

## **Unequal egalitarianism: A preliminary study of discourses concerning gender and employment opportunities**

**Margaret Wetherell, Hilda Stiven and Jonathan Potter**

---

A set of accounts concerning final year university students' views on the status of employment opportunities for women is examined to identify some of the practical ideologies surrounding the reproduction of gender inequalities. The focus of the analysis is the structure of the discourse produced and what is revealed about wider systems of making sense. This approach is contrasted with conventional survey research. We argue, first, that our sample's responses represent a conflict between their endorsement of equal opportunities and their emphasis on the practical considerations supposedly limiting those opportunities and, second, that their model of the human subject in society is individualistic in nature as are their notions of social change and explanations for existing inequalities.

---

In this paper we analyse a set of accounts collected from final year university students concerning the status of women in employment, the combination of careers with child rearing, explanations for inequality, and the nature of social change. Our goal in analysing these accounts is to reveal the understandings, theories and ideologies of these particular women and men as they evaluate and rationalize their employment opportunities. These patterns of accounting or sense making are, we suggest, one crucial facet of the reproduction of a labour market stratified by gender; and thus we hope to illustrate how the social psychologist might contribute to the study of complex, multiply determined, social practices.

In general psychologists have relied heavily on the concept of attitude and personality trait when investigating the psychological component of job choice and insertion into the labour market. McClelland *et al.* (1953), for example, postulated the 'need to achieve' as a type of stable and enduring character trait which would shape individuals' responses to competitive situations. More recently Horner (1972) has argued that women's responses are motivated by a different trait, fear of success, developed through sex-role socialization which then reinforces employment inequalities.

The problems with this general type of approach have been evident for some time. In particular, there is little support for the two most crucial assumptions: first, that traits predict performance relatively independently of contextual and situational effects (Morgan & Mausner, 1973); and, second, that women and men can be seen as separate internally homogeneous groups with respect to the demarcating trait—fear of success. Many studies have demonstrated that fear of success is not reliably linked to sex (Feather & Raphelson, 1974; Hoffman, 1974; Tresemer, 1976; Brenner & Tomkiewicz, 1982; O'Connell & Perez, 1982; Popp & Muhs, 1982). In some cases males have regularly demonstrated more fear of success than females. Overall it seems that evocation of this response is strongly dependent on subject's appreciation of the context (Alper, 1974). Condry & Dyer's (1976) extensive review of the literature demonstrates unequivocally that the behaviour of women subjects is mediated by the characteristics of the situation and the meaning it holds rather than driven by a personality trait. It seems that some men and some women are ambivalent about success and that some men and some women seek it, but differences in responses and behaviour, leaving aside the question of what success means to these individuals in the first place, cannot be easily predicted from traditional psychological analyses of motives and character.

We suggest that many of the problems with traditional psychological analyses might be resolved if the emphasis shifted from the fixed characteristics and traits of the person or

gender group to the systems of making sense available in their society. We should investigate the collectively shared practical ideologies which reconcile women and men to their employment options and structure representations of their social positions. In this way the psychologist might begin the difficult task of elucidating the relationship between psychological variables and social structure. By practical ideologies we mean the often contradictory and fragmentary complexes of notions, norms and models which guide conduct and allow for its justification and rationalization. Ideology should be understood here in its critical sense (Thompson, 1984); as referring to systems of belief or thought which maintain asymmetrical power relations and inequalities between social groups.

How might practical ideologies be studied? In our view, they cannot generally be fruitfully investigated through the questionnaire methods of attitude survey research. Practical ideologies are montages of incoherently related themes. The montage needs to be studied as it unfolds in discourse rather than assembled from responses to questionnaires which resemble a series of static photographs in comparison. Our study takes extended sequences of talk and discussion (the transcripts of open-ended interviews) as its database and proceeds through the detailed examination of the structure of this discourse (cf. Mulkay & Gilbert, 1982; Mulkay *et al.*, 1983; Potter *et al.*, 1984; Potter & Wetherell, in press).

Through this style of analysis it is possible to deal with the major problem plaguing trait and attitude research, namely that people are inconsistent in their behaviour and opinions, flexibly adjusting their response according to their perception of the context and a large variety of interactional and self-presentational goals. Although a problem for traditional research, this variation and the contradictions it generates are a resource for discourse analysts in their attempt to understand the functions of discourse (Potter & Mulkay, 1985; Potter & Wetherell, in press) and, ultimately, the reproduction of social structures (Fowler *et al.*, 1979; Kress & Hodge, 1979; Thompson, 1984). At the same time it abandons the empirically weak presupposition that people have *an* attitude which could be represented through mutually exclusive response categories, or act on the basis of a set of fixed identities or stable sets of attributes.

The use of the term 'discourse analysis' to describe our analytic perspective signals affinities with research in both the 'empirical' (van Dijk, 1985) and 'continental' (Barthes, 1979; Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982) traditions. This type of analysis is specifically concerned with questions about the organization of language and the consequences of this organization. For instance, how are accounts constructed; what effects do particular accounts have, and more generally, how do people construct a coherent social world for the occasions at hand given a particular set of linguistic resources?

This perspective draws on a number of theoretical approaches. From linguistic philosophy and pragmatics it takes an emphasis on the performative dimensions of language (Austin, 1962; Grice, 1975; Levinson, 1983). Inspired by ethnomethodology, it moves from using participants' discourse as a *resource* for the construction of analysts' explanations in terms, say, of motives and traits to taking that discourse as an analytic *topic* in its own right (Wieder, 1974; Heritage, 1984). Finally, from post structuralism it takes the idea that language embodies the 'sediment' of social practices which undermines its use as a neutral descriptive medium (Culler, 1983; Eagleton, 1983; Henriques *et al.*, 1984). Areas of agreement and disagreement with these positions are outlined in more detail in Potter & Wetherell (in press).

The particular analysis presented in this paper, unlike other examples (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984; Jayyusi, 1984; Litton & Potter, 1985; Potter & Reicher, 1987) is not concerned with the fine-grain examination of discourse, with describing and comparing, for instance, the rhetorical devices, metaphors or tropes developed in the construction of each version of events. Instead it focuses on the broad *types* of versions accessible to our respondents, the

themes and theories they use to structure and formulate a world view for these interview topics or the set of inter-subjectively shared resources available to them in this case.

These themes or theories have obvious affinities with Moscovici's (1984) concept of 'social representations' in that they can be seen as interpretative systems which may be used for formulating and understanding the nature of phenomena. However, discourse analysis avoids the ambiguity over whether representations are constituted linguistically or cognitively (opting firmly for the former as an analytically more productive option) and emphasizes flexibility: instead of thinking of an entire representation as either present or absent, the suggestion is that selections are made from the available themes to best suit the function to which the discourse is put (Litton & Potter, 1985; Potter & Litton, 1985). It also avoids some of the contradictions inherent in social representations theory (McKinlay & Potter, 1986).

Our analysis is based on transcripts from interviews conducted with 17 final year undergraduate students (10 women, seven men) in the Arts Faculty at the University of St Andrews. These students volunteered in response to a notice in the University Careers Advisory Centre soliciting people who were interested in participating in a research project on attitudes towards careers. All were aged between 20–23 years and were interviewed in strict confidentiality by a female interviewer following a semi-structured format. The interview schedule ranged over respondents' own career plans for the future, impressions of the qualities demanded for certain jobs, their ambitions, views on careers and children, opportunities for women, positive discrimination, and assertiveness training programmes. Some responded at much greater length than others but overall a large body of discourse was generated. Responses were relatively homogeneous and similar as will become apparent in the analytic sections below. Where possible numerical indication of the prevalence of a theme in the sample will be given. These indications should, however, be treated with caution. The interview format was open-ended and respondents were not asked directly whether they agreed (yes or no) with a particular statement, thus failure to articulate a theme does not indicate that the respondent might not be willing to produce it on another occasion or might not agree if asked directly.

All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. The transcription conventions used stress readability at the expense of the detailed nuance of stress, pronunciation, and timing. In the extracts reproduced below (. .) is used to indicate a pause in the respondent's utterance; . . . indicates omission of material, and (inaud) indicates that the tape-recording was inaudible at that point. Extracts are annotated according to the subjects' sex and subject number. No claims are made for the generality or representativeness of the sample. The analysis demonstrates the practical ideologies this particular sample had access to, reflecting their social position, and what they were able to reproduce in an interview. Obviously other samples could be included in a more extensive study. The discourses identified here have generality only to the extent that they are recognizable as having a much broader currency. This is sufficient to make the analysis interesting and an ideal means of illustrating our analytic approach.

Four analytic sections follow, taking up the most dominant themes in respondents' discourse. They concern respectively the presentation of equal opportunities and the constraints on those opportunities, respondents' theories of individual nature, their analyses of how social change might occur, and their representations of the past, present, and future for women. We begin with the discourses of egalitarianism.

### **Equal egalitarians**

Two particular kinds of talk tended to dominate participants' discourse about women in the workplace, careers and children. These could be called the 'equal opportunities' and

'practical considerations' themes. The equal opportunities theme was articulated during the interview by every respondent (with the exception of one male and one female), while the practical considerations theme appeared in six out of seven interviews with male respondents and seven out of 10 interviews with female respondents. The extracts below provide some examples of the equal opportunities theme and illustrate the rationale behind our classification.

*Female Two:* I would expect the father to do his equal share in bringing them up. I would take great offence to the father turning round and saying they're your duty, you look after them.

*Female Three:* Um, yeah, I think there could be more equal opportunities, for example, when women take maternity leave they often miss out on promotion.

*Male Two:* It's very hard to see their point of view because I've never been, I've never been a male chauvinist so I mean I just, on the business side, women are just as good as men, I mean if not better, I mean obviously perfectly equal.

*Male Three:* I think that equal opportunities should continue, and I think possibly more could be done for equal opportunities.

What is meant by an equal opportunities theme, therefore, is a form of talk endorsing general liberal values—egalitarianism, freedom of choice for the individual, equally shared responsibility and so on which develops a moral language of should's, ought's, fairness and duty. Ideals are portrayed as obvious, natural and to be taken completely for granted. Thus 'everybody *should be* treated as an equal' and not to do so involves bias and incorrect ethics.

The adoption of this kind of talk by the majority of the sample achieves several beneficial functions for the user. It establishes implicitly or by explicit contrast with non-believers, a certain kind of identity and within that clearly structures a positive self-presentation. The extract from Male Two, for example, demonstrates how the speaker can separate self from undesirable others (chauvinists) and mark out good intentions which would be difficult to attack because they are phrased as obvious moral imperatives.

In contrast to the equal opportunities theme which was generally presented as internally directed, freely chosen, statements of belief, the competing practical considerations theme depended on a different construction illustrated in the following extracts.

*Male Four:* I suppose you can always see how an employer's mind will work, if he has a choice between two identically qualified and identically, identical personalities, and one is male and one is female, you can sympathize with him for perhaps wondering if the female is not going to get married and have children and then there's always the risk that she may not come back after, she may well do, a lot of women do, but uh I don't know he may well decide that the risk is not worth taking, play safe um and from the nature of things it looks like that is uh, the way it would stay.

*Male Six:* I mean there are other considerations like by and large women are probably better for bringing up children in the home so uh you know if they're all working then they are not going to be able to do that which ( . . ) you know wouldn't be good.

*Female Eight:* But I think more and more nowadays companies are willing to take on women although I can ( . . ) its understandable that sometimes they don't ( . . ) they aren't so keen, just because they think women are going to chuck it all in in a few years' time. I mean I'm an example of that, I've every intention of chucking it in in a few years' time.

*Female Two:* I said that to some friends the other night who have got children and they said yeah well that's what we thought as well and one of them was high up in management but once her children came along that was it, she just, all these maternal urges came surging out of her and she just couldn't go back to work again.

The particular considerations cited are presented as unalterable facts, appealing to a biological inevitability or the 'nature of things', and frequently assume, contra current psychological thinking (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974; Nicholson, 1984; Wetherell, 1986), that women and men can be meaningfully and readily categorized into two distinct,

non-overlapping groups, where the differences far outweigh the similarities. To be effective rhetorically, self must be distanced from the requirements of reality which are best portrayed as unambiguous givens rather than as personal wishes or beliefs. Biology and nature satisfy this case as do the rational depersonalized requirements of employers in the first extract from Male Four.

In practical considerations talk women become a 'risk not worth taking' as employees. Riskiness arises because of their greater responsibility for child care. A contingent kind of social arrangement is presented as a biological constraint, due to 'maternal urges', or as reflecting a natural skill at bringing up children not possessed by men. A false naturalness is thus created (Reicher, 1984). Particular individual choices, within given social structures and institutions, become discursively reified and externally attributed as facts of nature which the individual speaker is not involved in, cannot change, and for which she or he is not directly or indirectly responsible. Rhetorically, it is not the individual male or female whose actions reproduce social arrangements, it is the requirements of impersonal nature or the reasonable needs of employers. 'The problem' is the reproductive role of women which is presented independently of what 'I believe' should be the case or what 'I desire'.

Although we can, as we have done here, describe these two equal opportunities and practical considerations themes separately, for the analysis of ideology, the most important point to make is that they frequently co-occur. In fact, two-thirds of our sample drew on both in the interviews. On many occasions a belief in equal opportunities, often strongly phrased by respondents, was contradicted by later or sometimes almost simultaneous reference to practical criteria which restored inequality. Many of the obvious inconsistencies or contradictions in the respondents' talk were due to invocation of the two competing themes. Some extracts from just one respondent illustrating these inconsistencies are reproduced below:

*Male One*

*Int:* So if it was a decision between you and your wife as to who was to stay at home, you would rather go to work rather than stay at home?

*Resp:* Well, no, that would have to be a unanimous decision, in other words if my wife was adamant that she wanted to go out to work, uh and if I were 90 per cent convinced that I wanted to go out to work, then it is possible that I would look after the children. But I would say that it's unlikely that I would marry a person who would be so closeted in her views anyway. So you know, it's not really likely to happen. I will be going to work.

*Resp:* The point is just to have essential correct ethics behind it all, in other words, that there should be equalities for both men and women at the workplace.

*Resp:* I think they should look after the children, for the sake of the uh the uh balanced uh, mature, natural upbringing for the child, in other words there must, in the ideal world, there must be both a father there and a mother there and the mother should be looking after the child and bringing it up, and certainly for the first five years, I would say, of the child's life should the mother be there full time uh and then after that you have a career as long as she can spend time with the child when he gets back from school.

For this respondent the use of the equal opportunities theme expressed as 'essential correct ethics' and child rearing as being a 'unanimous decision' allows a certain sort of self-presentation but this is contradicted by the description of a wife who wished to go out to work as 'closeted in her views' and the assertion made that 'I will be going out to work', combined with his representation of women rearing children as 'balanced, mature, natural'.

This dual combination of themes in our sample illustrates a very important point about ideology and discourse. Namely that ideology is not simply a set of propositions but is primarily a method of accounting or managing a representation. It is an *active* way of making

sense. Language use can be varied from moment to moment depending on the participants' interactional goals. This fact and the inconsistencies produced by flexibility suggest major problems for any simplistic application of conventional social psychological analytic tools such as the concept of attitude. Given the series of extracts just reproduced for Male One, how would one describe his attitude? It would be possible to argue that this respondent believes in both equal opportunities and that 'a woman's place is in the home'. Traditional survey methods, therefore, might miss the complexity of representation here which is probably the most powerful determinant sustaining this accounting practice.

Similarly one could easily and mistakenly conclude from a superficial analysis of survey-type data that the majority of respondents from a sample such as ours wholeheartedly support social change. Indeed they do, but they *also* appeal to practical considerations which effectively neutralize impetus for change. The combination of two ideological forms in this sample is worth noting if one's aim is to change the position of women in this society. From a feminist perspective, the respondents seem to be perpetuating patriarchal privilege and the *status quo* while continuing to present themselves in positive liberal terms, they are thus enmeshed in spite of or perhaps because of their partial allegiance to equal opportunities.

In this respect it is instructive to compare female and male participants' responses to a series of questions asked by the interviewer concerning whether they could imagine a fully satisfying life without a career or without children and thus whether the possibility they might have children was a consideration in career plans. A regular and obvious difference emerged and is illustrated in the comparison between one male and one female respondent below.

*Female Two*

*Int:* So is the possibility that you might have children a consideration in your career thinking?

*Resp:* Yeah, I suppose it is because yeah one of the things about social work is that you can go back to it, you can sort of take a break off and have your children, you know sort of bring them up to whatever stage that you want to bring them up to, I mean I don't know whether I'll go back to work when they're only 18 months old or not. But you can go back, it's relatively easy to get back in again at the same level you left off.

*Male Three*

*Int:* Can you picture a fully satisfying life without having children?

*Resp:* Um, no.

*Int:* Is the possibility that you might have children a consideration in your career thinking?

*Resp:* Yes, are you suggesting that there are careers where it would be difficult to have children?

*Int:* Yes, I suppose so.

*Resp:* Like what?

*Int:* Well I suppose what I'm suggesting is what the next question is, would you ever consider staying at home and looking after children as a job that you might do for a number of years?

*Resp:* No.

*Int:* So that's what I meant, when you are considering your career, are you envisaging yourself looking after your children at all for any period of time?

*Resp:* Well, I mean I would as a working man look after them. I would be there in the evenings, I would be there if there was a disaster.

The responses to these questions clearly defined the limits of the equal opportunities theme. Eight of the 10 female respondents unambiguously perceived the issue of career planning and children as a problem for them personally, involving responsibilities which required management and juggling of two competing options, while every one of the seven male respondents, despite, in most cases, their use of equal opportunities discourse in other parts of the interview, expressed incomprehension as in Male Three's case, hadn't seriously considered it as a conflict or, if perceiving it as a problem, did not interpret it as a threat to the possibility of *any* career. For the male respondents especially, anticipated practice appeared to lag behind what was elsewhere assumed, unquestionably, as a desirable goal.

The two exceptions to the general rule for female respondents were **Female Three** who stated that having children was only a slight consideration in her career thinking **and that she** would prefer to work to support them, and **Female Five** who replied 'No, I'm **going to have** children no matter what, it doesn't really matter. I mean that's a sort of old-fashioned custom, it doesn't affect it (career thinking) at all'.

The general conflict prevalent in respondents' discourse represents a type of theory/practice (Potter & Litton, 1985) or *de jure/de facto* distinction; the practice effectively undercutting the ideal but the statement of the ideal allowing participants to buy into a particular kind of liberalism. This type of accounting, which seems to merit the description 'unequal egalitarianism', could be said to preserve more efficiently the *status quo* and patriarchal privilege (than, say, the isolated expression of 'practical circumstances' or biological accounting) in the sense that appeals, polemic, and arguments for equal opportunities can be met by the restatement of and earnest belief in the ideal but 'practical talk' ensures that the ideal remains an ideal. And the extent to which it remains idyllic is clear in these last responses to questions about careers and children. We are not suggesting, however, that the two versions are cynically arranged by, for instance, the male respondents. One is clearly sincerely held and the other usually equally sincerely regretted. But the contradiction is rarely noted by respondents. It is often argued that ideology is distinguished by contradictions. In this case it also seems possible that these contradictions may be responsible for the force and continuation of the ideology.

### **Individualism: Types, talents and niches**

Any extended discussion of employment opportunities, future career plans and views on the position of women is likely to reveal participants' theories of the individual in relation to complex social processes. This analytic section describes the assumptions or models articulated by our sample in their discourse.

The most prevalent model we found of the person in relation to the social was avowedly individualistic in emphasis. It was framed, that is, in terms of *types* of people with given characteristics or fixed traits which were seen as stable across situations and time. Thus individuals were seen to carry their personalities, or in this case talents, with them into their jobs. There were few references to the possibility, expounded in the sociology of roles, for instance, that occupational positions might come to structure individual nature. The following three extracts illustrate this 'trait theory' type of accounting.

*Female Four:* I don't think it should be that business is as such and people should just be made to become suited. I think it should be more the actual qualities that people have. You know, they should be looked at and see how they could best be used or else everybody would become, should turn into machine-like.

*Male Two:* I think it would take a long time to change a person. I think it is best to adapt to what you've got (. .) in such a large company there must be a number of openings for people with different personalities and characteristics so yeah, fitting a person into an appropriate position.

*Male One:* I think it (assertiveness training) is an absolute and utter waste of time. You see I don't really think you can change people's personalities fundamentally um I suppose in the long term you can mould people just as the Civil Service might mould many of its employees into, become more functionaries than people (. .) but I think companies really ought to be looking for people who already have the qualities that they demand in their profession, in other words if they want an extrovert, assertive, flexible-minded, individual they should pick that individual up from interview instead of sending them on silly, expensive courses um you can't really change people's natures so easily in the space of a six-week course.



This type or trait theory of the individual, emphasizing inherent qualities and personal consistency over time, is clearly related to a particular representation of the job market as consisting, more or less, of a set of niches requiring specific skills or personality traits. The process of candidate selection or choice of jobs comes to involve fitting the right person to the right niche or choosing a career that matches one's pre-given character. This has obvious implications for the evaluation of work-related success and failure which becomes attributed, for other people at least if not oneself, to those personal capacities and wishes as opposed to structural and institutional factors.

*Male One:* I would suggest that um really in the real world there is in the end some form of natural equilibrium where after many years in a job people uh reach their natural optimum position. In other words, they'll go as far as they're ever going to get and if necessary they will overcome obstacles in their way.

The adoption of an individualistic analysis or trait talk has important consequences for analyses of social change and explanations for inequalities. This aspect of the discursive pattern will be discussed in the next section.

**Analyses of social change: 'It is up to the individual woman to prove herself'**

Commensurate with their use of a 'type' model of the individual, the respondents' accounts of what needs to be changed and how change would come about were principally psychological rather than sociological. By omission of any discussions of power, vested interests and institutional or structural factors their explanations recurrently drifted towards psychologizing. The problem for 10 out of 17 of our respondents was understood to lie in people's (employers') attitudes or prejudice.

*Female Nine:* Um, well I think it just needs a change of attitudes rather than anything else and I think women will just have to keep at it.

*Female Three:*

*Int:* What kind of things need to be changed?

*Resp:* Attitudes, that a woman's place is in the home is still very much dominant in many organizations.

This consistent emphasis on the importance of changing attitudes is ironic in light of the observation made earlier that positive attitudes to equal opportunities may be held by the same people who stress practical obstacles. Egalitarian discourse does not magically wipe out non-egalitarian discourse. The respondents' own understanding and definition of attitudes, evident in the extracts above, in fact resembles the classic socio-psychological theory of attitudes. Both tend to exclude the kind of flexible and inconsistent accounting we have witnessed and take for granted that individuals are consistent in their attitudes, as they are in their personalities, and so attitude change cannot help but have powerful consequences. In this sense socio-psychological theory could be said to mimic or have fallen victim to an uncritical acceptance of common-sense talk about people and their beliefs and opinions.

Consistent with individualism, inequality was also on many occasions presented as the fault of women or as a result of their own attitudes to themselves and this fostered a particular kind of 'superwoman' accounting when it came to considering how society might change.

*Female Eight:* I think that sometimes we have the wrong attitude that we go in and say well these men are going to look down on you or going to think I can't cope, and then start almost a sort of a reversal, well it's an inferiority complex in some ways, I think. And so that can lead to strained relationships . . . I think the best way to get change, a change in attitudes, is to show



that you're good at your job and if a woman goes in there and is good and as competent as a man then I think that's just as constructive as anything else.

*Female Three*

*Int:* Are you happy with the roles women play in the world of work and employment?

*Resp:* Um, I think it is probably expanding but at the moment no I don't, but I think that's the fault of the woman rather than society in general . . . Um, I think you just have to prove yourself worthwhile of your position in a company. Just show that you're capable of doing the same as any man. It's up to the individual woman to do.

*Female Five*

*Int:* Are you happy with the roles women play in the world of work and employment?

*Resp:* No, not really. But I think it can't be, no definitely not, but I don't think it could be changed by standing up and doing it, you just have to prove yourself, and people will notice.

In the absence of a theory of society including structural and organizational factors and power relations, the logical conclusion is that individuals themselves are to blame for their position or could triumph over 'negative attitudes'. This can be described in this context as a 'superwoman' type of accounting because it dovetails with the broader construction over the last 20 years or so of a new image or identity for women: as workers who continue to maintain traditional domestic functions (Coward, 1984). The general message is that exceptional women can cope and thus all should strive to be exceptional rather than question the basis of the striving. This superwoman image would seem to serve several functions: notably, positioning and maintaining women as certain kinds of consumers, releasing them for certain labour markets and yet preserving domestic labour (Winship, 1978).

Two other aspects of this version of women and social change are worth noting. Firstly, it assumes a neutral and fair context of evaluation. Competence is seen as an attribute of individuals which shines out rather than as the product of a complex interaction between the individual, those doing the evaluating and the criteria for success. In this version competence, ability and skill are never negotiated but simply uncovered. Secondly, it is assumed, as the implicit or hidden side of this accounting strategy, that value, ability, skill, are ascribed to men, an inevitable concomitant of masculinity, but are achieved by women. Men are, therefore, reasonable judges of women's attempts to attain status. Hence the people who are the appropriate audience for the superwoman's performance are men.

This kind of perspective on women and the world of work was also continued in some of the female respondents' concrete suggestions for social change which, with the exception of some references to job sharing, education and legislation, centered predominantly on the importance of successful women as models for the less successful.

*Female Two:* I mean Mrs Thatcher should really do it (. .) be doing something you would think, because she is a female politician and there's still so few female politicians even with the top one being female, and I think, yeah, anyone who's like an MP, or a district councillor could do a fair bit to help women. There's so few women in big business really that it's difficult. I think female journalists play an important role in bettering the role of women in society, I mean like Katherine Whitehorn and like Erica Jong.

Interestingly, none of the male respondents drew upon the 'superwoman' rhetoric or referred to the responsibility of individual women to prove themselves worthy. It is thus a moot point whether they might have access to this theory and could reproduce it in other contexts. It has to be remembered that in *this* context, nearly all the male respondents produced a liberal equal opportunities discourse and the interviewer was female. The stringencies of self-presentation may not have allowed for the argument that it is up to women to prove themselves worthy.

To conclude this section, the predominant explanation for inequality focused on the individual characteristics of employers (their attitudes or prejudice). Notions of how change

might occur were similarly individualistic and included, for the female respondents, the construction of a category of women who would prove themselves to men and thus change their attitudes. The provision of equal opportunities in this context is confined to the provision of uniform treatment and once gained it is assumed individual (exceptional) women would support the claims and case for all women through their example within existing structures. The overall effect of this ideology can only be to maintain the *status quo* for women as a whole.

### The past, present and future: 'Times are changing'

Many cultural commentators, most notably Williams (1975), have pointed out the 'golden age' tendency in representations of history and social change. This is the tendency to look backwards to a much better or happier time shortly before the writer or speaker's birth or perhaps during their childhood, celebrating harmonious communities, a more natural, frequently rural, order and a social structure that seemed to involve simultaneously a deeper regard for others and greater respect for authority. They celebrate, that is, a period where there were apparently fewer rebellions and riots and more 'community' spirit.

One of the most noteworthy aspects of our respondents' discourses on social change is their reversal of this trend. In Williams' words 'the simple backward look' becomes the 'simple progressive thrust' (1975, p. 51). Instead of celebrating the past, the present and future are praised. The golden age for women is not in the past, it is in the immediate future and steadily being realized. Respondents' theories about the nature of change are evident in the following extracts.

*Female Four:* I think it is much better now than probably it ever has been but I still don't think it is completely equal. There is still a long way to go before it's anything like really equal, because there are so many prejudices still held. But I think it's good that opportunities are opening up, and as more capable women go into them it's bound to get better in the future when it's shown that women can work as well as men . . . it will become more and more easy and more and more acceptable.

*Male Six:* No, I think there is a change taking place, more women are working and, but it will probably continue for quite a long time and that providing it takes place gradually, it won't matter. Um because people have time to adjust to it. If it were to happen very quickly it would be quite disruptive. I think that probably more women will work. I think it's just like people are going to have to work shorter hours because of the shortage of jobs, that'll come to be accepted.

*Female Seven:* I think there is still some bias against women in some places, but I think it's diminishing. I think things are progressing. I don't think any drastic steps have to be taken.

*Male One:* But I do tend to think that uh if you look at statistics of graduate intake into many large companies there is a very high proportion of women being accepted, often more than men (. .) um, so times are changing.

*Female Two:* Oh yeah, I think it'll change gradually, because I mean if you think of the changes that have happened since even 1900 and today, I mean we've got a female Prime Minister. And I think that'll just go on (. .) not that she's doing much for females but I mean (. . .) yeah (. . .) she's not a very good example, but I think yeah it will improve, as time goes by, because women are getting (. . .) I think the feminist movement has calmed down a bit now. It's being more practical rather than just being anti-men. And I think that'll start to really show in the next ten years.

Two assumptions are specifically salient in this kind of accounting which emerged in 11 of the 17 interviews. First, an almost teleological view of history and change is manifest. The recurrent use of phrases such as 'that'll just go on', 'it will become more and more easy', 'it's bound to get better' suggest that change is inevitable and in some sense automatic: an unfolding of a predetermined trend or an obvious rightness. This impression is reinforced through the choice of the agents of change: '*things* are progressing', '*times* are changing'.

Secondly, change in this model is gradual. 'Natural' social change is understood as a gradual change and this also seems to be seen as the most desirable or ideal kind. Thus, rapid change might count as 'drastic steps' or become 'disruptive'. This view appears to combine with a concept of people as only capable of accepting, accommodating, or *agreeing with* gradual changes.

Like the golden age version of a happier past, this vision of equality taking shape gradually and approaching steadily but inevitably can serve to justify inaction and lack of personal responsibility. Williams, for instance, notes how 'the myth of a happier past' (p. 54) can helpfully buttress traditionalism and redirect social criticism of the present to a world of the past which can never be recovered. Similarly, we suggest the 'times are changing' version removes the need for the detailed analysis of what has been achieved in the present, while the teleological cast to the talk absolves the individual from the imperative to change their own domestic and work environments. A positive consensus view of society, as willing to solve problems and slowly combat injustices, is legitimated, rather than a conflict model. This analysis may thus have the broader ideological effect of obscuring the lack of change for women and the continuing pattern of inequality. Historical comparisons may not suggest that the position of women has automatically improved (cf. Yeandle, 1984).

### **Conclusions**

As we noted in the introduction, psychologists interested in the formation and reproduction of the labour market have in the past often turned to personality traits as explanatory mediating variables. The character trait, fear of success, for instance, is assumed to account partly for women's failure to live up to their full work potential. In Horner's theory this trait mediates between structural factors (sex roles) and the individual actor.

In contrast, in this paper we have suggested that the important psychological variables are not personal attributes as such but the limitations on individuals' systems for making sense of themselves and their environments; the limitations, in other words, inherent in the ideologies to which people have access. We have attempted, therefore, to lay bare some of the understandings, theories, and rationalizations of one sample of people through an analysis of their discourse. The themes or versions they draw upon constitute and will continue to constitute their experiences of employment and job selection and their evaluations of their social positions. Respondents' talk is both a product of material conditions, power, vested interests, and intergroup relations and a representation of those conditions with some autonomous effects of its own.

Our analysis documented the theory of the individual and society predominantly available to our respondents and demonstrated its individualistic bias. It seems clear too that the commonplace adoption of practical considerations talk serves to naturalize and justify inequality and this is reinforced by an image of social change as gradually and inevitably unfolding, as well as by underlying models of sexual difference and achievement. Most importantly, analysis revealed how the issue of inequalities and the achievement of a positive self-presentation in terms of moral principles is managed discursively through the use of the competing equal opportunities and practical considerations versions. A powerful ideological effect appears to be created through this dual accounting system.

One of the advantages of discourse analysis is that it allows the researcher to deal with the complex content of people's representations. As we have noted, this complex content, particularly the inconsistencies and flexible moment-to-moment adoption of different themes, would tend to be edited out or obscured in traditional survey or attitude questionnaire methods. In order to understand the operation of ideology one needs to be able to describe its contradictions, as these are essential to its maintenance; and hence a method, like

discourse analysis, which can deal with extensive bodies of material from the same participant, is desirable (Thompson, 1984).

Attitude theory may not provide an adequate method but perhaps we could recast our results in terms of the social identities occupied by participants and the strategies afforded by those identities? Our findings, for example, might be seen as tapping into what Tajfel (1981) has described, in his theory of the socio-psychological dynamics of social change, as *status quo*, social mobility, and social change belief structures.

Williams & Giles (1978) have argued that, as for other oppressed or 'minority' groups, distinct subgroups of women might be identified according to their choice of strategy or perception of their social identity. Thus some women might come to accept the *status quo* and their inequality as justifiable and legitimate; others may seek to move as individuals into the more valued group, separating and differentiating self from other women (perhaps those other women who are 'just housewives'), while adopting 'masculine' styles and norms. Yet others may reject social mobility or 'passing' into the 'superior' group as a strategy and attempt to change the criteria on which superiority and inferiority imputations are based through actively promoting social change, or through a strategy of social creativity which redefines 'positive' and 'negative' attributes. At first glance it would seem that parts of the representations we have described might be usefully understood in these terms.

However, one major difficulty immediately becomes obvious with this reframing. This arises from the assumption that strategies will be coherent in relation to a particular group identity such as gender so that subgroupings of women defined according to their strategy will be homogeneous and distinct. It is evident from our analysis that respondents will frequently develop highly contrasting versions of the situation facing them, not only at different stages of the interview but within the same sequence of talk. The meshing of equal opportunities and practical considerations themes in particular would cause problems for Williams & Giles' conceptualization. Only by suppressing this complex, intra-individual, variability would it be possible to read each respondent's account in terms of one specific intergroup strategy.

The findings from our preliminary study seem to suggest that group members with a given social identity vis-à-vis other groups do not consistently articulate one belief system, whether *status quo*, social mobility or social change, but may draw upon many inconsistent belief systems to make sense of their position.

This problem highlights the reasons behind our stress on language as the unit of analysis rather than the individual actor. This emphasis has allowed us to make sense of both diversity and inconsistency. In conclusion, therefore, we suggest that discourse analyses may well offer the best starting point more generally, if patterns of accounting and the strategies involved in social change are the subject of investigation (cf. Billig, 1985, for a similar argument in relation to intergroup prejudice and tolerance). Identity and categorization practices are relevant to this study as particular versions obviously develop certain group and self-categorizations and in this sense contain 'identity work'. However, as the representation changes the categorization and identity constructions frequently change too and social psychologists must in the future explore the implications of this for contemporary social psychological theories of social cognition and social influence.

## References

- Alper, T. G. (1974). Achievement motivation in college women: A now you see it now you don't phenomenon. *American Psychologist*, **29**, 194-203.
- Austin, J. L. (1962). *How To Do Things with Words*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Barthes, R. (1979). *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*. London: Cape.
- Billig, M. (1985). Prejudice, categorization and particularization: From a perceptual to a rhetorical approach. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, **15**, 79-105.
- Brenner, O. C. & Tomkiewicz, J. (1982). Sex differences among business graduates in fear of success and fear of appearing incompetent as measured by objective instruments. *Psychological Reports*, **51**, 179-182.

- Condry, H. & Dyer, S. (1976). Fear of success: Attribution of causes to the victim. *Journal of Social Issues*, 32, 63-83.
- Coward, R. (1984). *Female Desire*. London: Paladin.
- Culler, J. (1983). *On Deconstruction*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Dreyfus, H. L. & Rabinow, P. (1982). *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*. Brighton: Harvester.
- Eagleton, T. (1983). *Literary Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Feather, N. T. & Raphaelson, A. C. (1974). Fear of success in Australian and American student groups: Motive or sex-role stereotype? *Journal of Personality*, 42, 190-201.
- Fowler, R., Hodge, B., Kress, G. & Trew, T. (eds) (1979). *Language and Control*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Gilbert, N. & Mulkay, M. (1984). *Opening Pandora's Box: A Sociological Analysis of Scientists' Discourse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Grice, H. P. (1975). Logic and conversation. In P. Cole & J. L. Morgan (eds), *Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech Acts*. New York: Academic Press.
- Henriques, J., Hollway, W., Urwin, C., Venn, C. & Walkerdine, V. (1984). *Changing The Subject*. London/New York: Methuen.
- Heritage, J. (1984). *Garfinkel and Ethnomethodology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Hoffman, L. W. (1974). Fear of success of males and females: 1965 and 1971. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 42, 353-358.
- Horner, M. (1972). Toward an understanding of achievement-related conflicts in women. *Journal of Social Issues*, 28, 157-176.
- Jayyusi, L. (1984). *Categorisation and the Moral Order*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Kress, G. & Hodge, B. (1979). *Language as Ideology*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Levinson, S. (1983). *Pragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Litton, I. & Potter, J. (1985). Social representations in the ordinary explanation of a 'riot'. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 15, 371-388.
- Maccoby, E. & Jacklin, C. N. (1974). *The Psychology of Sex Differences*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- McClelland, D. C., Atkinson, J. R., Clark, R. A. & Lowell, E. L. (1953). *The Achievement Motive*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.
- McKinlay, A. & Potter, J. (1986). Social representations: A conceptual critique. Mimeo, University of St Andrews.
- Morgan, S. W. & Mausner, B. (1973). Behavioural and fantasied indicators of avoidance of success in men and women. *Journal of Personality*, 41, 457-476.
- Moscovici, S. (1984). The phenomenon of social representations. In R. Farr & S. Moscovici (eds), *Social Representations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mulkay, M. & Gilbert, G. N. (1982). What is the ultimate question? Some remarks in defence of the analysis of scientists' discourse. *Social Studies of Science*, 12, 309-320.
- Mulkay, M., Potter, J. & Yearley, S. (1983). Why an analysis of scientific discourse is needed. In K. Knorr-Cetina & M. Mulkay (eds), *Science Observed: Perspectives on the Social Study of Science*. London/Beverly Hills: Sage.
- Nicholson, J. (1984). *Men and Women: How Different Are They?* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- O'Connell, A. N. & Perez, S. (1982). Fear of success and causal attributions of success and failure in high school and college students. *Journal of Psychology*, 111, 141-151.
- Popp, G. E. & Muhs, W. F. (1982). Fear of success and women employees. *Human Relations*, 35, 511-519.
- Potter, J. & Litton, I. (1985). Some problems underlying the theory of social representations. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 24, 81-90.
- Potter, J. & Mulkay, M. (1985). Scientists' interview talk: Interviews as a technique for revealing participants' interpretative practices. In M. Brenner, J. Brown & D. Canter (eds), *The Research Interview: Issues and Approaches*. London: Academic Press.
- Potter, J. & Reicher, S. (1987). Discourses of community and conflict: The organization of social categories in accounts of a 'riot'. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 26, 25-40.
- Potter, J., Stringer, P. & Wetherell, M. (1984). *Social Texts and Context*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Potter, J. & Wetherell, M. (in press). *Discourse and Social Psychology: Beyond Attitudes and Behaviour*. London/Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Reicher, S. (1984). Action and identity: The need for a social psychology of social change. Paper presented at ESRC Workshop on Intergroup Theory and Race Relations.
- Tajfel, H. (1981). *Human Groups and Social Categories*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thompson, J. (1984). *Studies in the Theory of Ideology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Tresemmer, D. (1976). The cumulative record of research on 'fear of success'. *Sex Roles*, 2, 217-236.
- van Dijk, T. A. (1985). *Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, vols 1-4. London: Academic Press.
- Wetherell, M. (1986). Linguistic repertoires and literary criticism: New directions for a social psychology of gender. In S. Wilkinson (ed.) *Feminist Social Psychology*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Wieder, L. (1974). *Language and Social Reality*. The Hague: Mouton.
- Williams, J. & Giles, H. (1978). The changing status of women in society: An intergroup perspective. In H. Tajfel (ed.), *Differentiation Between Social Groups*. London: Academic Press.
- Williams, R. (1975). *The Country and the City*. London: Fontana.
- Winship, J. (1978). A woman's world: *Woman—an ideology of femininity*. In Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, *Women Take Issue*. London: Hutchinson.
- Yeandle, S. (1984). *Women's Working Lives: Patterns and Strategies*. London: Tavistock.

Received 7 April 1986; revised version received 19 September 1986

Requests for reprints should be addressed to Margaret Wetherell, Psychological Laboratory, The University, St Andrews, Fife KY16 9JU, UK.

Hilda Stiven is at the Department of Community Medicine, Dundee University.  
Jonathan Potter is also at the University of St Andrews.