Through a gendered lens? Male and female executives’ representations of one another

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Abstract
Executive leadership is constituted as a predominantly male domain, placing women in an antithetical position to executive power. In theorising this situation, a social constructionist model of gender suggests that in the corporate world, as elsewhere, perceptions of the behaviour of men and women are “automatically filtered through a gendered lens” and reconstituted within a more general discourse on gender difference, tapping into subconscious images of leadership to reinforce a masculinist construction of executive power. Yet today women are increasingly in executive roles. This study explores the relationship between a social constructionist model of gender and executive discourse by drawing on interviews with ten male and ten female New Zealand executives. Given that these executives hold comparable organisational status and power, the study examines whether or not a gendered lens still operates in their representations of one another, and if there are indications of gender and social change in the discourse.

Introduction
Executive leadership is repeatedly constituted as a world dominated by corporate masculinity, a man’s world, which accommodates women as “other” or “silence” (Marshall, 1985; Sinclair, 1994; Maier, 1999; Halford and Leonard, 2001). Leaders, and more specifically executive leaders, have been predominantly men and mainstream management literature has presented the male manager as the norm. Thus despite women’s increased presence and aspirations in management positions, executive leadership “is still often seen to be synonymous with men” (Collinson and Hearn, 2001, p. 145).

In turn, women and management research has been dominated by analyses of women’s “victimization” in relation to executive power. Certainly, statistical analyses of western countries reveal that while the numbers of women entering management positions continues to increase, women remain under-represented in senior executive positions (Davidson and Burke, 2000; Vinnicombe, 2000; Halford and Leonard, 2001). In New Zealand, women now comprise 47 per cent of the working population (Statistics NZ, 2001); yet a 2000 benchmark study of women in management in the top 500 companies by numbers of employees in New Zealand shows that 6.5 per cent of women are in management positions compared with 15 per cent of males, and a pattern of vertical segregation is apparent where women make up 57 per cent of junior, 34 per cent of middle, and 9 per cent of senior management (McGregor, 2002). In the New Zealand public sector, which is bound by equal employment opportunities (EEO) legislation and policies, women make up 56 per cent of the workforce but only 7 per cent are in the management group compared with 13 per cent of men, and women are one-third of the senior managers (State Services Commission, 2002). Similarly, Burns’ (2001) study reveals that just six of the top 200 private sector organizations have a woman CEO.

Yet a survey of three decades of gender research establishes similarities of styles and competencies between male and female managers (Butterfield and Grinnel, 1999). Explanations for women’s under-representation at executive level range from the pipe-line theory to person centered views, which posit:

…women’s lack of training, of line management experience, or else their family responsibilities as the reasons for their lack of progress (Sinclair, 1994).

Such views suggest that women do not have the traits of leadership, that they do not choose to pursue leadership positions, and that even when they are in leadership roles they may be invisible:

…their contribution, because it looks different, may not be registered as leadership (Sinclair, 1998).

A recent New Zealand study of women at all levels of management supports Sinclair’s point that perceptions of executive leadership may form barriers to women’s leadership roles (Olsson, 2000a).

Most “mainstream” leadership research to date has been positivist and quantitative (Bryman, 1996), rather than ideologically focused or interpretive. In the management context, the positivist tradition is based on a “realist”, empiricist epistemology, which posits an unmediated grasp of the empirical world and a representational theory of language and knowledge (Schwandt, 2000). In providing statistical data and quantitative analysis, positivist approaches support the pragmatic and instrumentalist concerns of the business world by delivering the statistical “results” and “objective” findings:
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... demanded by “users” in the community who seek immediate practical payoffs from social science research (Silverman, 2000, p. 824).

Yet Crane (1999) suggests:
There is an urgent need for practicing business researchers to scale the barricades of positivism’s epistemological roadblocks and thereby develop a more pluralistic approach, and hence a better informed understanding (Crane, 1999, p. 246).

We believe that a constructionist approach can complement and add to statistical or qualitative research findings, in this case the statistical evidence of the under-representation of women in executive leadership positions and the research which points to similarities of competencies and styles of women and men in management. While social constructionism “neither affirms nor denies “the world out there” (Schwandt, 2000, p. 198), a general assumption of a constructionist approach is that:
... the world ... is constituted in one way or another as people talk it, write it, and argue it (Schwandt, 2000, p. 198).

Language is the symbolic meaning system through which people constitute both a human “reality” and “knowledge” which are:
... in some sense ideological, political and permeated with values (Schwandt, 2000, p. 198).

Thus, a social constructionist approach shifts the focus of research from empirical data to discourse:
... as the prime site for understanding individuals, social groups and society” (Weatherall, 2002, p. 82).

From a discursive perspective, social constructionism explores how utterances “work” and:
... how utterances work is a matter of understanding social practices and analyzing the rhetorical strategies in play in particular kinds of discourse (Schwandt, 2000, p. 197).

We suggest that a social constructionist approach goes some way to explaining the persistence of attitudes that place women in an antithetical position to executive power.

Social constructionist model of gender

A social constructionist model of gender suggests how perceptions of men and women are “automatically filtered through a gendered lens” and reconstituted within a more general discourse on gender difference itself (Stubbe et al., 2000, p. 237). The model problematises gender as a social construct constituted within language and transacted through the positioning of male and female within discursive practices (Stubbe et al., 2000; McConnell-Ginet, 2000).

Together with language acquisition, humans develop schemata (cognitive structures or frameworks used in the processing of incoming information). These schemata include self-schema, cognitive generalisations about the self, and gender schema, a network of learned associations about male and female (Bem, 1981) acquired through socialisation and constructed through language and discourse (Weatherall, 2002). Gender schema draws on the discursive history and cultural scripts of a society, the narratives of childhood through to adulthood, to function at a subconscious level so that, while gender is constantly being constructed in specific contexts:
... cultural ideas frame and restrain what men and what women should think, feel and do (Alvesson, 2002).

Perception or ways of viewing the world are overlaid by a gendered lens and are constructed in language and discourse, which potentially distort judgements of women and men, without necessarily being recognised:
More often than not, gender schemas [sic.] are conveyed covertly, their tenets often not explicitly recognised even by those who help convey them (McConnell-Ginet, 2000, p. 277).

In pointing to the way cultural scripts, including subconscious archetypes of leadership, contribute to a gendered lens, a social constructionist approach explains the continuing association of men with leadership through a discursive history in which women lack an archetypal profile (Olsson, 2002). Thus Weatherall (2002) points out:
... power can be thought of as part and parcel of language, not as separate from it (Weatherall, 2002, p. 6).

At the same time, Halford and Leonard (2001) suggest that we are going through a period of social revolution in which, increasingly “women, as well as men, hold substantial positions of power” (Halford and Leonard, 2001, p. 5). This is apparent in New Zealand where the influential posts of Governor General, Prime Minister, Chief Justice, Attorney General and CEO of the largest corporation are all held by women, and the first woman vice chancellor of a New Zealand university has recently been appointed. We now see that the economic relationships between men and women are also changing. In a study of women senior executives, it was noted that over half the women in the sample of 30 were the major income earners in their families (Pringle and Olsson, 2002). Dual working or career partnerships are the norm,
and, increasingly, women seek to be financially independent and to pursue life-long careers.

A social constructionist approach recognises “the role of human agency and actions, including the purposive uses of language”, not only in creating and sustaining the gender order, but also in effecting gender and other social change (McConnell-Ginet, 2000, p. 269).

McConnell-Ginet (2000) suggests that: Speaking and having your contributions recognised is part of constructing engagement, of positioning yourself and being positioned by others in ongoing discourse (McConnell-Ginet, 2000, p. 269).

The number of women in top New Zealand jobs with resulting high media profiles is one possible indication of gender being reconstituted in the discourse to effect change. The contours of the gendered lens may be changing.

This paper explores executive discourse by drawing on interviews with 10 male and 10 female senior executives. Our own “gendered lens” as women researchers shapes our interest in the under-representation of women at this executive leadership level. We are also aware of the constructionist research which shows: 

... how language, in a variety of contexts, constructs gender in stereotyped ways that ultimately disadvantage and demean women (Weatherall, 2002, p. 76).

We view both gender and power not as static, but rather as relational and as effects of discourse: 

... created and renegotiated in interpersonal relationships and encouraged and maintained through social structures (Weatherall, 2002, p. 85).

Given that the executives in our study are in positions of comparable status and power, we examine whether or not a gendered lens still operates in these executives’ representations of one another, and if there are indications of gender and social change in the discourse.

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**The study**

Here we bring together material from two studies: interviews with ten male executives in a previous study (Olsson, 2000b; 2002); and interviews with ten female executives, which form part of a larger, ongoing study of women in senior management (Pringle and Olsson, 2002). That wider study involved 30 interviews with public and private sector women. However, as the male executives were all from the private sector, interviews with ten female executives were randomly selected for comparison from among the private sector women. Participants in each study were informed that the research sought to explore senior executives’ self-representations of career identity and these were examined in the aforementioned papers. This current paper focuses primarily on previously unused material from a section of the interviews where executives were asked to comment on possible changes occurring in management.

The sample of New Zealand male executives includes members with the following titles:

- chief executive officer (three);
- director or managing director (three);
- partner (two);
- area manager (one); and
- building development manager (one).

As such they conform to Sinclair’s (1994) categorisation of “executive” as “chief executives and those reporting directly to them” (Sinclair, 1994, p. 181). All are situated in Wellington, the capital city of New Zealand. Similarly, the ten women in this study have the following titles:

- chief executive officer (three);
- partner (two);
- area manager (one);
- general manager (one);
- business unit manager (two); and
- HR manager networks (one).

Seven of the women are located in Wellington and three in Auckland. The male sample is Caucasian and ages ranged from 41 to 60 years. In the female sample, nine are Caucasian, one Maori and overall they are a slightly younger group, aged from 31 to 55 years.

Interviews were conducted one-to-one, taped and subsequently transcribed under an allocated code number to ensure interviewee confidentiality. Names and references to organisations were omitted from the transcripts.

In previous studies of career identity (Olsson, 2000b, 2002; Pringle and Olsson, 2002) we found that men and women constructed parallel paradigms of leadership as archetype and demonstrated both transactional and transformational skills (Olsson, 2002).

However, men constructed executive leadership as a male domain and did not spontaneously refer to women until the subject of women managers was directly introduced to the questions at the end of the interviews. By contrast, while men did not dominate women’s representations, they did form part of women’s career identity, often as mentors and sometimes in terms of difficulties encountered with internal politics and decision-making processes (Pringle and Olsson, 2002). In this paper we...
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Male executives

Operating in a male domain
In so far as women did not feature in male representations of career identities, a gendered lens operated in the construction of the executive world as an unthinkingly male domain. The one exception to this was provided by a chief executive who, when asked how he saw himself as a manager, mentioned that he had identified the need for female staff in setting out a position charter four years previously. At the same time, he suggested this position charter was unusual in the private sector:
We now have four female managers . . . So out of 20 operators if you like, or managers, we have four females and that is about four more than anybody else.

However, the under-representation of women at executive level did not feature as an issue in men’s constructions of desired future directions in management. When asked, “Would you like to see management change in any way?” points discussed included “staff empowerment”, “staff election of the management team”, “flattened management structures” and “strategic vision”. The only desired difference related to management personnel concerned the attitudes of some male executives. For example, an area manager, who felt that regionalism was a problem, advocated changes to some senior management behaviours by drawing on male images of sovereign power:
I think some of the guys could put more into developing themselves personally and developing their skills personally . . . I am one voice amongst a group of other area managers, who only really are comfortable in their own areas and in their own kingdoms where they are kingpin and enjoy being kingpin.

In considering change, then, male executives constructed senior management as a male domain in which, implicitly if not explicitly, women were “absence” or “silence” (Marshall, 1995).

A level playing field
Immediately following the question on future management directions, male executives were asked, “Do you think more women in management would bring about change?”

One recurrent response was to suggest that gender was largely irrelevant to a level playing field where merit is the means to success. This was frequently accompanied with identification of any successful women in the organisation coupled with a downplaying of gender significance:
We don’t go overboard with gender or cultural things here. We accept people as they are.

What Maier (1997) terms the “myth of meritocracy” sets up an apparent contradiction between the claim to encourage women and to make sure that all staff are treated the same. One male executive commented:
I encourage women. We have a woman trainee coming in as a manager, which has been a predominantly male demand. I personally encourage this. I like women involved. They have a different point of view. Quite often I enjoy working with women – we have a lot in our organisation. I really don’t think they should be treated any differently than a male. They have either got the skills, the thinking skills and the personality skills, or they haven’t.

Despite the images of a level playing field, two points echo the person-centred theories often put forward to explain the under-representation of women: the notion of management as a male rather than a female demand; and the implication that women may not have the necessary personality or skills for management (Sinclair, 1994).

Among the men in our sample, a gendered lens operated to sideline women into stereotypically “caring”, “people oriented” roles. While insisting that women did not contribute anything extra to management, one executive commented:
We have only got one woman in our management team, who is very successful. She works in the area of human relations where she possibly has the most staff of anybody. I don’t think that just because a person is a woman, they are going to bring anything extra into management. I don’t have any problems; some of my staff are women.

One chief executive acknowledged the operation of a glass elevator:
. . . the invisible leverage that propels even relatively mediocre men upward in female dominated organisations (McConnell-Ginet, 2000, p. 260).

In claiming to have a women-dominated staff, he pointed not only to the elevation of some mediocre men in the past, but also to the imbalance of two women in five director teams:
They [directors] have to be talented people and many men have got away with it without
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being particularly talented. Our director of XX is a woman. She is super. She is hugely aggressive but she is good at her job. Our director of XXX is a MBA scholar. She has been here a long time and she is a real expert and we have a lot of lower level women.

Two executives thought that having more women would play a part in transforming management, one suggesting:

It would change the flavour of the organisation, no doubt about that.

When male executives tried to pinpoint more precisely the ways in which women might contribute to change, they constructed stereotypical female qualities. Even the most positive advocate of women’s contribution to management patered out into an almost bathetic recognition of women’s under-representation in senior roles:

I think it’s essential. I would think of myself as a chauvinist but I think women bring a great difference in thinking into things. Much more instinctive, women are really – it’s a pity we haven’t got more of them in management.

Another male executive, although himself extremely positive about the potential contribution of women in senior positions, provided a variant on the pipe-line theory by suggesting that less enlightened managers failed to recognise the benefits:

I think they [women] do have a role. The problem is that there’s not enough of them getting training and experience and maturity to take them into roles. That is the fault of the organisation, the current managers, the managers are still slow to realise a role for them.

Thus the representations of those executives who saw gender as irrelevant and those who claimed women’s positive contribution to management appear to be filtered through a gendered lens and “reconstituted within a more general discourse on gender difference” (Stubbe et al., 2000, p. 237).

Perceived similarities or differences between men and women executives
Male executives were then asked whether they saw men and women in management as essentially similar or essentially different. A common response was to elaborate on views put forward in the previous question about women’s possible contribution to effecting changes in management. Four of the sample regarded men and women as essentially similar. For example, one executive claimed that:

...women and men here are part of the same key. My attitude to things is that women would not make a difference, just by the mere fact they are women.

Sometimes the attempt to see women as similar seemed to be based on their relative invisibility at executive level:

The business I have worked with and operated with, it’s a little rare for me to run into a CEO who is a woman. I don’t see any great difference there.

Ironically, one male executive, who saw women as similar to men, then developed a stereotyped opposition of logic and emotion/intuition, the latter being associated with women:

I think essentially similar, but you are dealing with a female, with female characteristics as opposed to male and whether that means anything or not, it probably doesn’t. On balance, there may be nuances. Often people say that women are more run by emotions than logic, and I am trying not to be critical here, and some ways I think that is not a bad thing. There are situations in my industry where probably what you feel in your stomach may be the right decision, rather than what you might think you should do logically ... in essence, I don’t think that management styles should be markedly different.

Interestingly, the male executives with the most contact or interactions with female executives tended to construct women’s essential differences from men. One director argued that women’s difference supplied a necessary balance to management:

They [women] bring a different perspective to management, like life in general. John Gray Men are from Mars; Women are from Venus highlights the basic difference between men and women. It is very good to get a balance in management, which women bring.

Another chief executive was more specific in stating the positive qualities he felt women brought to management:

Women are more aware of people’s feelings. A lot of male managers are unreasonable, unthinking, and uncaring of other people’s feelings.

Not all men were so positive about perceived differences. In Sinclair’s (1994) study of Australian male executives, men suggested that women were trying to be “too like a man” or “too different”. Paradoxically, in the adversarial and competitive context of the private sector, women were seen by some of their male counterparts as both different and too aggressive:

I think they are different. We have a high proportion of senior management women – and I’m talking about the client part of it. Some of these women are hard to get on with I must admit. I don’t know whether it is because there are so few of them that they try so hard to overdo it. They are almost domineering.
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Certainly, in some male representations, women executives are seen as “less compromising than men” and lacking not so much in management competencies, but rather in personal qualities:

I think they are quite different. Traditionally the women who have succeeded in management have had to be twice as good as a man. The women I have come across are very aggressive managers and haven’t endeared themselves to others.

A gendered lens functions to create expectations of women and related sanctions against those women who display stereotypical, male behaviours.

Social and cultural change
At the same time, one executive suggested that cultural changes are taking place as a result of the increasing number of women in executive positions:

It’s a new era, I am in my early 50s; 25 years ago you wouldn’t have seen as many women in senior positions. I don’t find that in any way challenging, but it is different. It does create a different environment.

Two male interviewees saw this inclusion of more women in senior management as a strategic response to the current climate of diversity and espoused change. However, a certain resentment was evident, reinforcing a notion of male accommodation of women in an essential masculine domain:

I have difficulties because I do interface with a number of CEO females, I sometimes have difficulty with their skills. I think some of them are appointed because they are females, but then I do meet some that are very well skilled across all aspects of management, technical as well as interpersonal.

One chief executive stated that the need to appoint more women in senior positions was both a strategic and a social response to the changing nature of the wider culture of the workplace:

It’s partly a strategic move, partly a social response, but a lot of organisations that we deal with have females that are at a very senior level and we think it would be healthy for us, both strategically and as a company, to have a better balance.

Thus, while executive culture is still seen by men as primarily a male world with male-oriented expectations and types of interactions, it is nevertheless a culture, which can accommodate women. Perhaps, significantly, there are also indications in the discourse not only that executive culture is changing, but that some men believe it needs to change if only to achieve a more balanced profile.

Women executives
Operating in a male domain
Women’s awareness of operating in a male domain was evident in occasional comments throughout the interviews. Most immediately, four of the women in the sample spoke directly of the support of male mentors, both in their past career progression and in the continuing present. None mentioned female mentors; some, however, suggested they functioned as mentors for young people coming through.

Less directly, acknowledgements of executive leadership as a male domain came through incidental comments:

The industry we’re in is very male dominated – all of my peers are men.

Within this domain women suggested that a gendered lens resulted in perceptions of women leaders as unusual or unexpected:

I sometimes think that it’s hard work being a woman in management because I still actually think that a lot of men don’t view it as natural for women to be in senior management. You know, they’re quite surprised initially at the role you’re doing but they accept it pretty quickly and don’t judge, but I still think it’s not as accepted as we like to think it is.

Certainly, stereotyped attitudes are more likely to be experienced by women in traditional male-dominated industries:

People don’t expect a woman to be running a manufacturing company.

However, a gendered lens seems to affect younger women in executive positions whatever their industry. A respondent in her early thirties commented: “You get comments like, ‘You’re only a woman’.

One woman implicitly pinpointed a gendered lens by saying it comes down to “the judgement, the perception thing”, which constitutes a “double-edged sword” for women in authority over men because the men find it harder to take criticism from a woman than from another “bloke”:

There was a situation a couple of years ago when I really thought this chief executive had let the company down. I was quite blunt about it. What was the word he used? He said he thought I was quite intimidating.

Yet when asked, “Would you like to see management change in any way?” women constructed comparable responses to males around issues of “flattened management structures”, “empowerment of staff”, and the importance of “strategic thinking and vision” as opposed to a focus on short-term profitability measures. None mentioned the under-representation of women at executive leadership level. However, one senior manager did supply a tongue-in-cheek
response to what she personally would do when she reached chief executive:  
When I get to the top there will be corporate shopping days and corporate cooking classes, corporate massage days! No more yachting, no more rugby, no more cricket!

**A level playing field**

Like their male colleagues, women subscribed to the notion of meritocracy as the basis for executive success. A recurrent theme was the need to earn respect through outstanding performance. In an echo of male views of women needing to be “twice as good as a man”, women described the process of outstanding performance as a matter “not only of achieving, but of over-achieving”. One woman’s survival strategy within a male domain was simply to “make yourself invaluable”.

Although most women denied that gender had affected their career progression, occasional comments suggested that the executive playing field is not exactly level. A partner in a multinational company drew attention to inequities:

You’re lead to believe that you’re actually a collaborative group of people who work together as a team, and share ideas about management. The reality is that it’s quite hierarchical and not all views are seen as important as other views and it isn’t a genuine partnership of equals.

A number of women felt they had to put in more time and effort than their male counterparts to achieve the same recognition:

I do still think, certainly now in our organisation, women have to work harder to achieve the same. You know, I work very long hours, hours that my male peers would never have to put in to get recognition.

Two other factors suggest a gendered lens works against a level playing field for women executives. One woman felt it was harder for women to progress quickly in management in contrast to “the ease with which men can sort of start getting up the ladder”. And, in an echo of a previous male view, one woman suggested a male tendency to sideline women in human resource interests and roles:

I think I weigh things up and I’m aware of resource constraints but it seems that men immediately put us in the category of being interested in human resource issues primarily and don’t realise we’ve weighed them up in relation to running a business.

**Perceived similarities or differences between women and men executives**

The women in this sample rejected any differences in competencies and spoke of similar skill bases. Yet, they all identified essential differences between male and female executives, regularly constructing some of the same stereotypes for women as men did, suggesting a gendered lens operates in their perceptions of self. Thus women were seen to be “intuitive and in touch with people”, “nurturing”, having “a different way of talking to other people”, “more adept at reading non verbal cues”, more “transformational” and better listeners than men. Conversely, some women acknowledged that women could take up stereotypical male positions and behaviours, and that men could display stereotypical female behaviours. One CEO states:

I’ve had hassles from both genders so you can’t say, well, a woman does it this way and men do it that way. Like you’ll always find there’s a crossover. Women often have a lot of masculine energy and a lot of men have a feminine energy, so you can’t necessarily role cast people.

Certainly, women perceived men through a gendered lens when describing various difficulties and frustrations they experienced with male colleagues. Male leaders could adopt a somewhat inflexible position, which needed to be recognized and dealt with:

One thing is quite clear. When you’re speaking to male partners it needs to be where they are sitting at the time. You can’t expect to get anywhere by making even an authoritative statement, if they don’t want to believe it they won’t.

**Male decision making processes posed another area of frustration. Women** mentioned decisions made in washroom breaks, in the lifts and in social contexts. These informal decision-making processes worked not only to exclude women, but also some groups of men:

Work will come up and they’ll make a decision in your absence. Now that can be an issue and that’s frustrating for a lot of women and some men as well, who also don’t fit that mould.

Moreover, male executives were perceived to operate according to a different code, which sustained male networks through a system of “owing” favours:

Men are much more “you do this for me and I’ll do this for you”. And they remember things over long periods of time and women will do what is instinctively right. They [women] don’t feel under the same obligation to do something for this person because this person did something for them years and years ago.

Male leaders were also deemed to present a public mask of control and success whatever was actually happening. One of the off-shoots of this mask was that men found it difficult to ask for help. A chief executive describes her experience of this male leadership style at
various chamber of commerce type events, again contrasting men and women: Men will say, “Oh, you know, everything’s wonderful and I’m doing this and I’m doing that” and there’s always that sort of – I guess, the ride before the fall, where women tend to talk much more from the heart, if they need help they ask for it.

Indeed, some women leaders compared their directness, openness and honesty with male indirectness, manipulation and closed emotions:

The male game tends to be more about wait and see, I’m [the male] not going to say, I’m just going to do this. I’ve [the woman] been exposed, I’ve poured my heart out.

Males could retain a certain emotional detachment to outcomes, while women tend to be involved more personally:

I think women tend to worry more, take things more personally. I don’t mean be over-sensitive, I mean be more personally involved than perhaps men do. Men, I think on the whole, tend to find it easier to step back and not care whether it really works or doesn’t work.

In such ways women executives, like their male counterparts, perceive the executive world through a gendered lens and constitute themselves and men through a more general discourse on gender difference.

Social and cultural change

Women, as well as their male colleagues, spoke of cultural changes, which impact positively on women in the workforce. Most immediately, the increased public profile of women in persuasive and powerful leadership positions in New Zealand (Pringle and Olsson, 2002) was linked to changes in attitudes to women in business. Women spoke of increased access to training opportunities, greater ease in obtaining financial backing or loans, and of no longer being the only woman on senior management teams.

Interestingly, New Zealand equal employment opportunities (EEO) legislation and policies, which are mandatory in the public sector but voluntary in the private sector, are not regarded by these private sector women as a major force to effect gender change at an executive leadership level: “EEO helps, but it doesn’t help if you’re trying to get up there”. More important are changes in senior management attitudes, including gender pay equity at executive level: “If you change at the top, the rest will filter”.

One change apparent throughout the interviews is women’s positioning of themselves, not as victim as may have been the case in the past, but as equal.

McConnell-Ginet (2000) points out that discourse both reflects and constitutes social change. This change is evident in the way women executives speak about achieving gender balance in their staff, not as supplicants (Marshall, 1995) but from a position of comparable power to men. A statement from a woman CEO illustrates this point:

I always try to keep a balance of males and females because I don’t think any one’s better and I think they’re both certainly different. They look at things differently and I think that’s really important.

Associated with this change in positioning is a celebration of female “difference”, which is almost seen to provide a competitive edge in leadership positions:

I think women are lucky because we can do it differently [from men]. We don’t have to be the stereotypes.

Nevertheless, women acknowledge that the culture of women in business is still relatively new:

Men have been in management longer and there’s that culture. They [men] have a support network, which is relatively undeveloped in the culture of women in business. It’s quite a new culture.

Of primary importance in the development of this culture of women in business, is women supporting other women, “Men do it all the time, support each other.” One woman also pointed to the importance of women leaders speaking out about their own experiences, and of research on women in leadership, as a means of assisting changes or “making change happen.”

Turning the covert into the explicit

We wished to consider the possible gender content and positioning of men and women in executive leadership. By drawing attention to a gendered lens of perception, a social constructionist approach makes explicit the often unrecognised or unexamined gendered attitudes and content within the discursive and social practices, which maintain men’s advantage over women in the workplace (McConnell-Ginet, 2000). The approach also shows how changes in gender content and in the positioning of male and female within the discourse provide evidence of gender and other social change.

Male executives revealed ambivalence in their attitudes to women in leadership. In constructing executive culture as an unthinkingly male domain (and “a male demand”), men in the study constituted management as a level playing field bound by a merit principle, yet conforming to male
norms and criteria. In turn, the merit principle provided an implicit justification for women’s under-representation on the part of those executives who saw women as essentially similar to males or who felt women did not contribute anything different to executive leadership. Alternatively, those men who claimed that women’s difference could make a positive contribution and help to achieve a better balance in management, tended to construct stereotypical images of women’s qualities, such as emotion, intuition, instinct, and being “more aware of other people’s feelings” than men. Although these qualities were viewed positively, implicit sanctions defined women with stereotypical masculine qualities as too aggressive, domineering and “less compromising than men”. The relative invisibility of women in executive leadership positions was explained by variants on the pipe-line theory, including the failure of some managers to see a role for women.

Nevertheless, change was evident in the construction of women’s difference as a positive force in executive leadership and in the recognition of the inclusion of women at executive level as a strategic response to the current, social climate of diversity.

Female executives’ representations pointed to some implicit contradictions in their positioning within executive culture. They claimed similar skills and competencies to men but suggested that a gendered lens, or “the perception thing”, rendered them unusual or unexpected in leadership positions. However, this implicit recognition of a gendered lens was not accompanied by an acknowledgement of the under-representation of women as an issue in executive leadership. Like men, women executives subscribed to the principle of meritocracy, yet their strategy for success was to over-achieve or make themselves invaluable. Similarly, while they all denied that gender had affected their career progression, some acknowledged that not all views were equal at executive level, and that women had to work harder than men to achieve the same recognition. Although some women acknowledged the positive role of male mentors, most viewed men through a gendered lens when describing their frustrations with male processes or behaviours. These processes and behaviours included informal decision making, indirectness, inflexibility, emotional detachment, male codes of obligation to one another, and the public masks of control and success presented by men whatever the circumstances. Paradoxically, all claimed their difference from men by constructing stereotypical female qualities such as intuition, nurturing, an ability to read non-verbal cues, emotional honesty, and being better listeners than men. However, gender change was evident in women’s positioning of themselves as equal to men and in the way they not only embraced, but celebrated, their difference, which they saw as providing them with a competitive edge in the private sector. This celebration of female difference was also apparent in their construction of the new culture of women in business.

Our analysis of male and female executives’ representations of one another suggests that even when men and women have comparable status and power at executive level, as elsewhere, gender remains a salient and continuing feature of social organisation and transactions. Both men and women in this study viewed themselves and one another through a gendered lens. And both at times constructed stereotypical images either of themselves or of one another.

These unexamined, gendered perceptions and stereotypes assume particular importance if and when they disadvantage one group or the other. While the gendered content and stereotypes constructed about men may surprise some men, they do not dislodge or sideline male power within the dominant, corporate masculinity of executive culture. However, the previous research referred to earlier in this paper suggests that stereotypes about women disadvantage women and place them in an antithetical position to executive power. Certainly, in our study gender stereotypes are implicit in male executives’ sidelineding of women into human resource roles and in explanations for the under-representation of women at executive leadership level. Equally significant, however, is the positioning, including self-positioning of women in executive culture. Thus some men constructed the positive contribution of stereotypical female qualities to management. And although women also constructed selected female qualities in their self-representations, they positioned these stereotypes positively by suggesting these qualities provided executive women with the advantage of being able to do things differently from men, and so not having to enact or conform to the stereotypical male behaviours of executive leadership, “We don’t have to be the [male] stereotypes”.

In summation, our analysis provides some evidence of changes in the traditional association of men with leadership and in the positioning of women at executive level. How widespread these changes are, and the extent of the emerging culture of women in
business, remain to be seen. However, in making the covert or unexamined gender content of both male and female executives’ discourse more explicit, we seek to facilitate the understanding of men and women in leadership positions.

References

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