

Performing *Professional*: University Student Perceptions of Gender
Discrimination in their Future Careers

By Deborah Natasha Brewis
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School of Languages, Cultures, Art, History and Music
College of Arts and Law
University of Birmingham
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Abstract

This thesis argues that female finalists are aware of the potential impact that their gender might have on their future careers and in light of this have begun planning how to cope with them. Students' concerns lie in two areas: a) family responsibilities interrupting a linear career and b) that their future existence as culturally situated 'women' in the workplace may influence how they are regarded as 'professionals'. These exist despite the discourse of 'equal opportunities' that higher education promotes and the perceived equality of opportunity and outcome. Extrapolating from the detailed analysis of survey and interviews from students, and combining this with an analysis of academic literature, I suggest that the seeming failure of equal opportunity policy in employment may in part reflect a lack of clarity inherent in equality policies and of coherence in the range of theories that inform them. Although the study is limited in the extent to which student attitudes expressed in it can be considered representative, it nevertheless helps us to explore the implications of differing conceptualisations of 'gender' on gender equality policies and informs the direction of what further research is needed in the area of gender in employment studies.

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Introduction

Work organizations are critical locations for the investigation of the continuous creation of complex inequalities because much societal inequality originates in such organizations. (Acker, 441, 2006)

In 2010 women made up around 57% of first degree graduates (ILM, 2011) and 50% of the workforce (*ibid*, 2011, 1). However, despite the seeming gender-equal environment of higher education, beyond university women earn on average less than men: the overall gap between the average pay of women and men has recently been calculated at 17.1% between men and women working full-time¹ and 22.5% when including part-time work (Woodroffe, 2009). There continues to be notable sex-segregation across sectors with more women or men working in particular industries² (Hakim, 1995, Halford and Leonard, 2001), and vertically within almost every industry. Proportionally few women progress to senior positions, accounting for just 12.5% of directors in the FTSE 100.³ Since the landmark legislation of the Equal Pay Act in 1970, initiatives have been put forward to address such issues as equal pay, anti-discrimination during the recruitment process, maternity rights and flexible working but, as the statistics show, further action may be necessary. In a recent report *Women on Boards* (2011), Lord Davies has re-ignited the debate surrounding the representation of women in business and other non-traditional industries. The report not only recommends more transparency on the part of large UK firms regarding their

¹ According the Office for National Statistics, this figure has fallen to 10.2% in April 2010, *News Release*, <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/pdfdir/paygap1210.pdf> Accessed 28/03/2011

² For example, statistics show that men dominate categories such as 'Management and Senior Officials', and 'Skilled Trade Occupations' whereas more women are employed in the categories 'Administrative and Secretarial Work' and 'Personal Service Occupations' *Labour Force Survey: Employment status by occupation and sex, April - June 2010*, Office for National Statistics, <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/statbase/product.asp?vlnk=14248> Accessed 29/03/2010

³ <http://nds.coi.gov.uk/content/Detail.aspx?ReleaseID=418251&NewsAreaID=2> Accessed 3/4/2011

gender equality policies and the number of women in senior positions but goes some way towards endorsing 'positive action' to redress the gender balance following the path of other European countries and Norway's more radical obligatory target (2002) of 40% women in boardrooms.⁴

In light of the continuing controversy that 'positive action' ignites in the popular press,⁵ this study was designed as a probe into potential contradictions inherent in such policies and an examination of why the issue remains unresolved. There are numerous studies of workplace inequality (Acker, 2006, Claes, 1999, Talbot, 2010) and also work on the perceptions of students of inequality in higher education (Morrison et al., 2005, Neitz, 1985). Yet there is a lack of research on the relationship between these two environments: on students' perceptions of inequality in their future careers as they make the transition from an environment that is perceived by them to have achieved gender equality (Morrison et al., 2005, Neitz, 1985) to a more problematic environment for gender. In the original study design, I hypothesised that students would not perceive gender to be an obstacle to the progression of their careers, whereas comparable individuals (alumni of the university with several years of experience of career-building) would have direct experience of discriminatory practices and therefore regard gender as a more important consideration. Instead, as I began the investigation I found that both students and alumni expressed a similar and highly varied range of attitudes towards gender inequality and its importance in planning their careers. The data also showed that, regardless of whether they perceived higher education to be 'equal', students were aware of potential gender

⁴ An obligatory quota has been introduced in Spain and a 'soft' version in Germany <http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/documents/Breaking%20the%20Mould%20for%20Women%20Leaders%20-%20could%20boardroom%20quotas%20hold%20the%20key.pdf> p. 6 Accessed 2/4/2011

⁵ See for example: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2011/aug/21/fears-quotas-more-women-boardroom> Accessed 21/9/2011

inequality issues in employment and had begun to plan how to cope with them. As there were existing studies on experiences of inequality in the workplace, and little work on perceptions of individuals *before* they enter this environment, it is the perceptions of the students that form the focus of this study and their views that act as a springboard to examine the contradictions inherent in ‘equal numbers’ equality policies such as quotas. I discuss the data from alumni in Chapter 5 as a tentative confirmation of student perceptions and as a pointer towards avenues for further research.

Through the analysis of qualitative survey and interview data on perceptions of gender discrimination in employment from a focussed set of undergraduate finalists the majority of whom have yet to experience full-time employment,⁶ this thesis will argue:

- Female finalists in higher education are already aware of the potential impact that their gender might have on their future careers and in light of this have begun to develop plans to cope with them.
- Students’ concerns lie in two main areas: a) family responsibilities interrupting a linear career and b) that their future existence as culturally situated ‘women’ in the workplace may influence how they are regarded as ‘professionals’. This phenomenon occurs despite the discourse of equal opportunities that higher education promotes and the perceived equality of opportunity and outcome in higher education.

⁶ Post-graduation, full-time work is delineated from work experience or part-time work that students may have had to date as this work does not focus on developing a career over the long-term.

- The seeming failure of equal opportunity policy in employment may in part be due to a lack of clarity inherent in equality policies.

Although the study is limited in the extent to which student attitudes expressed in it can be considered representative, it nevertheless helps us to explore the implications of opposing conceptualisations of gender on equality policies and informs the direction of what further research is needed in this area.

This thesis uses a number of key terms: ‘discrimination’ in this study refers to the disadvantaging of an individual based on assumptions about an aspect of their identity, in this study gender. Although there are complex understandings of work, in this thesis the terms ‘employment’, ‘work’ and ‘workplace’ refer to paid employment or self-employment of an individual and the environment beyond the home in which this takes place, focussing on the problems of existing as a gendered individual in industries and workplaces that have been traditionally *male-dominated*. I use the term ‘discourse’ to refer to social understandings or values that are shared by members of a particular social context: for example, a discourse of ‘woman as homemaker’ refers to an understanding shared within a particular social context that it is primarily a woman’s role to take care of the home. I also use the terms ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ interchangeably in this study. I return to explain the decision for this in the *Review of key literature* section.

Thesis structure

The thesis is structured with five main sections. In the first two chapters I present an evaluation of key literature that will inform my work and explain the methodological approach to the study, giving a detailed account of the methods used to collect data. Three chapters of analysis follow. In Chapter 3 I present the range of issues of gender discrimination in employment that the participants of the study were aware of and from my results I argue that although they are aware of gender discrimination issues in employment, they are divided as to whether they conceptualise these processes as being ‘discrimination’. In Chapter 4 I examine the perceived role of the female *body* in the workplace and how it is ‘performed’ through appearance and behaviour. I argue that contradictions between cultural understandings of ‘femininity’ and ‘professionalism’ are potentially problematic from day-to-day and in the long term for women. In Chapter 5 I use the understandings of ‘gender’ and ‘discrimination’ that have emerged from the previous two chapters as a springboard to analyse students’ understanding of ‘equality’ and gender equality policies. I argue that conceptualisations of ‘gender’, such as ‘essentialist’, ‘social constructionist’ and ‘poststructural’, produce problematic ambiguities and contradictions with existing policies and that this may perpetuate the ‘double-bind’ in part explaining the perceived failure of equal opportunities in employment.

CHAPTER 1: REVIEW OF KEY LITERATURE: SITUATING THE STUDY

This research draws on work from three academic fields: management and organisational studies, gender equality in higher education and theories of sex and gender. As prohibitively large bodies of work exist in these areas I do not attempt to give a comprehensive analysis of the development of each field, but pick out key texts and concepts that inform my arguments.

Management and organisation

Scholars have identified that despite advances that have been made in Western Europe in getting a larger number of women into employment, there is ongoing inequality between men and women in terms of the type of work that they do, how many hours they work and at what level of seniority (Halford and Leonard, 2001, Hakim, 1995) resulting in the ongoing disparity in earnings, a ‘pay-gap’ (Woodroffe, 2009). This phenomenon has commonly been explained by two main observations: women are more likely than men to work in occupations that are perceived as being lower in status and therefore lower-paid such as the caring professions and administrative work (Acker, 2006, 448); women are also more likely than men to work part-time and less commonly progress to higher-paid senior positions due to ‘career-breaks’ from taking on family responsibilities such as childrearing (Olsen et al., 2010, Richmond-Abbott, 1993, Chzhen and Mumford, 2009).

Joan Acker’s influential work on power in organisations, imbedded through social gender relations (Acker, 2006), is summarised in the opening quote of this thesis.

Acker argues that inequality flows *from the organisation into society* and from this stance we can argue that organisations' equality policies have the potential to effect change in a wider social context. However, this perspective cannot entirely explain why policies such as flexible working and equal pay have not succeeded in closing the pay gap. Research by Arnaud Chevalier shows that the disparity in choices that men and women make with regards to education, occupation, life-time aspiration and childrearing expectations, with the latter of these being a 'main driver of the gender wage gap' (2007, 840), is also important. Chevalier argues that women who display a 'stronger preference for childrearing' earn less even before they take 'career-breaks' or part-time employment due to choice of occupation and because they are less likely to demonstrate ambition for long-term progression (2007, 837). An important concept that I use in this study is that of the 'dual burden' that women face in terms of balancing both their time for family and work but also their gendered identities *as women*. I will return to evaluate this area of research in the review section *Gender theory*.

A recent report by the Institute of Leadership & Management (ILM) *Ambition and Gender at Work* (2011) revisits this idea, arguing that differences in career-goals of women and men largely account for the pay gap. However, this line of reasoning stops short of probing the grounds on which women make these choices and whether these are choices made 'freely' or whether we should consider them outcomes of 'discrimination'. These questions require a more holistic view of the interactions between individual and organisation. In order to do this, I turn to theories developed for research into career-building, specifically on 'self-concept' (Betz, 1994) and 'Image Theory' (Beach, 2006). These closely related concepts assert that career

decisions are made according to the desired fulfilment of an individual's perceived social role or status: their 'value image' (Thompson and Dahling, 2010, 1, Gottfredson, 1981).

Whether or not processes such as this constitute 'discrimination' is a question that Marie Richmond-Abbott attempts to engage with by organising workplace inequalities into four categories: 1. Human capital inequalities: the unequal numbers of men and women in or available to work in paid employment. 2. Occupational segregation: men or women dominate particular sectors and types of work. 3. Dual burden: women face social expectations to take on family responsibilities in addition to or instead of paid employment. 4. Discrimination (1993, 138-141). Richmond-Abbott explains that the basis for discrimination is that within any given employment context and social culture there are customs, traditions and norms that give rise to gender stereotypes of whether women or men should do certain forms of work (1993). If we conceptualise the dual expectations of women not only as a doubling-up of the demands on their time, but also of the social identity that they are required to perform based on perceptions of sex difference, Richmond-Abbott's third point and the gendered 'self-concept' can also be conceived as an aspect of 'discrimination'.

Although statistics show that there are disparities between the numbers of women and men in the workplace and the opportunities for them to progress, discriminatory practices can often be 'covertly' embedded in language, jokes and cultural representations (Gherardi, 1995). What this thesis hopes to demonstrate is that despite the perceived achievement of 'gender equality' in higher education, students are highly aware of issues that might affect them because of their gender. Also, some

'internal' discriminatory processes are evident in students' testimonies as they discuss how they might cope with discrimination in the future. Yet students are divided as to whether they see these decisions as voluntary or a result of wider gender discrimination. This may be due to differences in how they understand the concepts of 'gender' and 'equality'.

Higher education

Much research on gender in higher education has focussed on gender inequality among groups of academic staff and argues that barriers exist to women's career progression: the so-called 'glass-ceiling' (Ledwith and Manfredi, 2000, Bain and Cummings, 2000). Studies have also been conducted on the attitude of university students toward inequality within higher education arguing that students are resistant to recognise ongoing gender inequality (Neitz, 1985, Morrison et al., 2005). Drawing on research by Diane Millen (1997), a study by Morrison et al. argues that this disinclination is a 'coping strategy' (2005, 151) for dealing with inequality as well as an indication of a wider 'post-feminist' belief that equality between the sexes has largely been achieved. (Kavka, 2002). This position can be conceptualised as a reaction to women being regarded as 'victims', partly as a result of Michel Foucault's influential theories of power.

Foucault argues that through internalising social ideals and values and being progressively rewarded or punished by others according to their relative achievement in these, individuals censure their own behaviour without being able to identify any distinct source of oppression. This model received critique from Nancy Fraser (1989)

and Nancy Hartsock (1990) arguing that it deprived women of subjectivity and real 'choice'. This emphasis on 'choice' can arguably be conceived of as a neoliberal standpoint according to which an economic structure of 'equal opportunities', that facilitates free choice, should be the key to reaching gender equality. Yet the idea of 'choice' continues to evoke debate amongst feminists with the term itself coming under scrutiny by feminists such as Nancy Hirschman (2005) and Rebecca Claire Snyder-Hall (2010). I use these debates to evaluate the implications of 'choice' and in particular understandings of 'equal opportunities' for the coherence and potential success of equality policies.

Little research has been done on whether the platform of 'equality' that higher education aims to achieve for students is perceived by them to continue beyond it. By investigating this, this study offers a new perspective on why gender inequalities in employment persist despite apparent equality at university achievement level. This thesis examines the varying extent to which students expect their future workplace to be gender 'equal' and argues that evidence suggests that significant gender inequalities exist through the reproduction of stereotyped *expectations* of gender both at an individual 'choice' and organisational level.

Gender theory

In this study, I argue that different conceptualisations of gender held amongst students lead to problematic ambiguities in equality policies. It is therefore necessary to establish that there are various ways of conceptualising 'gender'. In their seminal work *Doing Gender* (1987) Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman describe the

evolving history of how 'gender' has been understood, from the first understanding of 'sex' and 'gender' as 'essential': all-pervasive features of identity accountable for all sex-differentiated behaviour (also: Moi, 1999, 11). In the 1960s first and second wave feminists began to argue that this essential conceptualisation was too simplistic asserting, among other less popular standpoints, the 'social constructionist' view that 'sex' should be considered the biological form of the body, whereas behavioural 'gender' characteristics and appearance develop through interaction with society (Moi, 1999, 4, West and Zimmerman, 1987).

In the 1980s and 90s, using a post-structural approach to gender formation derived from the linguistic theories of J.L. Austin, Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes (Salih, 2002, 56), feminists such as Susan Bordo (1989) and Judith Butler (1990) located social discourse as the 'origin' of gender, arguing that gender is formed subconsciously and endlessly through the individual's interaction with social texts and language. Butler's theory identifies discourse as key to the process of gendering; as Sara Salih explains (2002), according to Butler's model there can be no understanding of body beyond the society, and therefore no un-gendered body. As it is the discourse of society that inscribes the body with meaning sex must also be considered a discursive construct (2002, 55-56), causing the sex/gender distinction to collapse. In line with this reasoning, in this thesis I use the terms 'sex' and 'gender' interchangeably. My argument for doing this is supported by the fact that the participants of the research themselves most commonly use the terms in this way and therefore in terms of their lived experience, sex and gender are not separable.

One of Butler's most systematic and convincing critics is Toril Moi. In her text *What is Woman?* (1999) she offers an alternative through an appropriation of one of feminism's first gender theories by Simone de Beauvoir in her work *La Deuxième Sexe* (1949). Like Butler, Moi argues that the sex/gender distinction is not productive. However, her argument diverges from Butler's in that she sees Butler's work as not attributing due significance to the overarching material differences between the male and female body and the significance of their respective reproductive capacities (1999, 40). It is particularly relevant to this study that the differing reproductive capacities of the female and male bodies can be recognised and discussed, as social meanings of 'maternity' play an important role in student narratives and understandings of gender discrimination. I therefore approach the analysis of my data from the perspective that gendered physical differences are 'real' insofar that they are *lived* in the social world whilst recognising that social meanings attributed to physical differences can polarise sex into a misleadingly binary system.

Although I do not present any one of these conceptualisations of gender to be 'true', for the purpose of enquiry I use the concept of 'performance' of gender in order to analyse the way in which students express their gendered identity in relation to their identities as 'professionals'.

Judy Wajcman (1988), and Jennifer E. Cliff, Nancy Langton, and Howard E Aldrich (2005) have analysed the gendered use of language in the workplace to expose the phenomenon known as 'dual burden'. This concept represents the dual expectation of a woman to fulfil both the role of *woman* that continues to be associated with the role homemaker and the contrasting role of a 'professional' in the workplace. In research

on linguistics this concept extends to describe the necessary performance of dual *identities* in the workplace and the home. In my study I demonstrate that this tension arises in student data and draw on existing scholarly work to theorise that the social norms of the culturally sexualised female body stand in contradiction to the ‘professional’ image and are problematic for women both day-to-day and long-term. To support my analysis I draw on a number of key texts on the process of performing the female body by Sandra Bartky, Deborah Zelenese (2007), and Patricia Holland (1987) with particular emphasis on work by Silvia Gherardi (1995) and Mary Talbot (2010) on this apparent ‘role conflict’ (2009, 13) that women experience in the workplace.

In the next section I outline the methodological approach that I take to this research before analysing the potentials and limitations of the methods of this study.

CHAPTER 2: CONDUCTING THE STUDY

Methodology

As a piece of research on inequality, my study is sensitive to the critique that empirical research methodologies have received for reproducing inequality in terms of the relations of power between the researcher and participant and the influence of the researcher in interpreting the results of the research.

The validity of 'scientific' approaches was scrutinised by feminists in reaction to the relative invisibility of women and other marginalised groups within mainstream research (Flax, 1990) and to their negligible role in producing knowledge. Feminists argued that 'scientific' research reproduced stereotypes that were inaccurate and oppressive of women (DeVault, 1996). This 'positivist' methodology did not take into account the production of knowledge as an historically situated, active process (Flax, 1990, Saukko, 2003) and was challenged in 1983 by Derek Freeman in response to a 1920s ethnography of Samoan society by Margaret Mead (1928). The unacknowledged impact of the researcher on interpretation of events or contexts and their presence in the research process was heavily critiqued.⁷ Ann Oakley (1981) and conversation analysts (see Wodak and Krzyzanowski, 2008, 145-159) highlighted that the researcher's presence in interviews has a potential impact on how data can be interpreted.

⁷ The conflict between these two researchers' interpretations of the same social context highlighted the significant impact of the researcher's ideological and epistemological stance on interpretation of observable 'evidence' calling into question whether 'objective' knowledge could be produced at all. From this debate emerged an argument that valid research should be sensitive to the ways in which individuals 'relate to reality differently' SAUKKO, P. 2003. *Doing research in Cultural Studies: An introduction to classical and new methodological approaches*, London, SAGE. p.19

In the analysis and writing up of the study I recognise my place in interactions with participants. As a recent final-year student, personal experience initially guided the focus of this study preliminarily setting the issues in the survey. I mitigated this influence by being open with participants about my motivations for this research,⁸ referring to media sources to identify gender discrimination issues and by conducting semi-structured interviews in which participants could guide the conversation to subjects they deemed relevant to the study. In my presentation of the research results I endeavour to produce a thesis with a ‘polyvocal’ structure in which a range of attitudes are presented as contrasting but valid (Saukko, 2003).

A variety of approaches exist within this framework. Paul Saukko divides these into three main types, each of which I draw on during this study: firstly a hermeneutic or phenomenological methodology which aims to produce a ‘dialogic validity’ (2003, 19) capturing the lived reality of others through a representation of multiple understandings of the world. Secondly, a poststructural methodology which disentangles ‘problematic social discourses’: drawing on Derrida’s work on deconstruction it questions the binaries through which we understand the world (2003, 21). Lastly, a realist or ‘contextualist’ methodology focuses on an insightful evaluation of the direct and wider social, political, economic and historical context of the research being carried out (2003, 19).

In the deconstructive aspect of my research, I will draw on Judith Baxter’s Feminist Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis (FPDA) (2003). Baxter argues that FPDA adds to existing techniques of discourse analysis by providing a specific feminist

⁸ Participants were provided with an information sheet in an email to participants before the interview and were given the opportunity before and after the interview to ask questions about the research.

poststructuralist foregrounding of the shifting relationships between gender and power (2003, 181). I draw on this framework primarily in the foregrounding of gender in my research and focussing primarily on the differences in beliefs '*within* and *between* girls/women' (2003, 181): differences between girls' attitudes and variations in each individual's attitude. Although I hoped to collect data from both male and female students and alumni I was only successful in gaining survey data from male participants and was unable to attract an equal number of male and female participants to be interviewed. Although the data is weighted more heavily in favour of female participants I do not exclude male voices.

My methodology also diverges from FPDA: Baxter seeks to include voices that have been '*silenced*' in order to represent marginal perspectives (2003, 189). For practical reasons I invited students to respond to my initial questions through an online survey: by using an online survey that was advertised through the university-wide online portal, alumni newsletter and business networking website LinkedIn I was able to reach a greater number of respondents from a broad range of academic fields and industries. The respondents were therefore self-selecting and I could not assure that '*silenced*' voices would be heard. In order to mediate this I invited participants to take part in a more in-depth interview from a broad range of ages, educational backgrounds, industries and attitudes towards gender. Baxter also argues for *local* feminist action so as to avoid the universalising of any solutions or recommendations that emerge. In my research I recognise that the knowledge produced is local, historically-situated and specific to the context from which it was produced but I use this knowledge to point out potential contradictions between differing standpoints of gender on wider policies that are in action or under consideration.

Collecting the data

Qualitative methods are used in this study due to the nature of the research questions: I ask students not only which gender discrimination issues they are aware of, but analyse *how* students perceive them, and in particular from what conceptualisations of ‘gender’ and ‘equality’. My findings are limited as a result of the small sample size and the types of students that volunteered to take part in the research that I discuss further at the beginning of Chapter 3. This study does not produce findings that represent the views of the entire 2010/11 final-year cohort at the University of Birmingham, instead it examines the *range* of attitudes towards gender discrimination that emerged from the data that I collected and argues that there are potential implications of such standpoints on wider issues of gender equality in employment.

Initial perspectives were collected in online surveys on the same themes: one for final-year students at the University of Birmingham and another for alumni of the university. The themes for these surveys were picked out from a range of recent articles on gender in the workplace from the UK national press through LexisNexus. The themes were: career motivation in terms of salary, current status of gender equality, performance of gender in behaviour and appearance in the workplace, and the impact of having children on career. Most response options were left open in order to allow participants to guide the focus of the research. Next, participants were invited to take part in semi-structured interviews that lasted 40-60 minutes on themes derived from survey responses. These were conducted face-to-face with students, and with the exception of one, alumni were interviewed by telephone. The encounters took an

interview rather than conversational format, giving participants space to take their narratives to themes that were of importance to them. In addition to responding to direct questions, I responded non-verbally with appropriate nods and laughs. I found that my position as a young researcher aided me in developing a rapport with the final-year students as I was able to present myself as in a similar position as them. I found that in interviews the alumni took a more educative approach, wishing to convey their experience for the benefit of their younger counterparts.

In the next chapter, I begin my analysis of student data by presenting the range of gender discrimination issues that participants were aware of and evaluate their attitudes towards them.

CHAPTER 3: AWARENESS: STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF (IN)EQUALITY ISSUES IN EMPLOYMENT

In this chapter I provide an overview of how a number of final year university students at the University of Birmingham perceive gender discrimination issues in employment in general and in relation to their own careers. Responses demonstrate that these students are aware of gender discrimination issues in employment and link these primarily to women's ongoing association with childrearing. Two themes emerge: the time away from employment that women have and are expected to have for child bearing and child rearing, and the impact this has on career progression, traditionally understood to be linear, progressive and continuous. Respondents also display evidence of 'internal' discrimination in the way that they discuss how they might cope with discrimination in the future and in reluctance to acknowledge gender discrimination with regards to their own career 'choices' and 'covert' forms of discrimination.

Context of study

The University of Birmingham's policy on gender, *Gender Equality Scheme*,⁹ reports that there is a relatively equal balance of male and female students in the 2009 undergraduate cohort with 54% female and 46% male, and that attainment rates are in line with this ratio with 75% female students achieving a first or upper second class result in their undergraduate degree compared with 70% males (2010). I return to analyse this document further in Chapter 5.

⁹ This document can be found at: <http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/university/ges-2010-2013.pdf> Accessed 18/07/2011

My online survey received a total of 69 student responses. Finalists declare themselves aged between 19 and 25 with the majority aged 22. They are predominantly female: 47 compared to 22 male. The majority of respondents study an arts or humanities subject: 45 (including 11 from sociology) compared to 24 from a scientific subject. The bias, also found in the eight interviewees,¹⁰ is significant as arts and humanities courses commonly include modules on gender-related issues and theory. With this imbalance and the small-scale nature of this study in mind, the results of this research are not intended as representative of the wider student body, but rather a rich source of information about the range of themes that students are aware of and ways in which students conceptualise the issues raised.

Amongst the alumni respondents, the survey attracted a total of 204 responses of which 105 female and 95 male¹¹ aged between 22 and 73. There is no clear bias towards arts and humanities or science in the degree studied amongst the alumni respondents as among the students, but there are a disproportionate number of alumni working in business related industries. In likelihood this is due to the distribution of the survey via the networking site LinkedIn. Due to the developing focus of my study, a smaller number of alumni than students were interviewed. Six participants were chosen to vary in age and occupation in order to gain breadth in the testimonials and increase the potential for diversity of viewpoints. I discuss these results in Chapter 5.

¹⁰ Respondents from degree courses: one student each from Media, Culture & Society and Philosophy, Maths and Computer Science, International Relations, Physics with Computer Science, History and Social Science and Medieval and Modern History, and two students study Sociology.

¹¹ 3 not specified

Key themes

A number of key themes emerged from student surveys and interview data:

- Students perceive that gender roles within the home still have a significant impact on inequalities in the workplace, including on pay.
- There is a discourse of inevitability about gender inequality amongst students and there is some evidence that certain students are engaged in a process of ‘internal discrimination’ in their detailed plans to ‘cope’ with it.
- There is an overall belief in ‘choice’ and ‘equal opportunities’ amongst interviewees.
- Students ‘play down’ the importance of gender inequalities and engage in a complex process to decide whether particular acts or comments are discriminatory.

I shall discuss these through considering student expectations in relation to pay, child rearing, fairness, and ‘covert’ forms of discrimination.

Expecting the ‘pay gap’

In surveys and interviews, the majority of student respondents identified difference in salary between women and men as an area of concern. Yet when I asked whether they thought that men and women were paid equally in the industry that they were planning to enter after graduation, the majority of students answered ‘yes’ or ‘don’t

know'. In order to find out what students thought might be behind the pay gap those who answered 'no' were asked to elaborate on why they thought this was. From their explanations, we can see that respondents perceive wider social norms of *gender roles within the family* to still have a potential impact on inequalities in the workplace for two main reasons: there is a difference in salary value between occupations traditionally dominated by men or women, and women earn less over the course of a career.

The latter of these phenomena was better understood by students; they argued that women were more likely than men to have 'career-breaks' or to work part-time due to taking on family responsibilities:

...generally men get paid more than women, but this is probably because a lot of women take years off/go part time in order to have a family, so it's not really unfair if they actually haven't been working as long as men...

There is justification for paying women less in all employment when they have [...] less experience due to taking time out to have children etc.

This argument is well-established and it has been widely demonstrated that the time women spend outside employment is a major factor behind the pay-gap (Olsen et al., 2010, Woodroffe, 2009). However, it is essential to note that the impact of 'career-breaks' and part-time work that women more commonly take are salient due to the *linear* nature of the career.

Susan Halford, Mike Savage, and Anne Witz (1997) discuss the traditional model of a career as being 'linear', continuous and with progression being based on experience (duration) taking precedence over an ability to perform in the role. This career model confers advantage to those individuals who are able to devote themselves uninterruptedly to full-time work: men therefore have succeeded under this model as they traditionally have taken on fewer family responsibilities. In contrast, women's careers are traditionally non-linear and variable (Patton and McMahon, 2006).

Although in this model time taken away from work can be seen to justify a lower rate of progression of women into senior positions and gender pay-gap, it is also the *expectation* of women to take on these responsibilities later in life that has an impact on their careers.

This argument of gender inequality by social *expectation* of a certain career-path is largely absent from current debates.¹² The norm for women to take 'career-breaks', makes women a less reliable investment for organisations and students are quick to point this out. This issue is most frequently brought up in the survey and most talked about in the interviews as an explanation for the pay-gap. Students argue that women's continuing association with childrearing has an impact not only in the initial recruitment stage but throughout their careers. One student sums up the point:

Less chance of promotion or being hired because you are expected to have babies

¹² See for example a radio debate between Dr Catherine Hakim, LSE and Sarah Jackson of the Working Families charity for the BBC: http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_9304000/9304286.stm accessed 31/8/2011

In this quote, the *threat* that women will eventually take time away from work is inseparable from the act of taking time off itself in terms of the impact on employability and perceived potential to build a successful career. In this statement women's biological capacity to give birth to a child, to 'have babies', is used connotatively to imply that it is women that will be primarily responsible to care for the children and therefore require time away from work more significant than the physical act of bearing children itself. It is clear from this language that students are aware of the *expectation* that exists for a woman to take up primary responsibility for childcare whether or not she does in fact do so, and that this may have an impact on whether or not a woman is hired or considered suitable for progression within an organisation.

One interviewee, Rebecca¹³ expresses her concern with this phenomenon through an encounter with a professor at the university about applying for funding to study full-time:

[My professor] kind of suggested that well, 'oh you know, people coming in and out of academia all the time' [...] and I just kind of thought what does he *mean?* he's talking to me like I fancy, like if I was researching my family history and was dipping in and out of it. As opposed to I would like a career, and I was...yeah..I was quite angry actually. *Rebecca*

In this conversation, Rebecca feels that her professor is suggesting that academic study will be more of a hobby than a career for her. Whether this was the intention of

¹³ To preserve confidentiality, all names have been replaced with pseudonyms. Survey responses are given without names.

the professor or not, because this statement is made in the context of the interview on gender discrimination, we can see that Rebecca is sensitive to her professor's casual approach to her problem and questions whether it is her identity as a *woman* that means she is not being taken seriously for wanting to build a career in academia.

In survey responses other students identify gender perceptions:

I have worked within electricals retail and i [sic] have experience a large amount of males who will not be served by me, or feel i will have inferior knowledge about electricals.

...in healthcare, some people don't really like/are suspicious of male midwives or nurses.

The extent to which students perceive this sex-segregation by occupation as problematic creates a complex picture, which I examine further in Chapter 5.

However, one particular survey response identifies a more direct way in which this is disadvantageous for women:

Women are often paid less for the same level jobs, for example in council jobs a male bin man is paid more than a female care worker.

On the issue of how gender has an impact on the valuing of occupations, Joan Acker argues that the value of jobs is social (2006), with each occupation allocated a consensus value and salary. Acker asserts that associated with the historical gendering

of employment, particular jobs are more respected and seen as being 'higher-status' in any given culture and that this contributes to the differences in pay between traditionally male and female skilled work (2006, 448).

In addition to the expectation of employers practising discrimination, there is also evidence that an 'internal' process is contributing to the factors behind the pay gap: a recent report, *Ambition and Gender at Work* (ILM, 2011), argues that women continue to occupy roles that are traditionally 'feminine' and lower in status because they have lower levels of ambition. The report asserts that there are observable differences in the levels of ambition in women and men and that this has an impact on their respective careers. The report asserts that women are less certain of their abilities and less clear about their career goals than men (2011, 3) which may have an impact on an individual's capacity to be promotion or to negotiate pay. Arnaud Chevalier connects this lower level of ambition to progress into senior ranks with women's 'preference for childrearing' (2007, 837). According to Chevalier, women earn less both because they take time off from work or have more frequent periods of part-time employment than men, and because the knowledge that they may take on the bulk of family responsibilities in the future means that they are less likely to demonstrate ambition for long-term progression or may choose roles where progression is not a priority (2007, 837). These studies provide evidence that individuals make career decisions that are in keeping with their gender identities, in particular in relation to childrearing.

This observation is not a new one, for example Christine Griffin's study of young women in the 1990s demonstrated that they most aspired to office work because of

it's appropriateness for women as a profession and its glamorous, 'feminine' image (1999). This study and recent reports do not go on to explore *why* gender plays a part in choosing a career. To this question, career theorists' versions of Image Theory provide a clue. A person's 'image norm' (Super, 1957), 'self-concept' (Betz, 1994, Giannantonio and Hurley-Hanson, 2006) 'self-image' (Beach, 2006) can be considered to construct careers in order to fulfil aspects of an individual's perceived image of themselves, or more precisely their social role or status, their 'value image' (Thompson and Dahling, 2010, 1, Gottfredson, 1981). This family of concepts asserts that when evaluating their career options, individuals gradually narrow down their options according to whether they match up with aspects of their identity (Gottfredson, 1981). These theories therefore suggest women may make career decisions that accommodate their 'self-image' as *women*, a norm still strongly associated with childrearing.

It is noticeable from interview data that students were not only aware of how childcare might affect their careers, but had detailed plans of how they might cope with this. Although some female students focussed heavily on the issue of childcare with some expressing concern or frustration at the conflict between a desire to have a family with the concept of career-building and other students conveyed an attitude of acceptance, overall student interviewees saw the situation as 'inevitable'.

Anticipating the inevitable

There is a discourse of inevitability among the female students interviewed about the way in which taking on family responsibilities may have an impact on their careers.

Although many of them plan to work in non-traditional careers for women, they display some element of 'internal' discrimination in their acceptance and planned adaptation to 'cope' with the situation. There are complexities to whether we can consider these processes 'discrimination', and I return to this later in the chapter.

One of the first considerations for the female students interviewed is bearing children in relation to building a career. Many of the interviewees were able to clearly articulate the problem of 'coping' with a break in their careers and had already started to develop strategies that rely on switching occupations, changing hours of work or co-operation from their partners [See Appendix A, quotes 1-4 for more examples] :

Yeah, I mean, my plan would be to um do a PhD and research until I started a family and then if I decided to go back to work when the children were older I'd either switch to lecturing or maybe train as a teacher or, you know, find a way to fit it, fit both in. *Lara*

Some identified more general ways in which women choose careers in advance to reconcile the conflict of time demands at work and home:

I think primary school teachers, like, there's loads more women than men but when you think about it, teaching is a job that would suit women with families because they get the holidays off so when their kids are at school...*Lara*

Student responses in surveys and interviews reveal for the most part a confidence towards being able to 'cope' with potential dual demands on their time. In

combination with ‘coping’ is a discourse of ‘fighting’ discrimination in a seemingly contradictory claim that managing the situation is a form of resistance to it. This emerged in surveys when students were asked why they weren’t deterred from their preferred industry if they had identified that discrimination happens within it [For more examples see Appendix A, quotes 5-6]:

If discrimination is avoided and ignored rather than being tackled, those who are discriminated against will never be able to move forward and will always be marginalised.

From student data, it is difficult to define their understanding of ‘discrimination’. Many students assert in the survey that men are also victims of gender discrimination in terms of the unequal allocation of paternity to maternity leave, yet some are reluctant to describe the reason for this difference, women’s ongoing association with childrearing, as being discrimination *per se* preferring to express their plans to cope with childcare as independent ‘choices’.

This extract from an interview with Lilly reveals the complexity of defining ‘discrimination’ and ‘choice’:

I think I want to have children and I want to be the one who looks after them but then it's sort of dependant on who your partner is and their job...and you have to weigh up financially who's gonna [sic] do it but I think if you're a man it's difficult to become a carer [...] because you get a lot less time paternity than women do maternity which of course they've had the baby they need to

recover physically but erm it's expected in society that women will be the one that stays at home...erm I don't like that and I think that should change. *Lilly*

Lilly's narrative begins with a discourse of 'free choice' and implies a desire to stay at home with her children full-time with the phrase 'look after them'. Lilly then begins to explain the potential complexities of this decision stating that it is difficult for a male parent to take on the role of full-time carer and gives the reason that men in the UK currently get a shorter allocated time for paternity leave than women. She ends her statement with a rejection of social expectations of gender roles. Many students argued that women should be allowed to choose a take a traditional social role and this choice should be valued.

Fair's fair

From my study, it emerges that although theories such as Image Theory can establish a process by which gender is likely to be a key factor in career decisions, there is no consensus on whether or not choices formed by this process can be considered 'free choice' or a form of discrimination. For example, a survey response states:

...more women may apply for lower paid jobs than men, simply because of preference or differing priorities.

The student's use of the adverb 'simply' here implies that the 'choice' that women make to take on family responsibilities is considered to have been made freely on the basis of personal preference. According to Image Theory these preferences stem from

the 'self-concept', and so the crux of the problem becomes whether or not the 'self-concept' is conceptualised as voluntary, innate, or shaped by external social discourses.

The conception of the extent to which the individual is able to make free choices varies among the students interviewed with no clear bias towards any one position. Sandra for example argues that the choice that she has made to enter into a male-dominated profession (computer programming) has been made freely because it is an industry in which she identifies 'gender boundaries'. On the other hand, Sarah draws on her experience of being discouraged from studying mathematics by her father to argue that external forces on an individual's decision making are also at play.

Interviews with Sadie and Beth produced a similar picture of the complexities of 'choosing'. Both Sadie and Beth state that they have chosen their careers themselves according to their personal interests and values: Beth emphasises that she has chosen to enter an army career despite difficulties for women posed by structural barriers to women entering certain army careers. Sadie explains that her preference to stay at home with her children in future is a choice made freely and asserts that this is not at all at odds with her identity as a feminist:

..I don't see feminism as the right to work, yes of course it *is* the right to work but it's not just that it's the right to choose what to do with your own life and your own body and err...whoever *you* are it's you not me, I'll choose whatever I want to do and part of that is if I want to be a full-time wife or mother that is my choice. That's not what I want to do, I want to still work, but it it feminism

for me is about having the choice about what you want to do...not...
conforming to feminist ideas or whatever. *Sadie*

As I discuss in Chapter 5, the belief in free 'choice' can be argued to be the successful result of 'equal opportunities', a popular conceptualisation of 'equality' in higher education. The strength of the discourse of free 'choice' that runs through my data reflects the results of other studies on young people in which they largely express a belief that gender equality has been achieved, such as the study by Mary Jo Neitz (1985). A more recent study by Morrison et al. (2005) asserts that although students give evidence of occurrences of gender discrimination within their prestigious British university, such as in sports funding and places at co-educational colleges (2005, 153), and that both male and female participants express that individuals are compelled to conform to the gender stereotypes for their sex (2005, 152), there is a reluctance to identify this as 'inequality' or 'discrimination'. In their study, female students were particularly reluctant to recognise these phenomena as evidence for gender inequality in higher education overall (2005, 155).

By contrast, a study by Pamela Aronson found evidence that some young women were aware of feminist achievements and ongoing inequality (2003). In contrast to some of their counterparts, *Sadie* and *Beth* point out that there are still disparities between the treatment of men and women and attempt to identify possible structural and social influences on choice:

I think if you went and asked a load of like young girls like five year olds, oh 'can you do the same job as a man' they'd be like 'oh yeah if I wanted to' but

they'd still be like 'oh, I want to be a nurse' or 'I want to be a princess or a hairdresser'. From that young age ... I don't think they'd don't think they'd be...'oh I want to be a scientist or I want to be a police officer'. So, I just don't think people are as aware and it's like oh well it's a choice, they have got that opportunity but it's a choice to do something else. [...] You know I think how you are socialised as a woman influences what job you pick. And because you pick a job that's more tailored for a woman you don't think oh it's discrimination. All my friends want to be teachers, they're doing PGCEs. I think that's quite a 'womanly' job. *Beth*

In this quote, Beth describes the complexity in distinguishing 'choice' from opportunity with her hypothetical example of school children: although they recognise that they have the *opportunity* to work in whatever profession they like, on the whole they are likely to *choose* to work in ones that are compatible with the norm of their gender.

Beth ends by stating that it is difficult for individuals to identify this process as 'discrimination'. In their study Morrison et al. highlight an indisposition among students to acknowledge 'covert' (2005, 155) discriminatory practices, such as jokes about social gender roles, as being 'discrimination' or problematic even though they can easily identify them (2005, 155). Silvia Gherardi argues for the influence of language in shaping our understanding of the world and suggests that in certain situations jokes can be used as verbal violence and part of a process of subjugation of women and children (1995, 53). Students' lack concern therefore indicates an ongoing opportunity and danger of linguistic oppression (Coates, 1994).

Just having a laugh?

Student attitudes towards more 'covert' forms of discrimination were revealed through three interview topics: jokes about gender stereotypes, representation of women and men on television and under what conditions a student would report a colleague for discrimination. Although students seem to recognise the influence of jokes on creating and maintaining stereotypes of gender, they are keen to emphasise the difficulty in judging whether a joke is harmful to gender equality.

Sadie and Sarah highlighted jokes in their surveys and in interviews I asked them to talk further about their experience of them. Sarah describes an instance where her classmate implies that she is surprisingly good at 'logic' *for a girl*, but she emphasises various interpretations of this comment. She argues that it could be ironic, invoking a shared understanding of the Cartesian model associating men with the rational mind and women with the emotional body, but she notes that her classmate has been raised in another culture in which these stereotypes are seen as more acceptable (Sarah describes this as being 'sexist', expressing her disapproval), implying that his attitudes may be culturally formed. Pressing Sarah for an opinion on how this joke made her feel revealed mixed sentiments: on one hand she acknowledges that jokes perpetuate discourses of gender difference that exist in the status quo, yet on the other she argues that they do not affect her and that humour could help 'dismantle' stereotypes.

Sadie shares this dilemma of interpreting jokes:

Does it matter? Umm..yes and no...it's by sort of using it but sort of making it mainstream and then also you're making a joke out of discrimination you're discrediting it. [...] But then there's also people who would genuinely believe it or wouldn't see it as a joke or just messing around they would actually they might take that and think it's these people are absolutely true 'these women should be in the kitchen (imitates, lowered, posh voice)' [...] It's all a matter of interpretation. *Sadie*

She goes on to point out that the seriousness of jokes about gender seems to be 'played down' amongst her friends to seem to be more 'acceptable' than other comments based on stereotypes:

Gender discrimination is almost more acceptable [...] you can't make sort of off the cuff racist remarks anymore, it's completely unacceptable, it's not very nice but then you talk about women you know 'get back in the kitchen' or whatever and men and this and this and that and *that's* acceptable. *Sadie*

A widespread disapproval for all forms of discrimination was clear from survey data with students asserting that they would report a range of discriminatory practices on the basis of: sexuality, gender, age, racism, faith, disability, and class, but students often add caveats to the conditions under which they would report discrimination based on what repercussions of such action would be and what reporting an incident would achieve [see Appendix A, quotes 7-9 for more examples]:

Depends on the circumstances and any potential repercussions for me

...all sorts of discrimination should be reported. but [sic] within reason

All but only if it was hurtful and was meant rather than just light hearted
banter

It seems that the inferred *intention* behind a comment is essential in judging its harmfulness to the individual and/or to society. Comments made that may be considered 'banter' and 'within reason' are regarded as ironic and not seen as problematic compared to 'serious' discrimination. From the scale of study that I have conducted, it is not yet clear *how* it is that comments may be judged as being harmful or not, but we can see that making this distinction seems to be important for students. This stands in contrast to Gherardi's more universalising argument that jokes oppress the individual and reinforce wider gender norms (1995), yet the continuing use of this type of humour underlines that traditional stereotypes of gender are widespread and perpetuated.

Like the issue of jokes, there are conflicting interpretations amongst interviewees of how influential stereotypical depictions of men and women are on the television and in the media. Daniel who has studied inequality issues during his degree considers the influence of representations of gender roles to be unconscious and unavoidable.

Rebecca holds a middle view in that she recognises representations to be influential in wider society, but does not perceive them as having an effect on her own views as thanks to her academic background she is in a position to analyse problematic gender role norms within them. Beth asserts that although reiterations of stereotypes may be

harmful, they cannot be considered deliberately oppressive but rather the result of economic forces giving the example that adverts for cleaning products, aimed at women, are produced to mirror the social norms that are shared by its target market. I also asked students to name and talk about their opinions of television programmes they had seen and describe their reaction to the way in which gendered identities are depicted in them. Their answers on this topic reveal complex perceptions of self-presentation of gender in terms of behaviour and appearance, which I address in Chapter 4.

In this chapter I have discussed the most prominent issues surrounding gender discrimination in employment that emerged through a survey and interviews with a small sample of final year students of the University of Birmingham. I have argued that within a tradition of linear careers that the *expectation* for a woman to take the principal caring role within the family is considered problematic to building a career whether or not a woman chooses to take up this traditional role. I have also examined the complexities among student discourses of 'choice' in relation to making career decisions.

CHAPTER 4: *GENDER: THE GENDERED BODY IN PERFORMING* *'PROFESSIONAL'*

In addition to perceiving that childrearing may affect their careers, students raise concerns regarding the perceived way in which women might exist as gendered *bodies* in the workplace. I assert that student testimonies support the theory that mainstream femininity can conflict with the traditional image of the 'professional' and argue that this is potentially problematic in both the short and long term for women in employment.

Key themes

- Students are divided as to whether or not they perceive that their appearance in the workplace is relevant to issues of gender discrimination. A general sense emerges that work clothing should act as a 'neutral' foil that does not 'distract'.
- Overall, students agree that an individual's appearance and behaviour does and should differ in and out of work but that it is more difficult for women employees to manage their appearance than men due to contradictions between 'femininity' and 'professionalism'.
- Visible sexuality of the body is perceived to be particularly problematic for the female employee and an important consideration when presenting oneself as 'professional' from day-to-day.
- However, by taking into account arguments made in the previous chapter regarding the importance of *expectation* of gender roles and norms I argue that

behaviour in and out of the workplace are inextricable from one another in the long term.

Does it matter what I look like?

Bodies are an important location for research as they are the interface between the individual and the world: they are used to perform parts of our identity, including gender (Dolezal, 2010, Acker, 1991, Gherardi, 1995). It can be argued that, as a place in which an individual spends a significant amount of time, the workplace is also an important location for gender research (Ainsworth, 2001). This chapter investigates how these two locations intersect.

I received mixed responses from students regarding the perceived relevance of my investigation into the appearance of the gendered body in the workplace to the issue of gender discrimination. In surveys, I asked students about two main issues concerning their appearance in the workplace: what factors they would consider when dressing for work and what types of self-presentation would lead to being regarded as 'masculine' or 'feminine'. Some responses engaged with the topic of appearance, but a small number of respondents express vehemently that they found the question irrelevant to the topic of gender discrimination and that it was self-evident that women and men would look different in the workplace. For example:

...because i [sic] am a female and want to be seen as a feminine person,
because i am.

These responses are characterised by an understanding of gender as an inherent part of identity that is unchangeable, with male and female traits of behaviour and appearance falling into two distinct categories of ‘woman’ and ‘man’ and corresponding with one’s sexed biological form. One interviewee explains the standpoint in a discussion of the perceived attempts by businesswomen in the mainstream entertainment programme *The Apprentice* to match the traits of assertiveness and ‘cut-throat’ approach to personal success of their male counterparts:

Well it makes me laugh a bit, that they’re not comfortable in just being themselves like if you, if you feel you have to act like a man to get taken seriously that is obviously shows that you are not comfortable you know with the fact you are a woman and that you have different strengths, maybe, maybe if people were more comfortable with themselves in that way you wouldn’t have such a, such a big issue about gender disparities and whatever. *Lara*

It is important for the purposes of the discussion of equality initiatives in Chapter 5 that I take a moment to identify the various ways in which students conceptualised gender in their discussions with me. In this statement, that the standpoint expressed by Lara can be called ‘gender essentialism’ (also, Sandra and Lilly). As we can see, this standpoint attributes sets of oppositional characteristics to ‘male’ and ‘female’ bodies within a binary framework of ‘man’ and ‘woman’. Other students, most notably Beth, Daniel and Sarah, who have studied gender theory as part of their degrees, express that they believed gender to be ‘socially constructed’: that behaviours are learnt through interaction with social norms and rules. A third way of conceptualising gender was alluded to by one student, Daniel, as ‘gender performance’. This position

is known as a 'poststructural' approach to gender, brought to scholars attention by Judith Butler's canonical work *Gender Trouble* (Butler, 1990), that locates social discourse as the origin of gender, and argues that gender is acquired through the individual's communication with social texts and language.

Rather than identify *why* they would dress a certain way in the workplace, a large number of respondents gave details about what types of items they would consider 'appropriate' for the work environment. For men there was little permitted variation from a dark suit and tie unless casual dress was allowed or special uniform or safety equipment required. 'Fitting in' with other people's way of dressing and set 'norms' for each workplace or profession were the most commonly cited influences on work-wear with 'safety', 'comfort' and 'smartness' ranked highly in importance.

...smart casual and stylish clothing - the more im [sic] comfortable and look well. The more people respect me in return. I have experienced wearing bad clothes and receiving weird looks or/being ignored

The major factor is what others wear. I don't want to be the odd one out...

In survey responses and student interviews that do go into depth about considerations, it is generally acknowledged that work dress can help or hinder an individual from gaining the respect of other colleagues and clients as a 'professional'. It emerges that a key demand of work dress is that it should be *neutral* and not detract attention from the merit of their activities in the workplace: for example Daniel states that bright colours would be inappropriate for the workplace and Lilly warns of being too

‘attracting’. This discourse was evident in interviews with both female students and male student, although Lara, Beth and Sandra emphasised that working women needed to pay particular attention that their outfits were not ‘distracting’ on a sexual level. This concern with the female body representing a dangerous ‘distracting’ sexuality will be explored specifically later in this chapter.

Meanwhile, according to survey responses, it is seemingly important for some students to maintain a gendered image as a ‘feminine’ individual as well as creating an appropriately ‘professional’ look. Guy and Banim point out that the goal of self-presentation in the workplace is complex: in their study they found that participants wanted to achieve a ‘distinctive’ but ‘overall positive’ impression by balancing competing discourses of work-wear norms against the desire to present aspects of their individuality (2000). I explore the particular complexity of this process for women later in the next section of this chapter.

Although I asked specifically in my surveys about the changes that students planned to make to their *appearance*, scholars have argued that similar changes are made to behaviour and language used in the workplace in order to negotiate gendered identities with work roles (Cliff et al., 2005, Wajcman, 1988). Due to the small scale of my study I have focussed on changes to gendered appearance, as it is an aspect of this research area that has not yet been fully explored. The tension of negotiation that I identify in data from students between gaining respect in the workplace as a ‘professional’ and maintaining a ‘feminine’ gendered identity in terms of appearance is a feature that is shared with results of behavioural and linguistic patterns.

Dress to impress: 'feminine' vs. 'professional'

In survey and interview responses, there is a strong discourse of dividing gender along binary lines into two groups: men and women. I asked respondents to identify what types of self-presentation would lead to an individual being regarded as 'feminine' or 'masculine'.¹⁴ Most students gave a list of stereotyped and oppositional behaviours for men and women, but some respondents emphasise that they conceive that either sex can possess these 'masculine' and/or 'feminine' characteristics. Whether possessed by men or women, the many of responses linked success in the workplace with traditionally 'masculine' behaviours, though a minority of responses argued that feminine behaviours were also important to some professions. This discourse is one that can also be found in policy documents and is discussed at length in Chapter 5.

There seems to be a tension in this attitude: the majority of students perceive that 'masculine' behaviours are important in the workplace, yet they have also demonstrated through their disapproval of women who 'act like men' (as in Lara's previous comment on *The Apprentice*) that there is a strong desire to maintain their gendered identities as 'feminine'. Silvia Gherardi, argues that women must perform a 'balancing act' in order to maintain their identities as 'female' whilst behaving in an appropriate manner in the authoritative and traditionally masculine environment of employment. She explains that whilst it is important to adhere to the social gender

¹⁴ It is important to note that the terms 'feminine' and 'masculine' cannot globally be considered as McRobbie describes 'unified' or 'assured' as there are a range of ways in which these terms can be understood and performed MCROBBIE, A. 2005. Judith Butler and the Politics of Post-Feminist Cultural Studies. *The Uses of Cultural Studies*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd. p. 49 The terms will be used in this essay to describe a mainstream understanding of femininity and masculinity that was referred to by the students that I interviewed by which characteristics of the 'female' and 'male' are seen as oppositional and in keeping with traditional stereotypes.

norms and to anticipate that others will do the same, (1995, 131) a woman must also follow the norms of the organisational environment:

The 'rational' woman may be pleasing and moderately feminine, but she should not be attractive; if she is, she will not be taken seriously... (1995, 14)

Gherardi argues that being 'attractive' is perceived to be at odds with the image of a 'rational' employee. As Alsop, Fitzsimmons and Lennon explain, in modern Britain the concepts of 'beauty' and 'femininity' are closely linked because in a visually dominated, 'cosmetic' age, femininity becomes chiefly constituted by the presentation of the body (2003, 167). The idea that the identities of 'woman' and 'professional' conflict in traditionally male-dominated industries is supported by the work of other scholars in the area: Marie-Thérèse Claes describes the situation as 'no-win' for women employees (1999, 9), Mary Talbot identifies the dilemma as a 'double-bind' (Talbot, 2010) and other scholars emphasise gender 'role conflict' (Powell et al., 2009, Patton and McMahon, 2006).

Gherardi delineates the process of being 'rational' yet a 'woman' into two types of work: 1) ceremonial: by which individuals stress their sexual difference through socially recognised symbols of gender in order to establish one's gender identity within the organisation and 2) remedial work: by which individuals defer symbols of gender to situated interactions and selectively make their gender identity neutral or 'discreet' (1995, 131). From the way in which students reveal that they plan to alter their appearance in the workplace, it is possible to argue that gendered appearance plays an important role in this negotiation of gender:

...obviously it's more difficult for especially a young woman to be smart but not frumpy while dealing with patients, like, and a man can just wear a shirt and trousers whereas a woman has to maybe think more carefully about you know balancing what sort of clothes she likes to wear and what presents the right image... *Lara*

From this quote and similar statements from other students, it appears that a wider variety of clothes is deemed appropriate work-wear for women than for men.

Moreover, the use here of 'obviously' suggests that this imbalance is accepted. This situation has its advantages, as Lara describes, of facilitating the expression of personal taste and individuality, but it also makes it more difficult for women to maintain a professional image. It is more evident in quotes from interviews with Rebecca that it is possible to admire a successful individual's beauty as a *woman* and value this as an achievement:

I went to an inaugural lecture the other day and there was a very young woman [...] and she's just been made a professor at this university and she just looked *fantastic* and her lecture was really good and she really did, for me she was inspirational [...] her little three-year-old was there in the audience with her husband and...I just thought *wow* you know, she's a fantastic looking woman...not that that necessarily matters but that she, she is a good looking woman and she's made erm you know an effort with what looks she's been given, you know? *Rebecca*

The discourse of ‘not looking like a man’ is also seen as an accomplishment in surveys and in some cases a demonstration of resistance to the stereotype that some industries are necessarily ‘masculine’:

I see lots of girls changing their style to be like men to fit as computer scientists. I see some ladies in the school who refrain from wearing feminine clothing or wearing perfumes or make-up just so that they can fit in with the stereotypes of a how a programmer should look, which unfortanely [sic] is known to be fat, lazy looking and un-social...

The high value that is placed on presenting oneself as a ‘woman’ as well as a ‘professional’ contradicts an assertion made by Powell et al. that it is a condition of success in the workplace that a woman’s gender is ‘undone’.¹⁵ It is on the contrary in-keeping with Myra MacDonald’s description of the modern cultural ideal of ‘superwoman’ by which women aim to be able to ‘do-it-all’ without compromising their identities as ‘women’ (1995, 14). This is not an ideal that Sarah judges to be possible according to popular culture. In her example of a joke circulating the internet, she demonstrates an attitude similar to that which Gherardi takes:

There was like one of those funny internet pictures with a triangle, and in every corner it had intelligent, good looking and psychologically stable: pick two...*Sarah*

¹⁵ The use of the term ‘undone’ here refers to the article *Doing Gender* by West and Zimmerman in which they argue that gender can be ‘done’ through a set of culturally recognised behaviours and aspects of appearance WEST, C. & ZIMMERMAN, D., H. 1987. *Doing Gender. Gender and Society*, 1, 125-151.

In this statement it is implied that women cannot 'do-it-all', that 'good looking' individuals must lack one of the remaining characteristics and be either unintelligent or psychologically 'unstable'. These tensions are explored further in Chapter 5, in which I argue that discourses of equality policies may perpetuate the 'double-bind'.

In their interviews, Rebecca and Sarah seem to suggest that clothes can do 'remedial work' in maintaining a 'feminine' gendered identity (Gherardi, 1995) [see Appendix B, quotes 1-2]. The students perceive that an attractive 'feminine' appearance can redress the balance of having to perform a 'masculine' role in the workplace.

However, it can also be argued that appearing 'attractive' as a *female* in the workplace raises the problematic issue of sexuality. From survey answers it appears that in part men construct their masculinity through their heterosexual desire, one respondent phrases this as being 'a player towards women', a process that has also been observed in other organisations such as schools (Sauntson and Morrish, 2007), otherwise men are seen as having an asexual appearance in the workplace:

Men don't tend to dress provocatively. I'm not entirely sure how they could.

Unless they've got their hairy chests out and one with medallions and whatnot

[*laughs*]! Umm I'm not sure that would be described as 'sexy' even. *Sadie*

It is repeatedly implied in interviews and survey responses that *sexual* female bodies are seen as problematic in the workplace and that sexuality is something that women need to 'manage' if they are to succeed in appearing 'professional'.

Female sexuality

Have to be pretty but not really sexual or it might be assumed I'm trying to sleep with my superiors. Voters and the media need to be assured that I am business-oriented and serious, so nothing too comfortable or brightly colored [sic]. If I don't look sharp my sincerity may be questioned.

Looking good, does my boyfriend think i [sic] look nice, Would [sic.] my mother agree with what i'm [sic] wearing, Looking smart, Making the best out of my own natural appearance – not over the top!

A small number of survey responses such as the above express the desire to look attractive in the workplace, but that being seen as 'sexual' would be inappropriate. The latter student's comment about whether her mother would approve of her outfit refers to a tradition of regulating what is seen as 'dangerous' female sexuality. Sandra Bartky explains: society has long been suspicious of female sexuality and only a narrow sexuality is permissible even in modern culture (1993, 111). This attitude can be argued to be exaggerated in the workplace as the concept of 'professionalism' requires a highly controlled sexuality (Guy and Banim, 2000).

Lilly explains that in the workplace sexuality of the body has the potential to *distract* from the task at hand:

...you don't want to distract people when they're talking to you erm if you're straight attracting men or if you're gay attracting women I think you don't want

to be, *I* wouldn't want to be attracting wrong thoughts in people and I'd want to focussing on the work you're doing and giving out respect and giving respect back I think. *Lilly*

In some statements it is clear that the student shares an accepted *understanding* of what is acceptable or unacceptable in the workplace without exploring the reasons behind it:

Umm you know I would be a bit unsure about wearing particularly *revealing* tops but...that would go for any place not just the work place. *Sandra*

Sandra Bartky draws on the theories of Michel Foucault to propose a mechanism of power by which these *understandings* shape the way that the body is disciplined and explain why the students knew the 'rules' of work-dress implicitly. Through internalising social ideals and values and being repeatedly rewarded or punished by others according to their achievement in these, individuals begin to censure and control their own behaviour without being able to identify any distinct source of oppression: 'the disciplinarian is everyone and yet no-one in particular' (1987, 112). By this process, certain types of bodies and images are transformed and normalised (Bordo, 1993, 1989).

As we have highlighted, the discourse that emerges through this view of sexuality as 'distracting' from work is a desire to de-sexualise the body and render it 'invisible'

within (hetero)sexual relations:¹⁶ Luna Dolezal argues that an individual strives to achieve an ‘invisibility’ of the body in society through conformation to cultural norms (2010, 1). Arguably, the desire to achieve neutrality of the body in the workplace may be heightened due to its roots as a largely male-dominated environment. The British female employee’s task of being ‘feminine’ yet ‘professional’ and ‘asexual’ can be argued to be an extremely complex task given conflicting discourses of the female body that are deeply-rooted in the culture around them. In her seminal work *Visual Pleasure and other Pleasures* (Mulvey, 1989) Laura Mulvey demonstrates that the female body is commonly represented as ‘to-be-looked-at’, an object of the ‘male gaze’.¹⁷ Although women are not invariably the object of the gaze (Williams, 2011), Gherardi argues that the empowered-disempowered relationship between men and women that arises from the subject-object dynamic continues into the workplace, calling it the ‘sexual contract’ (Gherardi, 1995). There is evidence that this process has bearing on workplace attire in the contrast between the acceptable array of work-clothes for women and for men. The flexibility in women’s dress code can be argued to be reflective of their role as the ‘attractive’ or ‘decorative’ sex; the object of the gaze.

Sexuality and the female body are not perceived to be easily extricable in terms of work-wear. Some students think that it will be difficult to create an appropriately asexual image for the workplace as the women’s clothes that are available are cut tight to the body and aspects of it, such as frills, high heels or short skirts can be fetishised within British culture:

¹⁶ Although some students discuss this theme with regards to sexualities beyond heterosexuality, many of the responses are based on a heteronormative assumption.

¹⁷ It is important to underline that Mulvey’s description of the ‘male gaze’ represents a subject-object, mode of looking at woman rather than attributing the role of the ‘looker’ specifically to a man.

...[for men] you've got the option of a single-breasted suit or a double-breasted suit and colours and that's it whereas there's skirts, dresses umm...and I've got they've got to be made to be fitting to the body I understand that but looking for something that's frilly round the waist and frilly around the bottom and I just don't think that's appropriate for work *if* you want to be in a career where you're respected I think. *Lilly*

The popular American television series *Sex in the City* was criticised by one student for perpetuating the cultural connection between women and sexuality despite being 'career women':

I think basically *Sex and the City* might have changed a lot of things. Probably for the worst. [...] And it sexualizes the woman's body once again. Like, they're all on [sic] heels, they've got really cool clothes and make... It's like they're business woman or not business women, just career women, but they're only interested in make-up, clothes, men and shoes, you know. *Sarah*

If in cultural terms the female body is perpetuated as sexual, even when the focus is on women's private lives, this has implications in two areas with regards to gender discrimination in the workplace: day-to-day potential of sexual harassment and the long-term reinforcement of gender difference and discrimination on the grounds of the *expectation* that I discussed in Chapter 3.

Double-life: being 'woman' in and out of the workplace

The desire among students to de-sexualise their appearance in the workplace suggests that they perceive attention of a sexual nature as a hazard that they may face unless they make a *conscious* effort to adjust their appearance. This process can be considered discriminatory in that an 'unequal burden' is placed on women to manage their appearance to that of men, although we can see from examples of US law where this practice is explicitly illegal that the practice is difficult to prove (Zalene, 2007). Though these guidelines may not be explicitly stated by employers, it is clear that even students perceive that they will need to adhere to them.

It can be argued that other forms of gender discrimination that we have previously discussed, such as the *expectation* for women to take on maternal roles and therefore carry a 'risk' of being absent from work, are reinforced through the making of women's bodies visibly different to men's. If women's sexuality is highlighted through cultural codes of appropriate 'feminine' dress, women's relationship to domestic roles is also more prominent due to the ongoing relationship between the two concepts (Powell et al., 2009). Because in popular culture the dominant norms of 'femininity' are seen as contrasting to the 'masculine' behaviours that are valued in 'professionals', it seems that any long-term change to attitudes in organisations is rendered virtually impossible by the perpetual 'balancing act' that women must perform in order to appear professional without submitting to social stigma of being perceived as 'like a man'.

A number of policies have been put forward to address gender inequality, but their potential effectiveness must be evaluated in light of the differing standpoints on gender and tensions about visible gender in the workplace that I have identified amongst students. In the following chapter I attempt to do this.

CHAPTER 5: *EQUALITY*: WHAT IS ‘DISCRIMINATION’? THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

In this chapter I evaluate the potential effectiveness of gender equality policies that have been put forward by the University of Birmingham and the British government in light of conceptualisations of ‘gender’ and ‘equality’ that emerge amongst student testimonies. I argue that there are fundamental ambiguities inherent in these initiatives and that these may perpetuate the ‘double-bind’ and to be in part responsible for the failure to reach a satisfactory ‘gender equality’.

Key themes

- There are competing student understandings of what constitutes the concept of ‘equality’. These fall into two categories, ‘equal opportunities’ and ‘equal numbers’, between which there are contradictions according to various gender standpoints.
- Variations in how the notion of ‘equality’ is understood are reflected in a range of descriptions of ‘discrimination’, in particular what students describe as ‘positive discrimination’.
- Policies on gender employ a blend of standpoints (that we also identify amongst students) to promote initiatives aimed at improving ‘equality’, and this makes them ambiguous and potentially less effective.
- Alumni reflect the range of views held by students, and raise additional points that are not a central part of this study.

'Equal opportunities' vs. 'equal numbers'

It emerged early on in reviewing student survey and interview data that the concept of 'equality' is not consistent. When asked about what they thought about the situation of gender equality in the UK today and their experiences of any gender discrimination, students conceptualised 'equality' in two main ways: 'equal opportunities' and 'equal numbers'. The former of these categories seems to imply that employees should be treated as 'gender-neutral' individuals and judged solely on their ability to perform a particular role:

I've just said I think someone should be judged on their merits umm I don't think that gender should come into the issue *at all* with anything, it should be left completely out of the issue. So I'd say gender equality is when you ignore what gender someone is. *Sandra*

The latter way of understanding 'equality' is to make the value judgement that a balanced number of men and women in professions is important and that a discrepancy in this is an indicator of 'discrimination':

Women simply aren't present--in a very visible way. To not have over half the population represented in governance in a democracy is disgusting.

Lack of Males in Primary School professions

There are fewer women in Science than there are men.

Very few female judges in the high courts

In surveys most students indicate that they view one or other of these types of equality as positive and many present both as important. However, when I explored these issues further in interviews a more complex picture emerged. Inequality of numbers of women and men in particular industries was viewed as being a result of either a breakdown in the system of 'equal opportunities' (described as being 'discrimination'), or what we can call differing 'gendered choices', namely women choosing to leave or not to enter the workforce:

...I mean, a lot of women want to raise families and they shouldn't be made to feel that that's a bad thing, coz it's like, because they're not career-focussed, somehow they're letting the side down which is sometimes, especially when you hear, um, people who claim to be feminists on news programmes and things who makes it sound like if you choose to not do this then you're sort of you know you're trying to take it back to the olden days and whatever and it's I don't think that's what people actually think, it's just women naturally want to do different things. *Lara*

By teasing out these distinctions it is evident that, according to student perceptions of what constitutes 'equality', an 'equal opportunities' strategy may not inexorably lead to an 'equal numbers' result. This observation will be important in our discussion of the effectiveness of university and government policies later on in this chapter.

With regards to how 'equality' can be judged, student's understanding of 'choice' must be evaluated. Free 'choice' emerges as the ideal behind 'equal opportunities': if individuals are given the same treatment independent of their gender, then they will be able to make decisions based on personal preference and ability. However, as I allowed students to talk this through, how each student conceptualises 'gender' became influential. For those students that understand gender as being essential, equal treatment was unlikely to lead to equal numbers of men and women in each industry. Some students, even those who were themselves planning to enter industries that are non-traditional for women reconciled this by rejecting the ideal of 'equal numbers' entirely:

...my own opinion is that the glass ceiling it's a sort of it's an artificial construct because many women will choose to have time out of their career to have children, so naturally they won't get as far on in their career as people who stay working straight through so I think that if you like [...] adjusted the numbers excluding women who took time off to raise families, then you'd find it was much more equal, and that there's not as big a sort of women are excluded kind of thing that people, that the statistics kind of make it seem.

Lara

Perhaps because I am similar in age and situation to the students that I interviewed and that I had explained that the purpose of collecting the data was for a masters dissertations, most of them talked freely, taking me through their thought processes as they worked out their opinions on particular issues. As seen in her hesitations on the

subject, one student who also approaches gender from an essentialist standpoint found it more difficult to reconcile the contradiction on 'equal numbers':

I don't know really. I don't suppose it matters either way you know whoever's best for the job...erm...and if, women are better at being secretaries I suppose...but *why* they'd be better I don't know but I you know, as long as the job's getting done properly I don't think it matters. Erm...which then of course...that leads to say that there are other barriers though approximately 50:50 the population male - female therefore in every job you'd expect about 50:50 as a break up there...erm...so it should be, that's what it should be like because you get the best people for the job but then you've got the *barriers* for women whether that be you know, time off you know taking maternity or part-time working or...arrogant men or...whatever. *Sadie*

In this extract, Sadie attempts to explain the unequal number of female and male secretaries through a theory that women and men have different characteristics that lend themselves to particular jobs. This would be consistent with her religion-based essentialist standpoint on gender that she has expressed elsewhere in the interview. However, she concludes her explanatory statement by drawing on structural barriers to women participating in the workforce that are linked to the expectation that they will take on family responsibilities. Sadie's meandering narrative demonstrates the tension between the discourses of 'equal opportunities' and 'equal numbers' when approaching the issue of gender equality from an essentialist viewpoint.

A further complication in defining the concept of 'equality' comes from Rebecca who challenges, in particular the notion of 'equal numbers':

... you probably noticed in my questionnaire, in my answers, was something that I was saying that to get far you have to behave like man. So when you're, so when these headlines are saying 'women aren't, there aren't enough women' well, even if there were women on the board, have they had to *behave* like men to get there? *Rebecca*

In this extract, Rebecca's conceptualisation of gender is such that particular character traits fall into gendered categories rather than women and men being endowed with an inherent 'womanliness' or 'manliness'. According to this theoretical position, it becomes unclear as to what it means to have equal representation in terms of the numbers of women and men in particular occupations because the individuals who reach these positions, who are capable of performing the role, act in practically the same way and have the same characteristics. As Powell et al. argue in their study on young engineers *undoing* their gender (Powell et al., 2009), this is described by Rebecca as women having to 'behave like men' to succeed to a traditionally male role: it appears that she is asking here what the meaning of 'equality' is, in particular 'equality of numbers', if women can succeed into senior levels of business but female *attributes* cannot. This line of questioning can be pushed further: does or should the 'equal numbers' concept of equality constitute balanced representation of 'women' as being women's sexed bodies, female characteristics or both? If individuals can be regarded as able to successfully perform 'male' and 'female' roles regardless of their own body's sex, whether understood from a social constructionist or poststructuralist

perspective, we must ask *why* having equal numbers of women and men in particular roles would be an advantage for society.

We have seen from a range of student responses that among the students that I spoke with although ‘equal opportunities’ is accepted as being a positive model for ‘equality’, it is not clear *why* ‘equal numbers’ is regarded as a goal of ‘equality’. By analysing discussion on how the state of equality might be improved in the UK we can further unpick how students understand the concept.

Discrimination is discrimination

I introduced into interview discussions the theme of voluntary or enforced ‘quotas’ for women at executive level in business of which there has been recent debate in the UK motivated by the Lord Davies report (2011). Although I did not use the term in my questions, to avoid giving the concept a subjective value, I found that many students referred to this concept as ‘positive discrimination’ and among the students that I collected data from this was almost universally regarded as a negative phenomenon. According to recent government reports on Gender Equality Duty (GED), ‘positive discrimination’ is the unlawful practice of hiring a candidate of an under-represented minority group based on that aspect of identity if the candidate is less qualified than another (GEO, 2009). However, the GED distinguishes from this the practice of ‘positive action’, which remains lawful. Commenting on the Single Equality Scheme 2009-2011 that encompasses the GED, the Fawcett Society explains that: ‘employers will be permitted (but not required) to take into account any under-representation in

the workplace, such as a particular race or sex, when choosing between two equally qualified candidates for recruitment or promotion.’ (2009, 4).

For many students, the word ‘quota’ was most often associated with the practice of ‘positive discrimination’ and this was seen as being ‘discriminatory’ against men in the same sense that women were seen as being discriminated against in the workplace

[For more examples see Appendix C, quotes 1-4]:

All types of engineering use positive gender discrimination to an alarming extent. I knew this beforehand but was alarmed to see this for myself last year...

But, uh, yeah, it does annoy me when - when you hear people talking about positive discrimination for anything, whether it’s just gender or race or anything because, like, I’ve always been, like, the idea of discrimination is bad, regardless of its form [...] there shouldn’t be any bias. *Lara*

I wouldn't want to be treated positively in favour of a job just because I'm a woman I'd rather you know just be treated on my qualifications on my experiences. *Lilly*

Quotas, whether voluntary or enforced, are seen amongst students as ‘discrimination’, and in some of the extracts we see that the concept evokes an emotional response with adjectives such as ‘alarming’, ‘ridiculous’, ‘wrong’ and ‘odd’ being used to describe it but also incredulity evident in the rhetorical questions that students ask about it that

aim to express the contradiction they perceive in the idea. Rebecca explains her wariness of such an initiative through the day-to-day problems that it might cause to women affected by it:

Also I think that quota placements are just a ridiculous idea because any woman who gets to a high position because she's damn good at the job people can just turn around and say well you're only here because you know there needs to be a certain amount of women... *Rebecca*

In this statement, Rebecca implies that an 'equal numbers' result in itself is not innately a successful result in terms of working environment as those promoted on this basis may not earn the respect from colleagues of being a deserving 'professional' promoted by merit. Sandra describes an incident whereby she was arguably the recipient of such a 'discriminatory' process:

...In physics, A-levels in school, right at the end, I won the physics award [...] but the thing was I wasn't the best person at physics in the class [...] and the only reason I or any of the guys in the class could think of why I got that award is because I was a girl, I was the only girl in the class and a girl hadn't got it for quite a few years. [...] I felt like I hadn't deserved it, like it should have gone to someone else, but at the same time...not chuffed because I'd got it because I was a girl but chuffed that I'd got it so...[laughs]. *Sandra*

In this statement, Sandra did not give me a clear indication of whether or not she received negative reactions to the situation from her fellow male students, but during

the interview her nervous laughter hints that she felt a tension between feeling pride in having won the award and guilt that it was undeserved; a tension that is a potential one for women affected by quotas.

One interviewee argues not for 'quotas' but for 'positive action'. In this statement, whilst emphasising that any recruitment process should be founded on equal treatment of candidates, a certain degree of actively favouring a disadvantaged group is accepted, in keeping with the concept of 'positive action':

I think erm, quotas erm, you shouldn't initially say that so many women or so many ethnicities erm you know some gay people some straight people I think everybody in the recruitment process everybody should be treated in the same way [...] if it then comes down to a man and a woman and they're both fine for the job and you can't decide then it's OK to decide on, if you haven't got enough women to then employ a woman to make it a bit equal. I think that's fine. But to initially have quotas I don't agree with. *Lilly*

Yet, an important way to justify a quota system also emerges from a student narrative. During a discussion of representations of women on the television, Sarah argues that the visibility of female role models in certain occupations may have an influence on the acceptability of that job for that gender:

Err...because the more you see, um, like breaking, the breaking of stereotypes, you actually realize it's a stereotype. [...] Umm...so it helps them the more, there's been a study made that, um, you gain confidence if you just look at a

picture of what you wanna [sic.] become so if you wanna [sic.] become a builder, if you look at a picture with a woman as a builder, um, you'll be more confident, and be more motivated to achieve your goals, so the more you're gonna [sic.] see it in television and that, the more it will help. *Sarah*

Sarah gives this process a positive value using the verb 'help' in association with the concept of introducing more women in non-traditional occupations into the public domain by way of television. In Dorothy Hobson's study on women's talk in the workplace about television she argues that representations in the popular media are used by individuals to assess their own opinions and attitudes about the world and themselves (Hobson, 1999). Sarah's role-model theory is also supported by a study conducted by Shirley O'Bryant and Charles Corder-Boltz on school children in which young girls changed their preference for certain types of occupation when the sex of a television character in that role matched their own (O'Bryant and Corder-Boltz, 1978).

The student narratives that argue against quotas because they constitute 'discrimination' against men appear to assume that it discriminates against men *in the same way* that men or a male-orientated system are perceived to discriminate against women in employment by means of the processes in which we have discussed in Chapter 3. This suggests that the students I collected data from do not see 'positive discrimination' in the same way that proponents of 'positive action' do, as justified in *redressing* an imbalance that has developed over time. The process is not described as being 'equal' or fair in itself but rather as contributing 'positively' towards equality within the historical context of sex-segregated work, as re-balancing gender inequality in the workplace until it reaches a 'critical mass' (Powell et al., 2009, 421) when

equal numbers are achieved and are visible. This is the position that the equal representation of each sex will, through the provision of role models, have a positive effect on young women and men's 'self-concept' (Betz, 1994).

Although the use of a quota could be justified in this way, according to their study of young engineers, Powell et al. query its logic by arguing that by the time 'critical mass' is reached, female employees would already have become 'encultured' in the male-dominated environment and have developed mechanisms to cope with the situation including *undoing* their identities as *women* (Powell et al., 2009, 421). These comments bring into focus the ambiguities surrounding the argument for equality as 'equal numbers' in occupations; these I discuss in more detail later on in this chapter.

Student testimonies most strikingly emphasise the contradictions between the different conceptualisations of 'equality'. One student's hesitations about the issue reveal its problematic ambiguities: she implies that achieving the point of 'equal numbers' through 'positive action' may be the only way forward because 'equal opportunities' has failed to achieve this, but yet she holds back and questions whether 'equal numbers' is an appropriate solution:¹⁸

I'm not sure how I feel on the subject of positive discrimination (laughs)
erm...you know I've done the work within the sort of context of err minority
communities and quotas and err it's seems like a necessary evil really but then
do quota systems actually target the *cause* of the problems? Or just the
symptoms really? *Sadie*

¹⁸ Although a final year undergraduate student, Sadie has had some past experience working full-time in civil service administration: in a sample of this size, it is difficult to conclude whether this makes a significant difference to her attitudes compared to those students who have not worked full-time.

The quota system privileges, if only temporarily, an ‘equal numbers’ type of equality over ‘equal opportunities’ and regards the former as being able to produce the latter result. As we have seen from student narratives, the discourse and value of ‘equal opportunities’ is strong among these students in Higher Education and an ‘equal numbers’ type of equality is seen as positive *only* when achieved by this process. We have seen that ‘positive action’ occupies an uncomfortable position in student opinion, with only two students ceding that any form of deliberate rebalancing may be acceptable. In order to theorise as to why the discourse of ‘equal opportunities’ is so strong amongst students, and to further examine the ambiguities and contradictions that emerge between discourses of gender ‘equality’, I next examine a number of documents that pertain to gender equality that influence university context.

Discourse of difference

The university’s statistics confirm that it also has equal numbers of male and female students overall in the recent cohort. The university also has a *Gender Equality Scheme* (GES) (2010) and review system dedicated to promoting and assessing ‘gender equality’ across the institution that are in keeping with the government’s *Gender Equality Duty* (GED). In order to evaluate why students provide such complex and sometimes contradictory conceptualisations of the goals of gender ‘equality’ and how it should be reached, it is important to examine the way in which these documents define ‘equality’. We see imbedded in these concepts familiar ambiguities that we identified in student narratives and I argue that this lack of clarity

may be in part responsible for perpetuating the ‘double-bind’ in which women find themselves in the workplace and in this way hinder ‘equal opportunities’.

Let us begin with an analysis of concepts used within a document that has the most direct impact on the University’s approach to gender equality: its *Gender Equality Scheme* (GES). Early on, the scheme lays out the university’s definition of gender and its duties with regards to addressing gender inequality. Gender is understood by the university in line with the British government’s *Gender Equality Duty* (GED) as:

The GED defines gender as the social roles and relationships that structure men and women’s lives. Gender inequality occurs when women and men experience disadvantage because of their gender. (2010, 2)

This definition leaves it ambiguous as to whether ‘gender’ is regarded as being an essential or socially constructed set of characteristics, instead focussing on the ‘lived reality’ of social roles and relationships. In order to combat the ‘disadvantage’ that characterises gender discrimination, the GES highlights its duty to:

Eliminate unlawful sex discrimination and harassment (including that experienced by transgender people); and promote equality of opportunity between men and women. (2010, 2)

We can see from these extracts that the concept of ‘gender’ is assigned to the dominant binary system of men and women, and though transgender individuals are included in references throughout the document the addition of this term suggests that

they are regarded an addition to the understanding of 'gender' rather than included in it. 'Equal opportunities' are featured here as being a specific focus of the university's gender equality policy, yet, further on in the document, balanced numerical representation of women and men amongst students and staff is presented in a positive light:

The University staff body (as of March 2010), is 52% female and 48% male, indicating that the University has very good gender representation overall and is in line with the sector average. There are, however, some significant differences in the distribution of male and female staff by staff group... (2010, 3)

Further statistics provided in this section of the GES are presented as indicating the relative success of the 'equal opportunities' process that the university promotes but as we have seen in discussion of employment, there is troubling ambiguity in the relationship between these two processes with regards to gender.

A 'Practitioner's Factsheet' on the GED that informs the university's policies makes the following statement on the importance of gender 'equality':

The Government is determined to tear down the barriers holding women back and give them real choice and control over their lives. Equality of opportunity for women underpins our ambition to build a fairer Britain. It is not only what is fair, and what is right, it is absolutely imperative to the future growth and prosperity of this country. (GEO, 2009, 3)

The problems of conceptualising ‘choice’ or ‘real choice’ or ‘equality of opportunity’, as discussed in this chapter and earlier in Chapter 3, render this statement problematic.

Also of interest is the claim that gender ‘equality’ will somehow contribute to the UK economy. One of the measures in the GED’s programme was to ask Lord Davies to produce a report on gender equality initiatives, and it is from this that we find further clues to *why* the UK government perceives that gender equality to be high priority and *what* this might mean in reality.

Lord Davies’ report sets out three main reasons for which it considers gender equality in the boardroom to be economically advantageous: the first is that a diverse board improves the performance of executive boards, second that diversity of sex among board members decreases the phenomenon of homogeneity of approaches known as ‘group think’, and third that, by the exclusion of women from company boards, businesses are not utilising a major section of the talent pool. (Abersoch, 2011) [See Appendix C, quotes 5-8]

The latter of these arguments is one that is also made by the Women & Work Commission in their report *Shaping a Fairer Future* (Prosser, 2006), calling the phenomenon a ‘waste of talent’ (2006, vii). This argument does not draw directly on issues of conceptualisations of gender as it is based instead on *numbers* of potential employees. If we compare this to the criticisms that Powell et al. make of ‘critical mass’ theory, according to this line of reasoning diversity of the workforce can be seen as evidence of the successful utilisation of the entire potential workforce rather

than the failure to hire women or men into non-traditional occupations as archetypal representatives of their sex in order to achieve diversity of characteristics. The second argument that Lord Davies makes in his report is problematic in current theory because it is predicated on the *diversity* that will be supposedly provided by mixed-sex boards.

In addition to the arguments already put forward by Powell et al. (2009), this argument makes a series of awkward assumptions: the first is that gender is stable for individuals throughout their lives and in society as a whole; the second is that genders performed by men and women are generally contrasting; the third is that diversity of representatives at executive level will bring with it the capability for greater understanding of customer needs. The former two assumptions about gender are true only within an essential conceptualisation of gender, as a significant body of research has been produced by scholars from social constructionist and poststructural perspectives that argue the existence of a plurality of ‘femininities’ and ‘masculinities’ that are unstable and alter according to historical and social context (see for example, Skelton, 2001, Paechter, 2006).

Lord Davies’ third assumption is less straightforward to evaluate. He makes this clarifying statement:

Having women on boards, who in many cases would represent the users and customers of the companies’ products, could improve understanding of customer needs, leading to more informed decision making. (Abersoch, 2010, 9)

By arguing that women will better understand their customer counterparts than men, this approach assumes that women in executive positions or in industries that are non-traditional are still *representative* of women who occupy more traditional roles. We have seen from our discussion of coping strategies that women employ in terms of their balancing their gendered appearance in the workplace and the work of scholars on the adaptation that women make to their language and behaviour in non-traditional work environments (for example, Gherardi, 1995, Powell et al., 2009, Cliff et al., 2005, Talbot, 2010) that they can be considered representative of women as a whole only by maintaining this dual-identity of reinforcing their femininity alongside the contrasting ‘masculine’ characteristics they need to gain respect in employment (Cliff et al., 2005, 7). In a study by Jennifer E. Cliff, Nancy Langton, and Howard E. Aldrich, (2005) there is evidence that although women talk as if they approach their roles *differently* to their male counterparts, both sexes in fact take the *same* actions (2005, 24).

By making the argument for a supposed difference that women will bring to the workplace, Lord Davies’ strategy has the potential to perpetuate the need for women to represent it, to talk and dress to represent ‘femininity’. As we have seen in Chapter 2, the connotations of this can lock them into an untenable double bind that stunts action taken towards gender equality.

Yet the rationale behind Lord Davies’ argument has potential. He states:

This is not just a gender numbers game. It is about the richness of the board as a whole, the combined contribution of a group of people with different skills and perspectives to offer, different experiences, backgrounds and life styles and who together are more able to consider issues in a rounded, holistic way and offer an attention to detail not seen on all male boards which often think the same way, and sometimes make poor decisions. (Abersoch, 2010, 7)

The deduction that diversity in the boardroom will have a positive effect on business is convincing. I do not wish to dismiss the argument for diversity in itself, but rather highlight that the problems for women that we have teased out in chapters 1 and 2 arise when this diversity becomes attached to ‘gender’.

It is possible to make the argument for diversity without turning to equal numbers of men and women as its source. If we were to conceptualise diversity as *diversity of career paths or experience*, it may well be that in the short term women and men would largely represent differing experiences but in the long term no one group is characterised as representing other individuals on the basis of their gender and in time these positions could be represented by either sex. If, alternatively or additionally, we interpret ‘diversity’ as ‘diversity of viewpoint or personality’, then again there is no disadvantage and some advantage in separating this argument from discussions of gender.

Alumni views

During the developmental stages of my study, instead of addressing primarily student

perspectives on gender discrimination in employment and examining the implications of these, my early research questions focussed on the potential differences between University of Birmingham student expectations and alumni experiences. I hypothesised that students would not perceive gender to be an obstacle to the progression of their careers whereas alumni of the university with several years of experience in full-time work would have direct experience of discriminatory practices and therefore regard gender as a more important consideration. However, I found instead that both students and alumni expressed much the same *range* of attitudes towards gender inequality and its importance in making decisions about their careers. Because there were existing studies on experience of discrimination in the workplace, the main text of this thesis has focussed on the students.

In the survey and interview data, alumni statements largely echo the concerns that students raise with regards to the types of gender discrimination they might face in the workplace, including an ongoing *expectation* for women to take on family responsibilities. Alumni also focussed on the inappropriateness of sexuality in the workplace and the requirement for workwear to be ‘professional’ or ‘smart’ with an ideal of ‘invisibility’, and perceive looking or behaving ‘like a man’ as negative. Like the student responses, alumni view ‘positive discrimination’ and quotas, and conceptualise ‘equality’, with mixed attitudes. Discrepancy in earnings between women and men and difficulty for women to progress into senior roles were the most often mentioned.

Since alumni data largely repeats and reinforces students’ expressed views, rather than providing a counterpoint to student narratives, these are provided in an appendix

[See Appendix D]. A much larger piece of research may be needed to understand the complexities of how attitudes towards gender equality may change over the course of a career.

Alumni did mention a few types of 'covert' discrimination that students did not foresee: female employees being treated differently by their colleagues in the workplace and men favouring male colleagues because of shared interests:

One of my previous CEO promoted close contacts who played cricket and or football

Women in the workplace are often given additional roles such as making tea/coffee for meetings etc whereas men as not so much.

Assumption from male colleagues that, if there was a mistake/ problem, that I had made a mistake when not the case. Spoke down to/ like a child when being "taught" something.

Crucially, I asked the alumni that were interviewed whether or not they thought about the issues that we were discussing whilst they were at university and many of them asserted that they had not:

it's such a shock [*sighs*] because I went to an all-girls school and I was brought up at school and educated at school 'You can do as well as any lad, you can do whatever you want, you *can* do *anything* and suddenly when you hit the

workplace and you think well they said I could do anything but clearly...you see male colleagues moving on and you're not. *Emily*

There was a time when I felt quite bitter about it and resented it a bit, erm, then I think you come to a stage in your career where you think 'Well actually, I don't think I would want the responsibility anyway'. [...] I don't think, you know, as students we think that far ahead, really do you...well, I don't think that I did really. Umm. No. I mean, I always assumed that I'd have a family, um, I never really thought what the impact of that would be on my career. [...] but I...I don't think I really thought through what- I don't think you do think that far ahead, really. *Jan*

When I left university, you know I was keen to get on with my career I always assumed that I would you know get married, have a child at some point but err it never entered my head *how* you know how you know your emotions might about having children might affect your career agendas or sort of about where you sort of might locate or the sacrifices you might make on your career...*Mike*

Conversely, as we have seen from student data, some young people *have* given detailed thought into the issues of gender discrimination and the ways in which they might cope with them. It may be that this discrepancy is a result of the bias in my sample of students towards those academic subjects that include an element of gender theory. A larger piece of research, with a bigger sample monitored over a longer period of time, would be required to investigate the complexities of this.

Conclusion

By extrapolating data from student responses and interviews on their perceptions of gender discrimination issues in employment and analysing connected arguments from scholarly texts, in this thesis I have argued that female finalists in higher education are already aware of the potential impact that their gender might have on their future careers and in light of this have begun to develop plans to cope with them.

Their concerns are focussed on two main issues: the first is that it is inevitable that taking on family responsibilities will interrupt the linear career path that allows progression into senior roles. Students plan to 'cope' with this interruption through strategic career choices. However, I have also argued that the *expectation* for women to do this may have an impact on employers' propensity to employ and promote women. The second issue is that students foresee a potential 'double-bind' in their existence as culturally situated 'women' in the workplace due to women's ongoing association with sexuality and childrearing. They perceive that if this is not properly managed it may have a detrimental impact on how they are regarded as 'professionals'.

Although students have these concerns and recognise many inequalities in employment, there are also significant discrepancies between students as to whether women's 'choices' to take on family responsibilities can be considered 'discriminatory'. Despite the discourse of 'equal opportunities' that higher education promotes in its policies and the fact that student participants perceive that equality of opportunity in higher education has largely been achieved, there is a seeming failure

of equal opportunities beyond this environment. Through the analysis of equality policies in relation to conceptualisations of gender, I have highlighted discourses that may perpetuate the double-bind and problematic ambiguities in their goals. I have argued that the seeming failure of equal opportunities in employment may in part be due to this lack of clarity.

Although this study is limited in the extent to which student attitudes expressed in it can be considered representative, it nevertheless helps us to explore the implications of differing conceptualisations of gender on equality policies and informs the direction of what further research is needed in this area. In a radio interview with the BBC, Catherine Hakim argues that issues of gender equality in employment no longer have a place in current debate (2010). From my results I argue that this is far from the case: we can see that within even the small number of student testimonies that I have examined, as well as from employment statistics and existing academic work, there is evidence that when it comes to employment women wrestle with managing the incompatible demands of time spent on family responsibilities and building their careers. This results in a significant pay gap which female students have begun planning how to 'cope' with the future. I have also argued that women face the day-to-day challenge of negotiating conflicting *identities* as 'professionals' and as 'women' that may perpetuate workplace inequalities in the long term through the cultural association between women and childrearing.

Like Lord Davies, I argue for ongoing action in this area but I suggest that current policies are unable to produce a coherent strategy for achieving gender 'equality', because the concept and goal of gender 'equality' itself are not clearly understood. In

this thesis I have demonstrated that there are significant ambiguities in the language of policy documents (reflected in student narratives) that arise from contradictions between contrasting discourses of ‘equality’, ‘gender’ and ‘discrimination’. Student narratives give evidence that there are a number of possible ways of defining what a situation of gender ‘equality’ might be and they not only provide clues to identifying these standpoints but also reveal that conceptualisations of gender continue to differ fundamentally and that this can have a significant impact on how the initiatives for reaching ‘gender equality’ are regarded. Despite their differing standpoints on gender, the concept of ‘equal opportunities’ is seen universally among the students that I spoke with as being a positive and ethical goal. Yet because of their varying underlying understandings of what ‘gender’ is, students are divided in the extent to which they believe that ‘equal opportunities’ can achieve visible gender equality in the form of ‘equal numbers’ in employment and indeed whether this would be a desirable result.

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Appendix A: Excerpts from interview transcripts, Chapter 3: Awareness

1. ...I'm plotting secretly [...] I have a long term boyfriend, at least I hope now (laughs) that I'm going to be with him for a long time and he's a few years ahead of me in our career...he's just finished his PhD and hopefully he's going to get a post-doc and hopefully he'll have a stable job and that..we can possibly think about having kids..but I'm not..I'm ceratinly thinking that, and we've discussed in therms of if I've certainly thought about it, I mean if he's 100% with me on this is not (laughs) is not sure yet. But you know if I don't get funding for an MPhil, and I have to do it part-time then we have discussed maybe having a kid and doing the MPhil part-time and after 6 months having a nursery care and stuff. *Rebecca*
2. Umm that is an issue I've thought about. Erm...I do obviously want to have children at some point in the future. Umm but I have an arrangement (smiling) with my fiancée and as soon as I've finished having all these kids I get to go back to work and he can be a house-dad which should be interesting! *Sandra*
3. I mean I feel like I'm getting on a bit (laughs [...]) I think once I graduate from my masters¹⁹ I will (laughs) probably actually pursue someone to marry and...erm have children with. *Sadie*
4. Haven't really thought about this coz I don't wanna [sic] have kids, so. That's probably why, but if I wanted, yeah, you probably have a lot to think about.

¹⁹ Sadie is a final-year undergraduate student and refers here to the masters that she plans to complete in 2011/2012

Then you'd have to find like flexible working hours, or, I was raised by my grandma because of this. So yeah, because my mom was working full time and she decided that she doesn't wanna let me, she was left on her own in the house because my grandma was a nurse and my dad, well grandad was a man working full time, he couldn't take care of her, so she would just give him the keys to the house and was alone all day after she came back from school and she said she doesn't want this for me, and she gave me to my grandma who just retired when I was born [...] yeah, that is quite common [...] I don't think there's a solution to having a career and having a child unless you're being paid to raise a child somehow. I don't know. [...] It's flexible working hours. And that's it. *Sarah*

5. How will I put a stop to gender discrimination if I don't take note of it and put myself in a situation to limit its impact?
6. I enjoy programming and it's what I want to do. Should I be discriminated against for being female then I shall work extra hard to show that it is an industry that females are capable of performing well...
7. It depends on the situation, on the boss (if that one is gender discriminating, what would it help). But generally I would do so if I could see that it would help

8. Any Racism or Bullying/Harrasment. Sexism, although only when it amounts to Bullying/Harrasment (the knowingly [sic] negative/unwanted and often repeated attack onto a specific person or persons)

9. Blatant sexism/racism, particularly if it came across as particularly serious, rather than what some might call banter

Appendix B: Excerpts from interview transcripts, Chapter 4: Gender

1. I think that what I'm trying to say is that they're dressed in clothes that are for women, you know skirts, nice trousers with a blouse etc but that the manner in which they hold themselves and the manner in which they hold themselves is...is...is...a manner of kind of strength, authority, power [...] they're not necessarily masculine but they're not...the women themselves aren't but the things they have to do, the way they behave, has a lot of a characteristics that are linked more with masculinity than with traditional...you know, femininity.

Rebecca

2. Umm...probably by putting make-up on you're, then that, you kind of reclaim your gender somehow, and probably this explains why many high earning females are gonna always wear heels to board meetings, and dress provocatively and care so much about their hair 'cause they don't want to be perceived as men. Because culturally they've got the attributes of men, like rationality, intelligence, success, not having a ca...family, and so on. But they still want to be perceived as women. *Sarah*

Appendix C: Excerpts from interview transcripts, Chapter 5: Equality

1. Umm, you've got 'Women into Science and Engineering' you've got this that and the other...and well yes it might be admirable that they're trying to encourage more girls to do things why should boys miss out on those opportunities just because they were born male? Umm so that's something that I feel strongly about. In regards to quotas, having you know say 'you must have x number of females' umm it doesn't sound quite I read quite a few years ago about a police station? And at this police station they'd had a couple of openings and received loads and loads of applications and they'd automatically rejected all white males. Because they didn't they needed to up their quotas. umm and obviously there was a lot of white males very upset about that why should they be rejected *simply* because they were male and they were white?
Sandra

2. Only really quotas, I do feel quite strongly that I wouldn't want to be treated *that* way I wouldn't want somebody to be put down to a number in you know you want to be treated individually whether you're a man or a woman...shouldn't come into play. I do feel strongly about that. Because I think that...I don't understand how that is equal really. Although it's, it's on the surface it's equal it won't be in the process of recruitment it won't be...because if someone's better for the job then they should be chosen regardless of their characteristics. *Lilly*

3. I think it's very difficult for certain professions to say, because, you know,

they say “Look, we've got gender equality in our department or company or whatever and it's 50:50”, and I think that's wrong because then it gets discriminated... people get discriminated as well because then if you just have a look and just want to have 50:50 male-female people working in your company, for example. If you discriminate against people because you might take a man that's less qualified... that has less qualifications than the woman just because you need another man and it's 50:50 statistics or whatever...*Daniel*

4. I don't think that quotas are a good idea at all [...] [reports] very rarely go into the reasons *why* women might not read these positions and instead they're just discussing how can we get more women, you know, chairman or on the exec board and the issue of kind of child care and maternity, they're not really, they haven't really been discussed as much. I find it quite odd really that those aren't being discussed. *Rebecca*

5. Evidence suggests that companies with a strong female representation at board and top management level perform better than those without and that gender-diverse boards have a positive impact on performance. It is clear that boards make better decisions where a range of voices, drawing on different life experiences, can be heard. That mix of voices must include women.
(Abersoch, 2011, 3)

6. Inclusive and diverse boards are more likely to be effective boards, better able to understand their customers and stakeholders and to benefit from fresh

perspectives, new ideas, vigorous challenge and broad experience. This in turn leads to better decision making. (Abersoch, 2011, 7)

7. Boards are often criticised for having similar board members, with similar backgrounds, education and networks. Such homogeneity among directors is more likely to produce 'group-think'. Women bring different perspectives and voices to the table, to the debate and to the decisions. (Abersoch, 2011, 8)

8. Around the world, women have become the new majority in the highly qualified talent pool. In Europe and the USA, women account for approximately six out of every ten university graduates and in the UK women represent almost half of the labour force.¹⁷ These are trends that British business cannot ignore. The failure of any business or economy to maximise the talents of all its people will result in below-par performance. Tapping into the under-utilised pool of female talent at board level is vital if British companies are to remain competitive and respond to rapidly changing expectations and market demands. British corporate competitiveness is at stake. (Abersoch, 2011, 9)

Appendix D: Excerpts from interview transcripts: alumni

1. Experience of being paid less in the same role:

The guy who, sort of, did my job before me was paid more, had less skills and at my company most people who work there speak French and he didn't, but he was paid more for being less qualified. *Anna*

2. Work being undervalued:

They absolutely refuse to accept that I teach. [...] But, so this is how they've treated a *lot* of women, they've *never*, they have all the male the top male jobs have all been banded very accurately into the rest of the bands. *Emily*

3. Women earning less over the course of a career because of career-breaks:

Because women have to devote more time to their families such as having children and taking care of small children which will interrupt [sic] their career developments [sic].

4. There is an ongoing *expectation* for women to take on family responsibilities:

At an interview, I was asked if I planned on "going off soon to have babies".

5. In terms of appearance, like the students alumni focussed on the inappropriateness of sexuality in the workplace and the requirement for workwear to be 'professional' or 'smart' with an ideal of 'invisibility':

Again, you're not going to be taken seriously or listened to if you're going to be wearing... not even something provocative, but like a nice knee-length pencil skirt or something like that - you're going to get comments about it. Erm... I guess I try to dress quite conservatively, erm... like, even something that's not even remotely provocative, but something nice, or, you know, it will draw attention. Erm... it's not very nice. *Anna*

Don't want males to comment on my clothing. Don't want to be seen to be using femininity for personla [sic.] gain.

6. But alumni also perceive looking or behaving 'like a man' as negative:

Because I feel that, I see that the girls at work who are *desperate* to get on and they like try to power dress and they wear a suit and a shirt and I won't do that.

Emily

I find it quite sad when I see you know some examples where you see erm you know women sort of getting on and sort of to get on in the company they've had to sort of almost adopt male-type 'laddish' manners and sort of almost dress more manly and sort of act more manly you know more 'laddish' in the sense of humour you know to *me* that's not breaking down sexual discrimination and becoming

successful as a woman because you know if she's had to actually almost act like a man to do that then you know sex discrimination is still there isn't it? *Mike*

7. The issue of 'positive discrimination' and quotas most clearly reveals how alumni conceptualised 'equality'. Like the student responses, the topic was treated with mixed attitudes:

When I was a trainee I applied for several posts unsuccessfully [sic.] where a policy of positive discrimination [sic.] in favour of female's [sic.] occurred. I did not get selected. On two occasions [sic.] I was subsequently informed of what had happened. At the time these jobs were male dominated so overall it was a good thing - although it did not feel like that at the time

...at the end of the day it's I don't believe that it would be good for this country if you had a boardroom run by one set of people that was sub-optimal and as a result of the company fails and jobs end up going to overseas competitors. *Mike*

Yeah... Erm... I can see what they're trying to do, and yes, it would make a difference, but personally I don't agree with it. [...] You're not going to be respected or valued, you know, if people think that's why you're in your job...

Anna

My basic point is that I don't agree with quotas and positive discrimination. [...] I think that the most important issue for women in getting top jobs is that they don't promote themselves enough. It's more an issue of confidence and that I don't thin

any sort of government intervention is going to address the..the sort of..on the surface address the top-level appointment of women but I don't think it's going to change any *thinking*, certainly. *Cara*

Appendix E: Survey questions (students)

Are you in your final year of undergraduate study? Yes/No

What is your age?

What is your gender?

What is your ethnicity? (e.g. Asian, White British, Chinese)

What is your sexuality? (e.g. Lesbian, gay, straight)

What was your undergraduate degree course?

What is your preferred industry/profession of employment after you leave university?

Why are you attracted to this industry/profession?

Are you considering doing postgraduate study at University of Birmingham or elsewhere? Yes/No

If yes, what course are you considering and why?

How important to you is salary when choosing an industry/profession?

Very important/Quite important/Not bothered either way/Not very important/Not important at all

Are men and women paid equally in your preferred industry/profession?

Yes/No/Don't know

If no, why do you think this is?

Have you experienced any sort of gender discrimination in education? Yes/No/Don't know

If yes, what happened?

Are you aware of gender discrimination in employment? Yes/No/Don't know

If yes, what sort?

Has the issue of gender discrimination discouraged you from considering a particular industry/profession? Yes/No/Don't know

If yes, which industry/profession and why?

Does any other kind of discrimination occur in your preferred industry/profession?

Yes/No/Don't know

If yes, what sort?

If discrimination does occur, why are you planning to proceed into this industry/profession?

Would you report a colleague for discrimination? Yes/No/Don't know

If yes, for what sort of discrimination?

Do you think that men and women look different in your preferred place of work?

Yes/No/Don't know

If yes, in what way do they look different?

Do you think that men and women behave differently in your preferred place of work? Yes/No/Don't know

If yes, in what way do they behave differently?

Do you think that men and women treated differently in your preferred place of work?

Yes/No/Don't know

If yes, how are they treated differently and by whom? (e.g. colleagues, boss, subordinates)

What kinds of behaviour/self presentation lead people to being regarded as 'masculine' in the workplace?

What kinds of behaviour/self presentation lead people to being regarded as 'feminine' in the workplace?

Do you think that it is important to be regarded as 'masculine' in the workplace?

Very important/Quite important/Not bothered either way/Not very important/Not important at all

Why is this?

Is it important to be regarded as 'feminine' in the workplace?

Very important/Quite important/Not bothered either way/Not very important/Not important at all

Why is this?

What will you wear to work in your industry/profession?

How important will it be for your work clothes to appear:

	Very important	Quite important	Not bothered either way	Not very important	Not important at all
Beautiful					
Sexually attractive					
Smart					
Safe to work in					
Comfortable					
Similar to colleagues of the same sex					
Similar to colleagues of the opposite sex					

To achieve these things, will your appearance differ from that outside of the workplace? Yes/No/Don't know

If yes, how?

What influences impact on how plan to manage your appearance for the work-place?

(e.g. other people's opinions/the media/parent etc)

Do you have children? Yes/No

If yes, has this had an impact on your university career? Yes/No/Don't know

If yes, in what way?

If you do not have children, are you planning to have children in the future?

Yes/No/Don't know

If yes, do you think that this will have an impact on your professional career?