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'Stop making it such a big issue': Perceptions and experiences of gender inequality by undergraduates at a British University

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Synopsis

This paper focuses on the experiences and perceptions of gender inequality by undergraduates at a British University with strong historical traditions. Contrary to a 'post-feminist' rhetoric stating that gender inequalities no longer exist in higher education in the UK, or at least not at an undergraduate level, results of a questionnaire and interviews show that gender inequality does still persist in this institutional setting. However, we also found reluctance among students, particularly female students, to recognise or articulate this as discrimination. Instead, there was a tendency to downplay or deny such inequalities, and resistance to such matters being raised. Drawing on existing literature in the field, we suggest this might be a 'coping mechanism', as well as indicative of the 'post-feminist' milieu. The paper then reflects on the implications of these findings, particularly for those seeking to address gender inequalities in such an institutional environment. Drawing on identity politics theory, as well as the authors' own activist experiences, we argue that while recognising women as a discriminated group may promote gender differentiation, this may still go some way towards practically combating 'androcentric norms' [Fraser, Nancy (1995). *From redistribution to recognition? Dilemmas of justice in a 'post-socialist' age*, *New Left Review*, 212, 68–93.] and thus gender inequality in universities.

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Introduction

Feminist researchers have long pointed out the obstacles faced by women in academia in the developed world. Among other things, it is more difficult for female academics to achieve tenure and promotion (Dugger, 2001; Winkler, 2000), equal pay and oppor-

tunities (Berliner, 2003; Forster, 2001), research funding (Knights & Richards, 2001; Wenneras & Wold, 1997), infra structural support (Bown, 1999; Campbell, 2001; Lawler, 2002), peer review ratings (Wenneras & Wold, 1997)¹ and even equal media attention of their research findings (Wagner & Caudill, 2003). Yet despite the plethora of research, there is a persistent and indeed growing insistence by academic policy makers and academics themselves that gender discrimination is simply not an issue in universities, or that if it is, it

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is always in someone else's institution (McDowell, 1979; McDowell & Peake, 1990; Morley, 2003). 'Gender is a silence in UK higher education policy', Morley (2003 p. 11) confirms, in response to the recent White Paper on UK higher education (DFES, 2003 quoted in Morley, 2003, p. 1): 'It is assumed that gender is no longer an issue as undergraduate representation of women is now approximately 52 percent'.

In the UK, where our study is situated, feminists have identified a wider 'post-feminist' trend to deny, down-play and ignore the existence of gender inequality, making these issues even more difficult to address (Figes, 1994). Some even find this denial of gender inequality is the greatest impediment to positive social change in this area (Kobayashi, 2002; McDowell & Peake, 1990), with others defining 'modern gender inequality' (in contrast to the more blatant, traditional forms) as the denial of continued discrimination against women, antagonism towards their demands and a lack of support for policies designed to help them (Eckes & Six-Materna, 1998; Swim, 1995). The denigration of Equal Opportunities as 'political correctness' and cutbacks in pastoral support systems are all said to suggest that direct gender inequality in academia is increasing again (Leonard, 2001, p. 202), particularly in the context of the 'new managerialism,' which effectively 'hand-cuffs' equal opportunities in the academy (Saunderson, 2002). Yet at the same time as these alarming trends, there is also a 'surprising lack of empirical research on student culture and experience at either undergraduate or postgraduate level in the UK' (Leonard, 2001, p. 11).

This paper seeks to address this deficit by using research on undergraduate perceptions and experiences of their university education to probe the assertion that the differential treatment of women in higher education begins in graduate school (Berg, 2002). Our data shows that gender inequality clearly persists; yet it also shows that undergraduate students seem often reluctant to admit this. For example, they revealed gender inequality when specific incidents are discussed, but not when asked for an opinion overall. Drawing on literature concerning resistance to feminism in the academy (e.g. Millen, 1997a, 1997b), we suggest that this could be a 'coping strategy' of the students in question, as well as indicative of a wider 'post-feminist' social milieu.

We then seek to reflect upon the implications of this for those who attempt to raise and address feminist issues within such institutional settings, drawing upon wider theoretical arguments, such as Fraser's (1995) work on identity politics, and the 'political tactics' of recognition. We argue that while raising such issues can be difficult and at times even seemingly counter-productive, the answer is not to stop doing so, but for gender awareness to become more structurally accepted and mainstream.

As we describe below, our data was generated from a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with undergraduates at a British University with strong historical traditions. We have also taken an introspective approach to this research; all of us were staff and/or graduate students at this University at the time of the research. Thus, data was also generated through reflections on our own experiences of attempting to raise and address gender inequalities within this institution.

The research methods

As already mentioned, our study was based on a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with undergraduate students doing a degree in the same department at the University. The questionnaire was administered to a class of 110 undergraduate students, containing a mix of first, second and third year students. It was distributed by an academic staff member at the end of lectures. Students were asked to complete it (anonymously) and post it into a closed box. The questionnaire consisted of 11 pages of both open and closed questions. Some students also scribbled comments in the wide margins, outside the questionnaire's boxes and lines. These unsolicited remarks sometimes supplied the most passionate and interesting data.

The response rate to the questionnaire was high (total 77% give actual number: 7% first years, 49% second years, 44% third years), with a higher proportion of female students responding compared to males (67% female; 32% male and 1% unknown). Seven percent of the respondents were from a minority ethnic group. These proportions mean that the respondent population was not particularly representative of the overall undergraduate population of the university. At

the time of writing, there were approximately 11,000 undergraduates at the University, 43% who were women (OUSU, 2004a), 90% who are British (Halpin, 2004) and some 12% from an ethnic minority (compared to a figure of approximately 17% of the student population nationally) (OUSU, 2004b). We did not ask the educational and/or socio-economic backgrounds of the students in the questionnaire. In retrospect, we realise this would have been useful information.

The interviews were carried out by one of the authors who was a graduate student at the time. The interview respondents consisted of six female and six male second year undergraduates, and lasted approximately 1–1.5 h. They covered other issues about each student's experiences and perceptions of the University, as well the gender issues detailed below. All participants except one were white, and five had attended Independent (i.e. private) schools, compared to seven who went to Comprehensive or Grammar (i.e. publicly funded) schools. All the students were physically able, and their sexuality was not ascertained. They came from five different colleges, and were self-selected through an e-mail approach to groups of students in the second year. All interviews were taped, fully transcribed, and then analysed through identifying consistent and repeated themes, concepts, language and illustrative phrases.

The institutional context of the study

The university where the study took place consists not only of academic departments, but also of colleges affiliated with the University. The colleges are responsible for student's welfare and tutorial teaching, while the University is responsible for lectures and examinations. Both the University and colleges thus form the institutional backdrop of an undergraduate's education.

This University traces its beginnings to the 1100s, and it is culturally, socially and physically saturated with this history. Until relatively recent times this academic history was exclusively male. Academic halls for women were established in 1878, and women were admitted as full members of the University in 1920. Some of the original men's colleges, however, admitted women as late as 1983. Only one all-women's college remains at the University, and its

single-sex status was recently contested by its own governing body. The historical attitude towards women students in the University was, needless to say, hostile, and perhaps indicated by the following quote (Betjeman (1938 reprinted 1979), and taken from a myriad of others) on the marriage of two undergraduates: 'In that case the undergraduette [sic] has performed a better service than getting her usual second [class degree] after three years of unremitting work'.

The degree to which attitudes have changed at the University has not been studied. It is our impression that, like in other universities in the UK, a biased culture still persists. Part of this bias is reflected in the low proportion of female academic staff. Women make up just 18% of the academic staff (Corbett, 2001). Indications of a difficult working environment are predominately anecdotal. Greenfield (2000) refers to an academic culture where a number of seemingly 'trivial' incidents cumulatively erode the confidence of women academics. This is similar to claims made elsewhere about UK higher education (Leonard, 2001, p. 7), and to 'chilly climate' studies at an 'Ivy League' University in the United States (Zakian et al., 2003).

The department that this study took place within is of medium-size, employing 22 full-time academic staff at the time of data collection (2001–2002). While a wide range of nationalities was represented amongst the staff, the faculty was overwhelmingly white (95%). Interestingly, more than half (55%) of the staff was also educated at either an undergraduate and/or graduate level at the same University. Women made up 32% of academic staff employed in the department, compared to a UK average of 22% in the same subject. In terms of a hierarchical breakdown, women made up 75% of the contract teaching staff, 43% of the lecturers, 16% of the readers/senior lecturers and 0% of the professors, and the Head of Department was male. Thus, despite the higher percentage of women compared to national rates, the hierarchical division in fact fell below the national average: in comparative departments, women made up 20% of readers/senior lecturers and 9% of professors in Britain.

The department's building could be said to reflect this disproportionate balance of respect and power. Its dark, Victorian style, complete with mounted animal heads, skulls, horns, and old pictures created a masculine and imperialist sense of place (something com-

mented upon by undergraduates in the questionnaire). Similar to many other buildings in the University, the portraits on the walls in celebration and recognition of past members were almost exclusively of white men.

The university and the place of the feminine

The research below details many specific aspects of gender discrimination in undergraduate teaching at this University, but we want to begin by presenting an important overall impression conveyed in our research on this institution: activities or spaces where women predominated were often viewed as negative, inferior, marginalised, and even mysterious. This is not perhaps surprising, given the endemic positioning of women as ‘Other’ within the academy, yet it is particularly relevant to the results of our research to point out such a pattern at this institution. For example, the only women’s college in the University, women’s sports and clubs, even a sole female student in a tutorial—all these things were generally reported in a negative way. We perceived that women at the University were viewed as acceptable and even ‘equal’ as long as they ‘did the same things’ as men—such as belonging to the same college, studying the same subjects, doing many of the same sports (for example rowing). Yet, at the same time, students also pointed out inequalities where women and men were not the same: differences in exam results, for instance, the higher proportions of male students in many of the co-educational colleges, markedly lower funding and recognition of women’s sports, the presence of exclusive and elite men’s sporting and drinking societies. Data from our questionnaire can be used to illustrate this point:

Women’s sports teams in college and university are not treated with as much respect or receive as much practical help as the male equivalents. [British female, second year student, Questionnaire].

[Have experienced gender discrimination] [m]ainly when playing mixed sports because men think they are far superior to women and exclude you. Being from an all girls’ college means that people stereotype us as being a lesbian or a tart. [British female, second year student, Questionnaire].

[Have experienced gender discrimination on] [c]ollege sports teams—Boys teams get college recognition if they win—girls don’t e.g. the boathouse has only male crew photos. Being treated as if you can’t do something: gender. [British female, second year student, Questionnaire].

Yet juxtaposed alongside this inferiority of women’s participation in university activities, women students also conveyed a pressure to behave in certain ‘feminine’ ways, a pressure to communicate their difference, their femininity—or their Otherness, as it turns out. For example, 40% of women in the survey reported that they felt compelled to act in certain ways because of their gender:

You feel often the need to conform to typical female stereotype. [British female, second year student, Questionnaire].

Act in ‘feminine’ ways (wear make up, dress in ‘feminine clothes’, not be too rough and boisterous. . .) [British female, second year student, Questionnaire].

Subconsciously and don’t want to appear too outspoken etc, as such behavior isn’t associated with ‘women.’ [British female, second year student, Questionnaire].

I feel that I have to behave in a more feminine manner, that is, to speak or act in a more gentle and demure manner. And as it is not really in my nature to do so, sometimes I feel bad about not behaving in a more feminine manner. [Singaporean female, second year student, Questionnaire].

Male undergraduates also said they were affected by this gendering of the social environment, communicating pressure to conform to various forms of ‘masculinity’, which in this context included not appearing sensitive or insecure. Indeed a majority of male undergraduates (58%) reported feeling more compelled to act in certain ways because of their gender:

In a night out situation or a football team context, pressure to conform to macho, athletic, strong, fearless image. [British male, second year student, Questionnaire].

Especially at [the University], pressure to fulfil [sic] 'sporting'/academic ALL-ROUNDER [sic]. Everyone at [this University] excels at most things they do and for men this often involves being a 'lad', playing sport and associated drinking—although the pressure is not so great as to actually influence the way I lead my life. [British male, second year student, Questionnaire].

Male pressure to behave in hyper-masculine ways is certainly a significant and inter-connected problem. Yet, we would argue that many undergraduate women at this University found themselves in a double-bind: while compelled to act out their femininity, in many institutional settings this same femininity was also received with ambiguity or degradation. Foucauldian feminists would argue that this 'double bind' is a form of self-discipline, where women's bodies and behaviours are controlled and made docile (McNay, 1992). That is, since the feminine body is characterised as nurturing, mysterious, incompetent and passive, if women want to be competent and powerful—masculine characteristics—they must adopt a more 'male' demeanour. However, when they do so, there are often negative consequences (Trethewey, 1999). The result is an intense pressure to negotiate the body through these confusing ambiguities. Such ambiguities are described by some (Goode & Bagilhole, 1998 in Saunderson, 2002) as control devices to effectively keep women 'in their place.' What we will also assert here is that such 'control devices' also directly mitigate against women identifying or addressing gender inequality in such an institutional setting, since by doing so, they assert the very thing that is meant, in most academic institutional contexts, to be inferior or down-played.

Contradictory impressions and specific incidences of gender inequality

When asked generally about gender inequality in their institution, the undergraduates who took part in the research did not identify an overall problem. In response to a general question about whether they thought gender inequalities had affected the enjoyment of their learning, very few respondents answered 'yes': 96% (82) answered 'no', and the only ones that

did answer affirmatively were women. Similarly, 97.5% (83) of students said that they did not feel discriminated against on the basis of their gender. Again, those few that answered 'yes' were women.

However, contradictions surfaced when specific instances were examined. For instance, 30% of all female students and 11% of male students stated that they were offended by the use of gender stereotypes in their learning. Many of the students also noted the gender imbalance among the academic staff. When asked about the visibility of female academics in the department, 70% of undergraduates thought that increasing the profile of women was a good idea. When asked to nominate academic role models, an encouragingly large proportion (26%) of the teaching staff was nominated, and a female academic was the most frequently nominated member of staff, overwhelmingly by women students. However, 37% of female students, compared to 12% of male students reported having no role model within the department. While most students didn't feel lectures were gender-biased, a remarkable 74% of students (75% of women and 70% of men) reported that inappropriate jokes and remarks in relation to gender were made by lecturers, with some particularly lurid ones conveyed. For example:

Women are like books, why buy them when you can get them out of the library? [Lecturer comment related by: British female, second year student, Questionnaire].

The lecturers who were reported making such jokes were overwhelmingly male (but constituted a very small number of staff), and some undergraduates reported the jokes made them feel angry or sad:

I don't find jokes very funny that reinforce gender stereotypes but my experience of this is rare and it's not a big issue for me. [British male, second year student, Questionnaire].

Dr. ___ makes inappropriate jokes. It just makes me think that I don't respect their [sic] idea of relationships. [British female, second year student, Questionnaire].

Sad. [British male, third year student, Questionnaire].

Indeed, Iris Marion Young (1990) argues that jokes are a particularly effective form of perpetrating discrimination, precisely because they are so difficult to rebut. (Especially, we would suggest, when they come from a lecturer). However, many of the undergraduates who expanded on this question, especially women, while acknowledging that such jokes were inappropriate, denied they were offended, and sometimes in a forceful way:

Aware they are normally joking. [British female, second year student, Questionnaire].

I never thought there could be gender division and have only ever experienced one sexist joke and I don't think it is much of an issue. I will be glad to see the result of the questionnaire. [French female, third year student, Questionnaire].

Don't go over the top with GENDER [sic] issues. Most banter, etc., is very light-hearted and not meant as offensive. Please also consider e.g. SEXUALITY, RACE, NATIONALITY, [sic] etc, we are not just divided along gender lines. Seminars on e.g. how to study/learn would be more useful (plus then maybe differences between men and women, etc.). [German-Asian female, third year student, Questionnaire].

Often too much is made of gender 'problems' e.g. jokes that some find offensive. If it's a JOKE [sic] then it needs to be taken as such. Gender is also used as a means of hiding other motives e.g. getting sacked and the shouting sexual discrimination. [British male, second year student, Questionnaire].

Thus, while the majority acknowledged sexist jokes in teaching existed, and while some found this made them angry or sad, others also defended them as not in fact problematic.

Such a reaction by students to issues and teachings about gender inequalities and feminism has been found by others (Deay & Stitzel, 1991; Lewis, 1990; Titus, 2000). While our research was not a study of reactions to teaching about gender inequalities per se but rather an inquiry into perceptions of gender inequalities at the University, the sometimes strong responses to our questions, especially among women, was initially surprising. Millen (1997b)

describes such reactions by women to inquiries about gender discrimination in terms of power dynamics. That is, a discussion of women's situation 'may actually disempower them in the short term by undermining immediate coping strategies which do not involve any long-term structural change for women' (Millen, 1997a, p. 2) hence the strong resistance to any discussion of inequality. Further, resistance to such discussions may also 'serv[e] to avoid any closer examination of their own lives, resistance, then, offers some degree of emotional protection' (Titus, 2000, p. 27; see also Davis, 1992).

Similar resistance was apparent when other aspects of teaching were examined. Overall, a quarter of the students who responded to the questionnaire said they thought there were more gender inequalities at the University than in society, in general. More than one third (35%) stated that more gender inequalities existed in their department than in the wider world. One female student wrote that she felt certain opportunities might not be available to her because of her gender. This comment underlines a theme that ran throughout answers to the questionnaire: while women students' answers highlight an awareness of gender discrimination on some level, they often do not define this occurrence as 'discrimination' per se. Millen (1997b) makes a similar observation in her study of women scientists and discrimination. As one of her interviewees states:

I wouldn't go so far as to say that there's actual overt [discrimination] in the place, but definitely covertly it is hindering my career progression at the moment. . . I can't put any concrete facts on it, but more and more I'm pretty positive that had I been male in this position, I would have got there. There were three promotions of male members at exactly the same time as this, so that's what brings me to the conclusion that there is a female slant to the problem. [Naomi, physicist] (Millen, 1997a, p. 6).

Similarly, in our study, we found that few women students stated outright that they felt gender discrimination was an issue at the University or within their subject, yet a majority, much like the female physicist quoted above, identified specific instances of clear gender inequality. This was particularly the case with regard to experiences in tutorials at the

University, a style of teaching peculiar to a small group of Universities in the UK, and which we would now like to discuss.

'I still find it quite sort of off-putting': the University tutorial

As mentioned above, in addition to lectures in the department, undergraduates at the University we studied are also taught in their colleges in tutorials. Tutorials were originally intended as a one-to-one teaching situation, although these days there is more often two or three students rather than just an individual and her or his tutor in the tutorial room. Almost a quarter of the students (23%) stated gender inequality was a general problem in colleges (of these 94% were women) and 24% of students acknowledged a gender dynamic when taught individually or in small groups. One in five students (20%) stated gender was 'an issue' with their tutors. Both female and male students mentioned they lacked female tutors.

Alongside these general statistics (where a minority were found to comment on inequality) specific stories of discrimination emerged. This was particularly the case when women were the minority or by themselves with the tutor.

Male dominated tutorials made me feel less at ease and confident with my own view point, I became more inclined not to take an active role. [British female, second year student, Questionnaire].

I do find that the males are more confident generally, particularly in tutorials, so I'm more likely to feel at ease and have greater confidence in a tutorial with another girl. [British female, second year student, Questionnaire].

Tutors (male) tend to undermine pupils in an act of supposed encouragement. This seems to work with males but not with female students who respond much better to praise and encouragement. [British female, third year student, Questionnaire].

A number of female students also noted that they felt intimidated by their male tutor. In fact, some students

(both female and male) wrote that they prefer a female tutor because of perceptions of heightened sensitivity, better listening skills and better organization.

In regard to her male tutor, one respondent wrote:

It's hard to predict how he will respond to what you say—whether he will be angry/understanding. I do feel there is a difference due to him being a male, clever, knowledgeable [sic] tutor compared to me being a silly, careless, 'speak before I think' girl. [British female, second year student, Questionnaire].

This sense of being less intelligent, 'silly' or 'stupid' because of one's gender surfaced throughout female student responses: '[I have a] general feeling of coming across in tutorials as a "silly girl"', another woman undergraduate wrote. Also, disturbingly, several students (one male and one female) wrote they were uneasy about tutorials because their tutor 'touches them'. Although we did not specifically ask in the questionnaire if students had experienced sexual harassment, several students raised the issue in their responses to questions about tutorials. We note that sexual harassment is a deeply troubling occurrence in university communities and has been discussed in at least one other article in regard to undergraduates at this University (Sell & Robson, 1998; see also Bagilhole & Woodward, 1995; Collier, 1995; Lee, 1998). As Lee (1998, p. 302) remarks, recent 'university surveys have... revealed prevalent sexual harassment in UK higher education institutions.' A site of particular concern for the occurrence of sexual harassment is in fact the tutorial situation (see Purkiss, 1994). In our opinion, while the tutorial can, at its best, provide a student with a unique level of academic attention, consideration and support, when it takes places within a strictly hierarchical and potentially discriminatory framework it can at its worst be highly problematic, as exemplified in results from interviews detailed below.

Once again, in parallel with the questionnaire, despite recounting direct experiences of discrimination or sexism, most of the students interviewed stated that they did not perceive the University as a place where gender inequalities exist, and many students in fact emphasized that women were treated equally at the University. In several incidents, such a statement about the equal treatment of women even

directly preceded the narration of what we interpreted as a sexist or misogynist experience. For instance, in one interview, the student Barbara² said: 'I wouldn't say I've come across any [gender inequality] particularly,' but added, 'I can only describe one sort of time...,' before she related the following experience:

I had a male tutor and I was in the tutorial with three other guys... at the first tutorial he [the tutor] went around the room and said, 'I want you to tell me your name and which school you went to and where you're from.' I had to say, 'Well, I'm from... [a stigmatised place in Britain] and I just felt very—I felt I was the lowest down suddenly in the room... And I just felt that the whole of the rest of the tutorial was towards the men... I wasn't encouraged to—it wasn't going to come out. And I wasn't encouraged at all. And if I did say something, I felt that my views were sort of never held as highly as the men... And I remember not looking forward to the next tutorial because I did feel that my position in the room as a girl wasn't quite—I didn't feel on an equal pegging. [Barbara, undergraduate student, semi-structured interview].

It is important to note here that perceptions of gender inequality are interconnected with socio-economic class. As Loraine Gelsthorpe (1992) remarks: 'Women are never just women—we have a class, a sexuality, an ethnicity, and all these affect our situation and our views' (in Millen, 1997a, p. 9). The quote also illustrates that an incident described as 'nothing in particular', just 'one sort of time', could alternatively be viewed as a significant incident that affected a student's confidence and self-esteem, affected also her ability to learn and participate in those tutorials.

However, diminishing the significance of such incidents was, again, common among a number of student respondents. Many felt that gender inequality was not discussed or viewed as an important issue within the University. For some, this resulted in the feeling they were 'imagining things' that they themselves thought initially were wrong. The student quoted above, for example, drew on reactions of her male classmates as if to prove she wasn't in fact 'imagining' the incident, which she stated later

in the interview was something that 'you can start to think you're doing':

I actually spoke to the other [students in the tutorial]... and they did say well he did—they had kind of picked up on it, obviously not as much as I had—but they didn't tell me—oh shut up, you're being stupid. [Barbara, undergraduate student, semi-structured interview].

We also noticed students' difficulties in recognizing and validating feelings of gender inequality, particularly in instances where students blamed themselves for negative experiences. For example, one female student said:

I find in tutorials my [male] tutor kind of doesn't address me at all. [She explains how the other students in the tutorial were both male and played rugby]. We spend sort of the first twenty minutes talking about sport... I find he [the tutor] sits there and talks to [the two male students] and I sit there and I mean... I'm not the world's greatest [at the subject], I don't like it that much but—and I don't have much to contribute, but I still find it quite sort of off-putting... [Imogen, undergraduate student, semi-structured interview].

Thus, a pattern can be seen to emerge whereby female students express feelings of imagining gender discrimination, resistance to discussing such discrimination, and disclaimers or statements where they blame themselves for any discrimination that took place.

Such a pattern echoes other 'chilly climate' studies where subtle actions and 'micro inequalities' have the effect of making women feel uncomfortable, out of place, and less competent (MIT, 1999). Bernice Sandler (who coined the term 'chilly climate' in 1982) describes the phenomenon as 'small everyday inequalities through which individuals are often treated differently because of their gender, race, age, or other 'outsider' status... [W]hen these behaviours occur again and again, and especially if they are not noticed or understood, they often have a damaging effect, creating an environment that is indeed chilly—an environment that dampens women's self-esteem, confidence, aspirations and participation' (Sandler, n.d.). This 'chilly climate' coupled with the 'backlash'

against feminism and media messages that we live in a 'postfeminist' era where gender discrimination is a thing of the past (Deay & Stitzel, 1991 in Titus, 2000) and women have attained the same opportunities as men (Faludi, 1991) makes it increasingly difficult to articulate persistent inequalities. As one female student wrote in the questionnaire:

I'm inclined to think it really isn't that much of an issue anymore. I think there are bigger issues (i.e. class, race) to be addressed. If women are really equal (which I think they are) then I don't really see the need for all the extra attention. [British female, second year student, Questionnaire].

Tolerance, acceptance and denial

Overall, we found there was a both explicit and implicit tolerance and resignation to male domination at the University. 'Mum said [this University's] always been like that,' said Jess, one of the interviewees. These students were often aware of the history of women's exclusion from the University. Clive, for example, another one of the interviewees, related stories of incidents at his college (which was one of the last to 'let women in', as he put it) that illustrated the negative reactions of certain male members towards the first women members, such as misogynist graffiti painted on the inside of a communal College building.

Yet, we also found that there was sometimes a somewhat different attitude overall, between the women and men respondents towards these issues. 'Before [my girlfriend] came here', Clive said in his interview, 'she'd never think that when she couldn't achieve anything it was because she was a girl. And now she's starting to feel that maybe it is'.

This quote sums up, it seems, part of the informal education of female and male undergraduates at this University. Yet it is significant here that the 'girlfriend' in question is not telling us herself—rather it is her boyfriend who expresses it so eloquently. Indeed, on the whole, the male respondents frequently presented a sensitivity to and awareness of gender bias and discrimination—but of that which was most typically perceived as occurring against themselves. For instance, an equal percent-

age of male respondents to women (42%) stated they had been discriminated against on the basis of their gender in society, and a remarkable 52% of the men, compared to 27% of women, stated there were gender inequalities in the department we studied. Yet, again, when specifics were mentioned, it was women who answered in greater proportions and numbers. For instance, while more men stated there was discrimination generally within the department, almost a third of all women (30%) compared to 11% of men reported being offended by gender stereotypes.

Some men offered statements in their questionnaires illustrating the frustrations they felt with the tutorial system at the University. One male student wrote that the hierarchical system hurt his learning process and others wrote that their female or male tutor favoured female students:

My female tutor privileges women over men. I always feel I am disliked, my gender plays a part in this. [British male, second year student, Questionnaire].

Occasionally tutor will show anti-male views and categorise all males in college in the same way. [British male, second year student, Questionnaire].

Women respondents also reported being acutely aware of or afraid of the possibility of reverse gender inequality, and of ignoring other under-represented groups along class and race lines. Some also interpreted gender equality as 'too much attention' or privileging one group over another. Others got angry with some of the questions, stating that it was by 'making it an issue' of gender, that by talking about it, the problem was created.

The tendency to 'harmonise' is inter-related with a belief in the 'meritocracy' of the university system as Millen (1997a) remarks in her study of women scientists:

Most [interviewees] suggested that women could succeed if they just kept at it, worked harder, and did better, and without questioning the structural barriers which even now prevent women from entering and progressing within in science in representative numbers. The fact that the majority of respondents rejected feminist identification, and

respondents lacked the conceptual vocabulary to analyse the overall situation for women in science (Millen, 1997b). They did not view these experiences as part of a systematic organization of the scientific workplace which constructed women as Other, and felt that no deliberate sexist offense was intended on the part of the men perpetrating the sexism. Women were characterized, by male scientists and by themselves, as harmonisers of the workplace, as ‘people-pleasers’ with better social and interpersonal skills than men. (Millen, 1997a, p. 6).

Titus (2000, pp. 26–27) also notes that many ‘[f]emale students hold to a romantic vision of a meritocracy and “having it all”’. She goes on to state that since ‘these students perceive that the unequal position of women in society has been ameliorated, they dismiss research and theory when they interpret it as derogatory towards men. . . . Female students in these circumstances sometimes play a caretaking role, becoming protective of the feelings and emotional well being of their male colleagues in order to maintain harmonious relationships’ (Titus, 2000, pp. 26–27).

Perhaps this resistance to ‘making it an issue’ is further explained not only as coping strategies, as mentioned above, but also as being in line with a so-called ‘post-feminist’ perspective whereby ‘adopting feminist attitudes is said to worsen rather than improve’ the lives of women, by ‘lowering their chances for heterosexual romance and marriage’ (Dow, 1996 cited in Gagne, 2001). Other research has found that women who ‘want to get on’ sometimes make deliberate attempts to disassociate themselves not only from expected ‘feminine behaviour’ but also ‘women’s issues’ (in Saunderson, 2002). ‘Rather than resistance to the new managerialism’, Saunderson (2002, p. 393) writes in her study of academic women’s identities, ‘these women display a defensive championing of it. They appear to be coping with potential conflicts by simply denying them’. The problem with such denial, of course, is that these problems won’t just go away.

Political ‘tactics’ in a hostile academy

The implication is then raised as to how such matters of gender inequality are to be effectively addressed

within such institutional settings. How does one raise and address matters of gender inequality, when some of those experiencing it most distinctly do not want it to be raised at all? To what extent are we imposing our own ‘feminist’ reading onto a complex and clearly difficult situation? Might raising these issues in fact undermine the efforts of women functioning within these settings? Also, to what extent are such doubts bowing to the ‘you’re imagining it’ ‘post-feminist’ discourse? We don’t believe we have come up with any necessarily satisfactory ‘answers’ to these complicated and difficult issues. However, we would like to reflect on some of them here in light of our own experiences, and in relation to identity politics theory that has broached some of these matters.

Our attempts to address these issues at this University have so far, in our opinion, had decidedly mixed results. For instance, we (along with others) attempted to raise awareness and educate about these issues through a gender and teaching workshop. The attendees (staff and graduate students) reported that the workshop was useful, interesting and a ‘success’. However, the staff and students who attended the workshop were generally the most supportive of discussing matters of gender inequality—whereas some of those who might have benefited most from the workshop did not attend. Addressing the issues in other ways, such as acting on some of the many recommendations suggested at the workshop, was met with initial enthusiasm, but there was reluctance at carrying out the requisite tasks. Furthermore, often the burden of labour in carrying out recommendations fell onto a very small group of people. When some actions were taken (such as following up on the research findings generated by our questionnaire) we experienced an alarming degree of hostility, and indeed a threatening reception from some quarters. This provided us with another, particularly clear, illustration as to why more women ‘deny’, don’t speak up about or don’t want to be involved with addressing such issues: the professional and personal implications can be simply too negative and costly. Such a reaction also raised doubts, again, as to what extent this action was welcomed by other women already existing within the establishment.

On the other hand, simply raising such matters may have also had some positive effects. There has been a positive change in recruitment patterns in senior posi-

tions by gender in the department (although whether our own actions had any effect on this is of course difficult to ascertain). Discussing gender issues within one's own teaching was also found to be a way of potentially empowering students. Also, it can feel personally as well as professionally satisfying to 'do something about' these issues, despite the sometimes ambiguous or negative reactions. Indeed, some people's reactions within the institution (often those, we noticed, with less vested interest in the institution) were extremely positive and supportive.

Perhaps what is at issue here is that, through seeking to acknowledge and address gender equality, women are differentiated and marked out as a social group. In her writing on such 'identity politics', Nancy Fraser (1995 p. 89) suggests that 'recognising' or 'affirming' a certain reified group's interests is problematic, because it promotes group differentiation. Rather than addressing the underlying framework that generates inequitable social arrangements, it simply seeks to correct their outcomes (but see Butler, 1998; Young, 1997). For example, combating attitudinal discrimination against women does nothing, she argues, to combat the pervasive gendered division of occupations or labour, because such attitudinal work is based on the very gender differentiations from which such labour discrimination is derived. Tactics that point out such 'difference' might thus make matters even worse. They can generate constant 'surface allocations', which can mark women as deficient, insatiable, even 'privileged', a problem further 'exacerbated' by the affirmative recognition of cultural feminism. Calling attention to women's 'specificity or difference' is thus, according to Fraser, 'more likely to have the effect of pouring oil onto the flame of resentment against affirmative action', rather than creating any real or lasting change.

In light of this theory, students' attempts to stop us from 'making this an issue', or their efforts to draw attention away from their own to other excluded groups, along class and race lines (as we mentioned, they were mostly white), could make more sense. Anderson (2003), for instance, suggests a similar perspective to Fraser's, but from a more practical perspective, in her discussion on women and policy. She argues that the 'forms of persuasion' used by academic feminists arguing on the behalf of 'women centred policy analysis' are not productive of the

policy changes they seek, stating the need to avoid an 'us-versus-them rhetoric'; thus again, group differentiation is viewed as negative.

Yet, Fraser (although stating that it will mostly make matters worse) also acknowledges that in some contexts, recognising or differentiating a group such as 'women' can 'make progress towards decentering androcentric norms'. Indeed, we would like to suggest that there is not necessarily such a clear polarisation between those tactics of 'recognition' that result in mere ineffectual 'surface allocations', and those that go some way to transforming underlying structural problems (see Morrison, 2003). For instance, recognising and reporting that women and men do, in many cases, still have different (and unequal) experiences in undergraduate higher education, that it is currently still biased towards men, certainly promotes 'group differentiation', but is also a necessary part of going towards addressing the inequity. Thus differentiating women as a social group may, on a practical basis, be almost inevitable if not desirable.

As Figs (1994 p. 6) puts it, in the context of the UK, 'If our education system does betray this country's young women, it does so by failing to warn them. Most have no idea how difficult it will be...' Recognising there is a problem is certainly important, particularly when many believe it no longer exists. Yet we also believe that we must seek to do something more than simply 'warn' young women, as doing so can simply warn them off. As one female undergraduate respondent in our research put it in her questionnaire: 'I think it's a challenge for women to do well in academia. I think I would think twice about doing a PhD (if I wanted to do one) on the basis of being female'. Part of the answer must thus lie surely in strengthening and institutionalising measures that seek, without question, to eradicate unjust inequality across all social groups in higher education, in contrast to a 'post-feminist' trend to deny such inequality still exists. In an institution such as the one we have studied, historical and current contributions and achievements of women should also be routinely recognised and celebrated.

Conclusion

In this article we have contested the claim that undergraduates no longer experience gender inequality

in their teaching in Universities. We have also found that undergraduates themselves, particularly women, have difficulties in recognising or communicating these gender inequality problems. We, along with others, have suggested that this may be a 'coping strategy' in gender-biased institutions, and also a symptom of a 'post-feminist' academic environment, where gender inequality is supposed to be a thing of the past. We have suggested that this makes identifying and addressing feminist issues even more difficult to do. Feminist theoreticians have pointed out that recognising or affirming the interests of particular groups through such identity politics may, in fact, be counter-productive. We have found that raising such issues can certainly be hard, and not always successful, yet we have also found that raising them in such a context can be a way of identifying that a problem still in fact exists, and one which needs to be properly addressed.

These findings have possible implications for literature on gender in higher education, for political theory on identity politics, and for activists performing action on the ground. This research was based on one institution in the UK, and the specific local and also national contexts are important components to taken into account when considering the results. However, we believe this does not belie the usefulness of the study for different local, broader national and indeed international contexts. Similar to studies undertaken by academics at, for example, Princeton University (MIT, 1999) in the United States, we took an introspective approach and highlighted both the difficulties and advantages in undertaking such a task. We have acknowledged that the academic system as well as the local cultures of the University we studied are in some respects peculiar, yet we also suggest that the data presented here may be useful for comparative purposes to those who may wish to undertake similar studies. Further research on what other political tactics may work in a 'post-feminist', 'chilly climate' academic milieu would indeed be particularly helpful.

Endnotes

¹ Perhaps particularly startling, this study looked at peer review scores for postdoctoral fellowships at the Swedish Medical Re-

search council (Wenneras and Wold, 1997). It demonstrated what has come to be known as the '2.6 factor'; that women needed to be 2.6 times more productive than their male colleagues to get the same peer review ratings in competition for personal fellowships. As noted by one researcher, this amounts to approximately ten more years of work (Greenfield, 2000).

² All names used to refer to interviewees are pseudonyms.

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