional processes to give weight to their decisions, taking for granted that their addressees share their assumptions about the incontestable status and correctness of those procedures. Appealing to precedent, to the simplest and most logical institutionalized processes for reaching a decision, to the unchallengeable propriety of taking a superior’s judgement into account, and to the importance of using the ‘proper’ channels: these are all ways in which
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Systemic power is unobtrusively exercised in the discourse of everyday workplace interaction, as eloquently demonstrated by Janet Holmes in her forthcoming work. Gender, in this context, emerges as a significant factor in workplace discourse, influencing the dynamics of power and interaction. The pervasiveness of the 'old boys' network' and its implications for gendered workplace interactions are explored in this excerpt from Holmes' work.

EXCERPT 15

Context: Regular meeting of mixed gender group of 13 people in government department. Connie is the executive officer. The remaining participants are all Senior Policy Analysts. The Manager (also the Chair) does not contribute to this exchange which is a digression interrupting Connie who is reporting on a meeting with the Minister.

1 Jake: he's also very popular locally as well 'cause he actually looks after his workforce he's kept them up. 2 Stu: oh right 3 Janet: mm 4 Jake: he's as sort of a handshake and I trust you type guy so you know, when you've got another good bloke talking to another good bloke then you've got a good thing going on.

In this excerpt, the men and women (who are all of similar professional status) appear at first to be in agreement, as reflected in the development of collaboratively shared floor between Jake and Stu (lines 1-9) and Connie (line 10). Connie's contribution 'agoodchap' is practically simultaneous with Stu's synonymous 'agoodguy' (line 11) and Jake's 'bloody good bloke' (line 12). This is maximally cohesive, collaborative and supportive discourse, with all three players on the same wavelength, supporting each other's contributions and reinforcing the shared understanding of the situation.

However, gender gradually emerges as an alternative and contentious issue as the men develop the notion of the pervasiveness and power of the old boys' network (lines 14-24). The issue of gender becomes an increasingly salient concern in the workplace discourse, and its implications for power dynamics are explored in more depth in Holmes' forthcoming work.
gradually foregrounded as Jake expands the concept of a good bloke (lines 15, 18–20), and Stu’s comment they didn’t go to the same school (line 22) provides an implicit reference to the influence of the old boys’ network, a reference which Jake picks up in an overlapping turn us good blokes have gotta stick together (line 23), an explicitly gendered development of Stu’s humorous comment. The women protest and contest the men’s scenario with comments such as oh right, and sceptical noises, and Wendy contributes a challenging and sarcastic echo bloody good bloke (line 25). By this stage, gender is very explicitly the focus of the discussion and Jeff joins in (line 27) with a taunt to the women, bet he doesn’t employ many women workers, to which Connie responds challengingly, I probably wouldn’t want the job either (line 30). In the course of this exchange, then, the women and men explicitly articulate rather different views about at least some of the characteristics of a good bloke.

Hoppe and Le Baron (1998: 61) comment that noticing (paying discursive attention to something), may bring gendered issues to focused attention, allowing gender to ‘creep into our talk, rather than to be framed as one speaker’s explicit rhetorical project’ (1998: 73). This is exactly what occurs here: gender gradually becomes the explicit focus of attention as the women’s contributions to the discourse indicate their unwillingness to accept the values implicit in the picture of how the business world works, as constructed largely by the men at the meeting. The systemic nature of men’s more powerful position in the workplace is emphasized and underlined in this exchange which focuses on the strategies men use to maintain economic power, and the dependence of women on powerful men to provide them with opportunities for employment.

Such examples illustrate how sexist attitudes often lie hidden beneath an egalitarian veneer, and in certain circumstances they may surface in workplace interaction. Moreover, the framing of such interactions as humorous banter subtly ‘legitimizes’ such attitudes, and serves to reinforce underlying gendered assumptions, such as the assumptions in excerpt 15 that the old boys’ network is a ‘good thing’, and that women are dependent on men for at least some aspects of their success and progress in the workplace. Participants are clearly aware of such gendered norms as relevant background to interpreting what is going on. Furthermore, the ways in which these norms are exploited reflects the ideology of the wider society, and pervasive assumptions about the position of women in the workforce.

Covertly gendered discourse

In this final section, I use a CDA framework to examine the issue of how gender may contribute to the systemic manifestation of power in the workplace; more specifically, I discuss how gender plays a part in the taken-for-granted assumptions about the way power relations are constructed in workplace interaction. My starting point, as mentioned above, is the assumption that gender is potentially relevant in any and every social interaction. Sometimes it is foregrounded, as in Excerpt 15, but more often it is simply assumed background information which influences the ways people behave in a variety of subtle and not-so-subtle ways.

The ‘masculine’ discourse patterns of powerful males in workplace interactions have been well documented, as have the supportive, facilitative and positively polite discourse strategies typically associated with women in the workplace (for example, Tannen 1994b; Holmes 1995; Aries 1996; Coates 1996). These gendered discourse patterns typically emphasize the power of the male, and underline the supportive role of the female in workplace interaction. The weight of these well-established and widely documented patterns thus operates in the background of any specific workplace interaction, underlining its normality or, less often, indicating its abnormality. There is no neutral discourse. Cameron’s (1994) observation on sexist language is no less true of sex-stereotyped discourse behaviours: ‘every alternative is politically loaded, because the meaning of each is now defined by contrast with all other possibilities’ (1994: 26).

Hence the way people behave in specific interactions can be regarded as reinforcing the status quo, or alternatively as resisting and challenging the norms. In practice, as any detailed discourse analysis reveals, the reality of workplace interaction is much more complex. People act in ways that sometimes reinforce and sometimes contest the gender norms for appropriate workplace behaviour, and they speak in ways which sometimes conform to gender stereotypes, and sometimes do not.

In one stereotypically ‘feminine’ workplace, for example, where the mainly female employees were committed to participatory interactional practices, and to creating a professional environment that was comfortable for women to work in, we found many examples of management strategies which conformed to the stereotype of female behaviour. The managers recorded in this workplace were powerful women who consistently adopted management strategies which focused on facilitating discussion and reaching consensus, and who achieved their goals using discourse strategies which typically paid careful attention to the face
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needsoftheiraddressees (Holmes 2000; Vine 2001; Holmes and Stubbe 2003b). As illustrated in the first section, they also, of course, used language which took account of the rights and obligations of the participants, and the specific features of the context in which they were operating. So, for example, as mentioned above, they assumed their administrative assistants would accurately interpret their most minimal hint as a directive, when the implied task was relevant to their duties. In other words, these powerful women had developed ways of managing workplace interaction which successfully integrated the demands of their institutional positions with others' expectations of the ways in which women should behave when occupying powerful positions with others' expectations of the ways in which women should behave when occupying powerful positions.

More interesting, in an examination of the interaction of gender and power are the ways in which women in less 'feminine' workplaces operate. Here a CDA approach highlights the operation of gender 'in disguise', the extent to which gendered background assumptions influence interaction in unacknowledged and unrecognized ways. We find interesting and thought-provoking evidence, in other words, that gender sometimes 'leaks' into workplace interaction, and when this happens, it can provide interesting insights into the conflicts women experience when operating in powerful organizational roles, and the strategies they develop to handle such conflicts.

I discuss just two specific examples here. The first is taken from a commercial workplace where Claris is a highly respected manager, widely acknowledged as extremely competent. Indeed, her recorded interactions provide extensive evidence that she is self-confident and efficient, consistently adopting very effective strategies for achieving workplace objectives. Claris participates in social talk at appropriate points, such as the margins and boundaries of meetings, but she runs meetings in ways that challenge traditional gender stereotypes: she is direct and often very succinct, for example, and she does not tolerate long digressions from the agenda (see Marra and Holmes 2004; Holmes and Stubbe 2003b).

The following excerpt from one of Claris's regular team meetings illustrates some of these points, as it is provided in an expanded form: 

EXCERPT 16

Context: regular weekly meeting of project team in white-collar organization.

1 Harry: Look’s like there’s been actually a request for screen dumps.
2 I know it was outside of the scope
3 but people (will be) pretty worried about it
4 maybe if you =
5 Rob: we can quickly show you that
6 Clara: no screen dumps
7 Matt: we -
8 Clara: no screen dumps
9 Rob: ()
10 Peg: [sarcastically] thank you Clara
11 Clara: no // screen dumps
12 Matt: [we know we know you didn't want them]
13 and we understand // we've
14 Clara: [using a 'robotic' voice] that does not // meet the criteria
15 [several reasons provided why screen dumps should be allowed]
16 Clara: thanks for looking at that though
17 Sandy: so that's a clear 'no'
18 Clara: it's a no arroyal 'no'
19 Peg: do people feel disempowered by that decision?
20 Claris: [sarcastically] no
21 Clara: [laughs]

In the meeting from which the excerpt is taken, Claris's project team is discussing how best to provide instructions to other members of their organization about a specialized computer process. As Harry outlines (lines 1—3), the team has received requests to allow people to print from the computer screen (that is, to 'screen dump'). In response to Harry's implicit request to permit these screen dumps, which have been formally prohibited, Claris indicates clearly that she opposes this proposal, with a very explicit prohibition: no screen dumps (line 6). Some members of the team are unhappy with her decision, and they proceed to argue with her, providing reasons why screen dumps should be permitted. Claris overrules their opposition by the simple strategy of repeating her decision: no screen dumps (lines 8, 11), and then stating baldly and in a robot-like voice that does not meet the criteria. Disregarding conventionally polite (and stereotypically 'feminine') ways of disagreeing with one's colleagues, Claris is here 'doing power' very explicitly, using a stereotypically 'masculine' strategy of simply stating what is to happen.

There is however an important qualification to this observation. While Claris is clear about her decision—and she shows no sign of wavering despite considerable pressure and extensive argument from team members—she is somewhat pressed and expansive in her pursuit of a win. Despite her confident delivery, there is some anxiety that she does not completely understand the process of the computer screen dumps. This anxiety is reflected in her questioning of how the dumps are to be handled and the implications of the decision. It is this concern that drives her decision-making process, and the way she communicates her decision is a key part of this. Claris is not simply making a decision; she is ensuring that it is understood and accepted by her team. This approach is necessary in a workplace context where powerful women are expected to be confident and efficient. By prioritizing clarity and directness, Claris is able to manage workplace interaction effectively, and her decision-making process is a key part of this.
self-conscious about the uncompromising form in which she has conveyed it. Moreover, other team members, including Sandy, Clara's deputy manager, also provide evidence that, in the interests of preserving good working relations, they regard this bald prohibition as requiring attenuation. In both cases the evidence takes the form of a humorous remark, which is clearly intended to reduce the sting of the direct confrontation. Peggy's sarcastic thank you Clara (line 10) provides an initial tension-breaker. After listening to their arguments, Clara then responds with a more conventionally 'feminine' and polite dismissal of their suggestions thanks for looking at that though (line 15). Sandy's suggestion that Clara may be wavering so that's a clear well maybe no (line 16) is humorously internally contradictory. It leads Clara to restate her position quite explicitly, it's a no (line 17), but again Sandy defuses the tension with a humorous hyperbolic comment, it's a no a royal no (line 18), an echoic allusion to an earlier humorous episode in which Clara's high status and dignified manner were sent up by a reference to her as Queen Clara. The most convincing evidence for the suggestion that Clara is aware that she has stretched the gender boundaries with her confrontational veto is her own humorous comment, did people feel disempowered by that decision (line 19). By drawing explicit attention to the fact that she has acted in an authoritarian way, Clara implicitly acknowledges she has transgressed the norms, and I would argue that it is gender norms that are at issue here, rather than any others, since her veto is entirely consistent with acceptable strategies for doing power in this hierarchical commercial organization. The reason for Clara's self-consciousness, then, and perhaps also her team's discomfort, is their awareness at some level that such an extremely explicit and direct veto is inappropriately unfeminine (or, conversely, too explicitly masculine) in discourse style.

We identified this pattern repeatedly throughout our dataset. Powerful women would 'do power' authoritatively, issue orders peremptorily, summarize action points succinctly, and then follow up with a humorous comment or anecdote, sometimes even a self-deprecating remark, thus attenuating the effect of their 'masculine' behaviour (see Holmes 2000; Holmes, Marra and Burns 2001; Holmes and Stubbe 2003b for further examples). It seems, then, that while it is officially acceptable for women to 'do power' explicitly in the workplace, there is an underlying pressure to counter or neutralize the effects of the authoritative and 'masculine' strategies entailed in doing so with more 'feminine', supportive and collegial or self-deprecating behaviours. This is interesting evidence that societal assumptions about women's behaviour continue to operate and impose restrictions and constraints, even when women have apparently broken through the glass ceiling.

A second brief and again relatively inexplicit example of gender creeping in to workplace interaction involved a group of men teasing one of their group members for engaging in voluntary 'communicative' behaviour.

**EXCERPT 17**

**Context:** six men in regular meeting of a project team in a large commercial organization. Callum's colleagues pretend to be horrified that he has actually talked face-to-face with clients.

1  Barry: but we can we can kill this//particular=
2  Marco: /well yep \ 
3  Barry: =action\ point
4  Marco: you can kill this particular action point
5  Barry: and you //guys\ 
6  Callum: /are\ you sure (3) I took the opportunity
7  of talking with some of the users
8  Barry: what again? [laughs]/[laughs]\ 
9  Marco: /not again what are you doing talking to them\ 
10  Barry: [laughs] go on //Callum come on\
11  XM: /[laughs]\ 

Using stereotypically masculine language, Barry and Marco suggest (line 1) that a particular proposed action be killed: that is, dropped. Callum protests, pointing out that the proposed action emerged from his discussions with users. Barry and Marco then proceed to derisively mock Callum, ridiculing the notion that he should actually 'talk' – that is, verbally communicate face-to-face – with clients. The underlying (only slightly facetious) assumption is that 'real men' (and especially computer experts) do not ever actually talk face-to-face with clients. Talking to clients is regarded as a suitable job for women in this organization. Indeed, talking seems to be generally regarded as relatively 'feminine' behaviour, especially within the culture of this information technology project team where the most senior participant in the team meetings contributes the least talk. Hence the team imply that Callum has behaved in an unmasculine way. This is a paradigmatic example of stereotypically masculine workplace humour (Holmes forthcoming). It is contestive in its discourse construction, involving a competitive floor, and its content reinforces traditional stereotypes of the way men interact in the workplace. In other words, this exchange underlines the message
that communicating with people, relating to people as individuals, is an unacceptable and implicitly unmasculine way to behave in this workplace.

Finally, I return to the example of Tom and Linda. Ethnographic information collected at the time of the recording indicate that Linda and some of her female colleagues interpret the fact that she was passed over for the position of acting manager as yet another example of gender discrimination within their organization, but there is no overt reference to gender in the interaction itself. Tom's placatory response to Linda's initial 'complaint' leads to a discussion of ways in which she can ensure that she is not passed over again, but her gender is never explicitly referred to. Nevertheless, in my view gender is relevant in understanding 'what is going on' in this interaction.

The discussion above provides evidence of the way Tom 'does power' through his use of a range of repressive discourse strategies; these strategies are stereotypically associated with masculine ways of interacting. However, there is also evidence in this interaction that Tom pays attention to Linda's facial needs, and particularly her positive facial needs (see Vine's analysis in Stubbe eta!., 2000). This strategy, more stereotypically associated with 'feminine' ways of interacting, and while overall Linda is conventionally deferent, using a range of hedging devices to avoid challenging Tom too boldly, she nevertheless manages, as Excerpt 18 illustrates, to contest his account of the procedures which led to her being passed over. Indeed, she finally succeeds in extracting a commitment that she will be favourably considered next time (lines 11–13).

**EXCERPT 18**

1 Tom: so... I mean... next time it happens... I'll do what?
2 Linda: well obviously he did communicate it to you (yeah)
3 Tom: and I mean you're absolutely right, that's a... (yeah)
4 Linda: he didn't articulate that
5 Tom: and he came in on Friday and said 'well senior managers take acting managers'
6 Linda: I was obviously he didn't communicate it to you
7 Tom: I mean I didn't make any balance you know, I think what you're raising is quite valid
8 Linda: okay then I mean I understand that
9 Tom: I think if you do consider me as (well)
10 Linda: all right then oh good
11 Tom: okay? (yeah)
12 Linda: okay thanks
13 Tom: okay

This interaction illustrates a number of the points developed in this chapter. Tom draws on a range of strategies used by men in attempting to assert power, as well as a range of more 'feminine' strategies aimed at attending to Linda's facial needs and negotiating an acceptable outcome. Linda similarly behaves both in ways that are stereotypically 'feminine', expressing deference and reframing her complaint as much more acceptable to the existing discourse, and in more 'masculine' ways by contesting Tom's account of how her situation arose.

In this interaction, then, although gender is never explicitly referred to, I argue that it is always relevant; it operates in the background, constraining the behaviour of each participant, but arguably restricting Linda's options more strongly than Tom's. In other words, gender acts as a framework which implicitly legitimates Tom's assertive behavior, the overt strategies he uses for doing power, while also providing a context for interpreting his more 'negotiative, other-oriented' behavior.
endorse Linda’s deferent behaviour as ‘proper’ and appropriate in a contest where she is interacting with a superior, and frame her less feminine challenging strategies as much less appropriate. A CDA approach, however, usefully identifies the predominantly ‘repressive’ nature of Tom’s discourse as it enacts and reinforces the organizational status quo, while it also highlights the contestive, challenging components of Linda’s contribution to the discussion.7

Conclusion

The examples discussed in this chapter suggest that gender issues and gender stereotypes are often just below the surface in social interaction, making an unacknowledged contribution to the ways in which it is considered appropriate for men and particularly women to behave within a particular workplace culture. However, powerful women are steadily chipping away at the parameters of what is considered acceptable behaviour from a woman in the workplace. As the earlier sections of this chapter illustrated, many of the women managers we recorded operated for much of the time in ways that would not distinguish them from their male colleagues. Every so often, however, they would hit the gender barrier, adopting a strategy or speaking in a way that pushed and tested the boundaries of what was considered appropriately gendered behaviour in their place of work. At such points, they or others often reacted in ways that signalled awareness of these boundaries. In other words, it seems that there comes a point at which a woman who does power too overtly, who behaves in an extremely stereotypically ‘masculine’ way, is perceived as too obviously contesting the status quo. Such salient points are significant evidence that gender is always there in the background, often in disguise, ready to emerge to reinstate and reinforce the limits of acceptable behaviour for women at work.

Men, I suggest, do not operate under such restrictive social constraints. In several of the workplaces in which we recorded, males operated in traditionally ‘feminine’ ways without any evidence that their behaviour was perceived as out-of-line. Their willingness to negotiate and discuss decisions, to engage in small talk and gossip and to give instructions in ways which paid attention to their addressee’s face needs were accepted as appropriate in the workplace cultures and communities of practice in which they operated. Excerpt 17 is thus an interesting indication that there remain workplaces (or, perhaps more accurately, sections in some workplaces) where an overtly ‘masculine’ culture prevails, and where face-to-face communication skills, for example, are the focus of derision and perceived as a threat to the dominant workplace ethos.

In conclusion, this chapter has provided some evidence that a CDA approach can make a useful contribution to the analysis of the construction of power relations at work. The analysis has also demonstrated that gender is often, if not always, covertly relevant as an important systemic characteristic, a background framing construct, unobtrusively influencing people’s unconscious interpretation of what is considered appropriate in workplace interaction. Though people orient to power and gender differently in different workplace settings, and in different workplace cultures and communities of practice, the analyses we have undertaken suggest that both must be attended to in order to fully understand ‘what is going on’ in workplace interaction.

Appendix: transcription conventions

[laughs] : Paralinguistic features in square brackets, colons indicate start/finish
+ : Pause of up to one second
(3) : Pause of specified number of seconds..../....\... : Simultaneous speech
/\/\/\/\/\... : Simultaneous speech
(hello) : Transcriber’s best guess at an unclear utterance
? : Rising or question intonation
- : Incomplete or cut-off utterance
...... : Section of transcript omitted
=then : Latching of speech between speakers or between lines for same speaker
XM/XF : Unidentified Male/Female
[editorial] : editorial comments italicized in square brackets
[voc] : untranscribable noises

Acknowledgements

I thank Meredith Marra and Michelle Lazar for their useful comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.

Notes

1 The Wellington Language in the Workplace Project team comprises Janet Holmes, Maria Stubbe, Bernadette Vine, Meredith Marra, Deborah Jones, and
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and drawn from a number of research settings and contexts worldwide. In this chapter, we focus on a single workplace setting, the New Zealand public sector, where we have been conducting research for several years. The data we present here are drawn from a range of different workplaces within the public sector, including government agencies, health care facilities, and educational institutions. The research has been funded by the New Zealand Foundation for Research, Science, and Technology. We would like to express our appreciation to our funders and to the participants in the workplaces where we have conducted the research.

All names are pseudonyms. The total LWP database includes material from New Zealanders of diverse ethnicities, but the material used in this chapter involves only representatives of the two largest ethnic groups, namely Pakeha (European) and Maori New Zealanders. Ethnicity is not a focus of analysis in this chapter.

This example is discussed in more detail in the contribution by Marra and Stubbe (2003a, ch. 4). See Edley and Wetherell (1997); Kitzinger (2000); Stokoe (1997; 1998; 2000); Holmes and Marra (forthcoming); Holmes, Marra, and Stubbe (2000) for a fuller analysis of the whole interaction in CDA terms.

References


Holmes, Janet and Stubbe, Maria (2003b) "Feminine" workplaces: stereotype and reality' in Janet Holmes and Miriam Meyerhoff (eds), Handbook of Language and Gender. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, pp. 573-599.


