Introduction

Management and its discourses are playing ever more important roles in our lives. The political events in the UK of the 1980s and 1990s, growth of enterprise culture, reduction of manufacturing and an increase in the service sector has led to an increase in the numbers of people ‘managing’ (as opposed to producing). The discourse of ‘new managerialism’ carries in its wake an enormous swell of growth in business schools and academic and practitioner writings in the field. ‘Managing’ pervades our lives, and yet our understanding of the concept is problematic. It can be viewed as a set of ideas, an activity and a subject, depending on our perspective. Despite this conceptual ambiguity, however, the past decades in the UK have been characterised by increasing calls for furthering the ‘development’ of managers and building up a stock of trained and ‘competent’ managers in order to render the UK more competitive. Further, it seems that ‘competent managers’ are becoming the spearhead of globalising processes, and throughout the world ‘international competencies’ are being called for and developed in multinationals and their subsidiaries. The reach of ‘competences’ has developed at an extraordinary rate. The processes and language used to develop these ‘competent’ managers are the focus of concern in this book. In particular, I am concerned with the hidden action of power, and its potential impact on women managers.

At one level, views of what is good ‘management’ can be said to be changing. While there is growing reference in the literature to the importance in management of such qualities as co-operation, empathy, listening, nurturing, coaching etc., often explicitly associated with women (for example, Sharpe 2000; Ruderman et al. 2002) this recognition is not reflected in compensation practice or promotion policy towards women. The figures on the proportion of women in top management show little improvement over the past ten years (Oakley 2000). Recent statistics from the Equal Opportunities Commission (2002) show that, while the number of managers overall had increased by 20 per cent in the 1990s, women comprised only 30 per cent of managers in 2001, compared with a 45 per cent share of employment overall. They made up a higher share of managers and proprietors in agriculture and services (36 per cent) than that of the higher paid corporate managerial occupations. In spring 2001, women managers in middle and junior management earned 65 per cent of the average hourly workings of male managers (this was a wider gap than any other occupational group), and
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women directors and those in senior management earned 86 per cent of the average salaries of men.

This book explores how competence approaches represent and construct ‘good management’ and the impact this is likely to have on women managers. Do competence approaches encourage diversity? Or do competence approaches ‘exclude’ particular voices from reaching the boardroom? Competence approaches are largely vaunted because of their objectivity, in particular their gender neutrality. But is this the case and if not, what are the implications for women managers? In asking these questions, the more hidden underlying processes of power that may be setting up and reinforcing existing organisational structures and cultures are examined.

MAKING MANAGERS: THE MOVE TO COMPETENCE

Over the last two decades of the twentieth century, the intense globalisation and diversification of markets combined with the rapid growth of service industries has created a need to rethink organisation design and management within it. This redesign increasingly turned towards ‘meeting the needs’ of the customer. Organisational processes must have the flexibility to change to meet the vagaries of consumer desire – or even to construct consumer desire. This has spawned a whole new approach to ‘managing’ with an emphasis on creating a culture change that will enable real customer satisfaction. Managers have a pivotal role in securing change through fostering ‘entrepreneurial values’, first within themselves and then within their subordinates (Du Gay, Salaman and Rees, 1996). It is within this context that the notion of the ‘competent manager’ has arisen, and sophisticated ways of measuring this ‘competence’ have been developed.

As a means of developing and measuring managerial behaviour, ‘competence’ emerged in the UK in the 1980s. One of the major attractions of the competence approach is that it constructs and rewards particular types of behaviours that are deemed crucial to organisational success. Organisations draw up lists of behaviours (competence frameworks) which then become the basis for recruitment and promotion, underpinned by appraisal techniques. If, as a result of the appraisal process, it transpires that individuals do not meet the behavioural requirements, then they are encouraged to put themselves, or are sent, on various self-development courses, in order to be able to demonstrate the type of behaviour requisite for organisational success. Individuals are thus, in the language of competence ‘empowered’ to reconstruct themselves in line with organisational needs. By identifying and subsequently working on their own ‘development needs’ as clarified through
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the competence framework, individuals internalise the attributes required for organisational success.1

Not only are competences used in the training and development of managers, they can also be used in the performance management frameworks of organisations – measuring the behaviours of the chief executive downwards to manual workers. Further, competences are increasingly being used as the yardstick to measure the behaviour of different managers working in different cultures, in order to develop a ‘transnational’ organisational culture. Since the bases for the techniques are avowedly scientific, they moreover provide organisations with an ‘objective’ form of reward.

The question that this research sets out to ask is whether the competence frameworks really do provide the ‘level playing field’ that most practitioners claim for the approach. Do the particular assumptions in competence approaches foster diversity, or could they more subtly build on ‘taken-for-granted’ ways of structuring organisational hierarchies?

Management as Problematic

Theoretically, this book emerges from a growing critical corpus of writings that show that management is a cultural, social and ideological phenomenon that should be critically analysed from a number of different perspectives other than that simply of making profit (for example, Knights and Willmott 1985; Miller and Rose 1990). It questions the notion that the neutrality and implied virtue of management is self-evident and builds on the work of these recent theorists who have exposed the workings of power in economic life to construct and shape identities (for example, Alvesson and Willmott 1996; Du Gay 1996). It is based in an understanding that profit and the effective use of resources to get profit are not the only issues in organisational study, but that there are other areas of equal concern: for example, creating meaning in the workplace, gender equality, or environment protection.

By questioning the perceived neutrality of competence, this book attempts to show that such assumptions can silence other voices – in this case those of women. This does not mean that there is no place for analysing, debating, and developing the technical aspects of managing, or that managers are engaged in some conspiracy to subordinate other groups. What is questioned here is whether impersonal, technical logic should be the prime basis upon which managers make decisions. Since competence frameworks are intimately connected with recruitment, reward and promotion, and vaunted for their scientific measurement of managerial behaviour, then it seems that competence frameworks will have a significant impact on who reaches positions of authority in organisations. This book examines the way in which competences are drawn up, and who will benefit from them.
Competence frameworks are rarely represented as disciplinary practices (with the exception of Townley 1993a, b, 1994, 1999; Du Gay, Salaman and Rees 1996; Rees and Garnsey 2003). Nevertheless the approach has features in common with classic approaches to discipline in organisations. Competence focuses on behaviours rather than tasks and processes, and as such may draw the individual into the realm of disciplinary power. Disciplinary power, according to Foucault, works through ‘dividing practices’ and also ‘examination’ and ‘confession’. Do competence frameworks ‘divide’ and do they have elements of ‘examination’ and the ‘confessional’? And if so, what is the likely impact on women managers? Furthermore, is there a way in which competence frameworks can work to become more all-embracing?

A Theoretical Plurality

This book draws on a plurality of theoretical and methodological perspectives. Critical management theory with its emancipatory intent and its tools for understanding broad historical processes provides a broad umbrella framework. However, in order to overcome the ‘universalist’ tendencies of critical theory, the approach here draws on feminist understandings to create a more sophisticated understanding of the ‘embodied’ subject. The ‘subjects’ of the study are psychologically and bodily conditioned by the fact of being born either male or female, yet also conditioned by ideological forces. These ideological forces run through gendered processes which: ‘… mean that advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine’ (Acker 1992, p.251). To uncover these ideological forces, and again to offset the more ‘universalist’ subject of critical theory, Foucauldian approaches to discipline are used as a framework to capture the hidden aspects of power. The book is underpinned by the understanding that:

…politics of identity and identity construction is the deepest and most suppressed struggle in the workplace and hence the ‘site’ where domination and responsive agency are most difficult to unravel. … Prior to any analysis focusing on managers, workers or women and their various interests and reasoning processes is a concern with how these classifications come to exist at all. (Deetz 1992, p.28)

Unpicking the politics of identity construction necessitated a framework that could firstly examine how the classifications of ‘best managerial practice’ came into being, and then to analyse the impact of this on women managers.
Competences at Work

Case study material is drawn from six organisations: a university that was the instigator of ‘open learning’ techniques in the early 1970s; a major multinational in the oil industry; a multinational construction company; a semi-privatised national utility; a health and social services Trust and a beauty and cosmetics retailer and manufacturer. In order to access these processes, the book develops a variety of methods and tools of analysis. They represent a combination of textual and social analysis providing cumulative evidence to suggest that the identification and implementation of competence strategies is not as objective and straightforward as its adherents claim.

The interpretive repertoire is inspired and guided by insights from critical theory, feminism and post-modernism. However, in order not to fall into theoretical obscurity, and to provide some pragmatic advice for managers, it is also guided by a ‘bilingual’ position – keeping the critical dimensions in mind, but finding ways of working within and beyond the competence frameworks to expand their usefulness (Alvesson and Deetz 2000).

THE VOICE OF THE NARRATOR

This book represents an attempt at bringing together, both theoretically and empirically, two major areas of study to examine whether and how a gendered ‘substructure’ is built in organisations. This has necessitated developing a methodology and analysis that reflects this tension. The study represents a pioneering attempt to introduce new and more interpretative techniques into organisational research: it makes no truth claims. Because it is new there are undoubted pitfalls, which I return to in the final chapter. The freedom which I have exercised as researcher no doubt has its drawbacks: I do of course work within my own discursive constraints, and I do have my own political agenda. It is an attempt at what Foucault termed as the genealogical task of ‘recovering the autonomous discourses, knowledge and voices suppressed through totalizing narratives’ (Best and Kellner 1991, p.57) – here the narrative of organisational reform. It is an attempt at ‘unearthing’ ways in which the power of patriarchy filters through the introduction of competence strategies through the constitution of gender identity.

The book does not contest the processes of competence approaches themselves, but it does question the presumed neutrality of such approaches, and calls for a more critical approach to the way in which management models in general are introduced into the workplace. By prising open some of the assumptions in these models, it may encourage readers and management
theorists to begin to examine some of the myths of modern management – or at least to articulate some of the unspoken questions.

Furthermore, since critical theory has an emphasis on reflexivity and self-transformation, I have attempted as a researcher and writer to surface my own fears and anxieties, in the hope that this may help others as we try to make sense of our world. The book has taken some 10 years in thinking and practice. It charts my own journey, or at least selective aspects of it. It has its own story, to which I return at the end. I hope that it opens up a way in which academic researchers can bring together theory and practice in more creative ways – and perhaps work across disciplines more freely. Organisational theorising can become tautological or conflictual, and relate little to practice at the workplace. Our views of the world can be shaped not by what is actually happening in the workplace, but in the heated debates of the ivory tower. In opening up the thinking and emotional processes that have guided this work (and breaking through my own fears), perhaps it paves the way for new and invigorating voices to be heard both in organisation theory and its practice.

ENDNOTE

1. This book does not focus here on generic concepts of competence such as those sponsored by UK-government-led initiatives for vocational training. Nor is it concerned with wider issues of strategy associated with developing ‘core competences of the corporation’ (see, for example, Prahalad and Hamel 1990). Rather, it is interested in the widespread introduction of competence methods as features of Human Resource Management (HRM) within organisations.