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ABSTRACT

This paper uses examples of systemic sex discrimination at one Canadian university to illustrate the need to continue to redress the causes of such discrimination. An opening section explores some legal definitions of systemic discrimination from court decisions and government regulation. Using these, this section develops a working definition of systemic discrimination as any "institutionalized" (not individual) structures, policies, practices, customers and attitudes which disadvantage individuals who are members of certain groups (self-defined). The next section describes some examples of systemic discrimination experienced by an individual (the author) in the past three academic years working as an Academic Dean. These are grouped under several categories of systemic discrimination: institutional practices; criteria or practices which have adversely affected women academics in hiring, selection, promotion, review and tenure processes; and inequitable allocation of resources. A conclusion offers five suggestions for change: (1) institutional acknowledgement that systemic discrimination exists; (2) articulate objectives to eradicate discriminatory policies, practices, structures and conventions; (3) placement of explicit responsibilty for employment equity on senior management; (4) reconstruct policies, practices, structures and norms; and (5) continued striving by women to claim their rightful authority. (Contains 35 references.) (JB)

Reflections on

Systemic Discrimination

in a university

by

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SYSTEMIC DISCRIMINATION IN A UNIVERSITY

Overview

The purpose of this paper is to reveal, through example, some types of *systemic discrimination* experienced within one Canadian university. My overall aim in writing this is to prevent the university community from becoming complacent that systemic discrimination is no longer an issue. Rather, this paper underscores concerns made by a woman academic that systemic discrimination **is** in evidence in at least one university in Canada and suggests that the university community should systematically redress those causes of discrimination.

Some definitions

Judge Abella in 1983 in the Royal Commission Report was the first to define systemic discrimination within a Canadian context. And as her definition is used in Supreme Court case law decisions, that definition acts as a starting point: "systems and practices [which] we customarily and often unwittingly adopt...affect a certain group unfairly or adversely" (p. 9). Abella observed two basic antecedents to discrimination:

a) a disparately negative impact that flows from the **structure of systems** designed for a homogeneous constituency; and

b) a disparately negative impact that flows from **practices** based on stereotypical characteristics ascribed to an individual because of the characteristics ascribed to

the group of which he or she is a member.

The former usually results in **systems** primarily designed for white able-bodied males; the latter usually results in **practices** based on white able-bodied males' perceptions of everyone else.

In both cases, the institutionalized **systems** and **practices** result in arbitrary and extensive exclusions for persons who, by reason of their group affiliation, are systematically denied a full opportunity to demonstrate their individual abilities. (Abella, pp. 9-10) (my emphases)

The Canadian Human Rights Act Employer Guide (1981) explains systemic discrimination as **policies** as well as practices based on organizational rules and assumptions or past traditions; systemic discrimination is a by-product of systems established for some other purpose -- past institutionalized privileges, where these privileges have become imbedded in laws and regulations, in informal rules, in social roles, and in behaviour and structures of organization.

Using these and others' explanations, I developed the following operational definition of systemic discrimination as a framework for my writing: any **institutionalized** (not individual) structures, policies, practices, customs and attitudes which disadvantage individuals who are members of certain groups (self-defined). These treatments may be both directly discriminatory and also discriminatory in their effect. And its negative or

discriminatory effect, impact or result either limits the opportunities of a group from participating fully in the life of the organization or, more dramatically, actually excludes that group from participating in the organization. As examples, having no women on promotion committees has been identified as limiting women employees' opportunities for promotion; and the former height criterion for police officers was said to restrict most women from even applying for those jobs.

Although systemic discrimination affects all four designated groups (women, aboriginal people, visible minorities and persons with disabilities), this paper focusses only on systemic discrimination evidenced toward women academics, and one university faculty woman in particular. As Abella and others have pointed out, each targeted group has its unique problems and warrants unique solutions. Consequently, the suggestions for eradication of systemic discrimination advanced here are intended for that one designated group: women academics. There is no presumption that the examples given below are able to be generalized or comprehensive; rather they provide evidence to support the claim that systemic discrimination exists within an academic community.

The unfortunate result of systemic discrimination is that it affects only those people who are perceived by those in power as being different, i.e., those who are not the majority group or the group that has traditionally been the dominant group. Accordingly, The Canadian Human Rights Act Employer Guide argues

that preventative programs should focus on the macro -- the **structural causes** of discrimination, embedded in the criteria and evaluations schemes which comprise systems of hiring, personnel management and performance measurement, rather than the micro -- such as trying to find out who is culpable. Abella claims that we should be focussing on the effects or the outcome of remediative treatment or affirmative action within the workplace as the test of true institutional change as we move towards employment equity. And Sheppard (1993) says that affirmative action or equity programs designed to remedy systemic discrimination encompasses institutionalized changes and/or special legislative measures aimed at redressing inequalities in society at large. If one believes in the systems framework of organizations as I do however, all perspectives are necessary; changes in the context, changes in the inputs, changes in the processes and changes in the climate must all, ultimately, take place in order for noticeable changes in outputs.

Instances of systemic discrimination

This next section describes some examples of systemic discrimination that I have experienced within the last three academic years as an Associate Dean in an Ontario university. These experiences are embedded within the literature of systemic discrimination as adversely affecting women academics in the university system.

In my university, a medium-sized full-service university within Canada, approximately 26% of its full-time faculty in 1994 are women. Yet only 16 women of 126 faculty or 13% are in middle management positions; and 3 women faculty out of 15 or 20% are in upper level management positions (one woman of the seven vice-presidents and two women out of the seven deans). Even in my faculty where 69% of the undergraduate and 71% of the graduate program are comprised of women students, only 18% of full-time faculty are women (1994-95 data). I was the first female Associate Dean in the twenty-five year history of the faculty, and the only female in the faculty's administrative structure.

Before I begin, I wish to reiterate that I believe that no one person is culpable. As systemic discrimination is institutional, I believe that it is the organization which is responsible; it is the organization which allows these discriminatory actions to occur and to perpetuate.

My reflections commence when I was interviewed for the position of Associate Dean. I was interviewed by a committee of seven men and was asked about the "special" attributes that I would bring to the position as a woman. I informed them of the frequent occurrences of discrimination toward women which I had experienced or had heard of occurring in the faculty. The group's immediate response was one of disbelief; later, however, I learned that some of those committee members sought out other female faculty to verify my statements. Several, somewhat apologetically, expressed their initial disbelief to me. With

that auspicious beginning, I thought that it might be useful and revealing to keep a diary of personal experiences which, under the above operational definition, I perceive as constituting systemic discrimination.

Later, having read some literature on women academics' examples, I reflected on these and my own personal experiences and then categorized them into one of three distinct types of systemic discrimination. I labelled them as: one, discriminatory institutional practices; two, discriminatory criteria in promotion, hiring, tenure and review; and three, inequitable resource allocation. Next, I assigned each of my experiences and then those identified in the literature to one of those three categories. Each category is clarified by examples.

First, I describe what I construe to be examples of discriminatory institutional practices.

1. The most apparent example of systemic discrimination is the use of exclusionary language practices within the faculty. Women students and staff are called 'girls' by both male faculty and support staff, in classes and in general discourse. This is despite a Dean requesting to all faculty, several years ago, not to use gender exclusive language.

2. A number of occasions during my tenure as Associate Dean led to my concern that it was my gender rather than the position that was being discriminated against. As examples, I was not made the Acting Dean on either a temporary or year-long basis, yet a male was; I was not allowed to attend senior management meetings in

Dean's absence, although other (male) Associate Deans have attended on different occasions.

Literature on women in *academe* supports my contention, pointing out that women faculty are excluded from "powerful" positions where policy is set (Aisenberg & Harrington, 1986; Caplan, 1993; Chamberlain, 1988; Robbins & Kahn, 1985). To quote Caplan (p. 180):

> Rarely are women made department heads, deans or other top administrators, and, despite being placed on many working committees, infrequently do they hold positions on the powerful ones or on funding bodies or editorial boards.

This statement is certainly validated by data from my faculty and in the university as a whole.

Kahn and Robbins (1985) observed that women academics have disproportionate demands made of their time for committee work. Furthermore, Hyle (1993) pointed out that much of this committee work to which women academics are assigned is meaningless and unimportant. In my university, representation has been requested on all committees, and especially on the selection/review/promotion/tenure committees. I would agree that the few female faculty members are over-worked or over-used in terms of their internal community service. Accordingly, I applaud a recent report by the Faculty Advisor on Employment Equity which recommends to senior administration that committee work should be taken into consideration when women faculty are applying for tenure and promotion.

3. The paucity of women in middle and senior management in this university supports Finkelstein's (1981) point of a lack of female role models. Indeed on many occasions, I have felt "on parade" and was even advised by a male colleague not to be the first woman Associate Dean, but the second. The first, I was informed, would be subject to pressure for exemplary performance, and my failures would be generalized to all women. Finkelstein makes similar observations. What I sorely miss most, however, is a network of female colleagues with whom to share common problems. Rather than turning inward to the university community, I now seek support and feedback from colleagues in other institutions.

4. For three consecutive years, I asked to attend a well-known management training program for university administrators. The senior university management committee (committee of the president, vice-presidents, and deans) refused my request for two reasons: first, because I was "too new in the job;" and second, because the professional development fund had been expended (an associate dean of another faculty was awarded funds towards his professional development). I expressed my dissatisfaction with the decision and was told that the procedures had just been changed within the university: professional development of management was now decentralized to the Dean's level. From a larger central fund then, professional development funds "devolved" to a much smaller departmental fund. Not only had the rules been changed for the (one) female applicant, but the

resources were reduced and became more restricted.

5. At Faculty Board with a male as chairperson, men have been allowed to talk more than once to a topic; when women try, Roget's Rules of Order has been invoked as the reason for denying women's voices. Fuehrer and Schilling (1985) and Lewis (1993) have commented upon this silencing of women academics.

6. Despite my repeated attempts, I have been excluded from Old Boys' clubs which are operational both within the university and within the faculty. While "the boys" sometimes go out drinking or dining, play golf, or have a quiet weekend together, any overture on my part for informal networking has been turned down. Furthermore, I have been reminded of my children at home. As documented in the literature (Epstein & Coser, 1981; Kahn & Robbins, 1985; Lewis), here too women are excluded from the informal social networks where decision-making occurs.

7. Status-levelling (Finkelstein, 1981) and stereotyping (Kanter, 1977; Yoder, 1985) have occurred when I have been positioned anywhere near the secretary's desk; most strangers ask if I am the secretary, and male faculty members invariably comment upon my secretarial skills. As well, I am referred to by my first name (by students, staff and faculty) (something, however, which I do not mind) or as Mrs. (something which I do mind) while the other Associate Dean is invariably addressed by his title. Robbins and Kahn (1985), too, observed this inequity. Furthermore, when my husband and I attend university functions together, strangers address him as Associate Dean.

8. When a publisher requested that I undertake a national research project, one of my male colleagues suggested that I should share it with a male colleague. He believed that the findings would be more readily accepted if it were co-authored by a male. (I thanked him for his viewpoint, but remained as the single author.) Yet his comments are not unfounded: Geis, Butler and Carter (1982) wrote in a similar vein, saying that women's scholarship has been hampered because of some editors' reluctance to publish papers in which women are the single or senior author.

9. I have argued with senior university administration that our policy of decentralization sometimes works adversely for the non-dominant groups within the university. A case in point has been associated with the recent changes to the opening and closing times and dates of school and, in particular, elementary school. In our county, first secondary students and then elementary children are transported to school. Now parents of elementary school children must provide before-school care for their children because their work commences at 8:30 am yet the school does not start until 9:15 am and children are bussed until at least 8:45 am. Rather than centralizing the university's flexible starting-time policy to accommodate the parents/care-givers of primary children (usually women), the university has stated that with its decentralized system, flexible start-times are at the discretion of each Department Head. And as the majority of the Department Heads are older males, what has

happened in practice is that several women who have asked to start later have been turned down, and several more are too intimidated to ask. As Associate Dean, I made sure that those people affected within our faculty were accommodated; but unfortunately I heard other stories throughout the university where this support was not forthcoming.

The second category of systemic discrimination within the university is criteria or standards which have adversely affected women academics in the hiring, selection, promotion, review and/or tenure processes. As before, I expand upon my experiences with reference to the literature.

1. Despite the literature and university documentation that search committees be heterogenetic in composition, no woman member was on the search committee for the Associate Deanship.

2. Different questions were asked of the male applicant than the female applicant in the interview for the Associate Dean. Moreover, questions at the interview were asked of me about "women's issues/problems/concerns" in the faculty, and not of the male competitor. Again, all standard personnel selection procedures dictate that the same questions be asked of all candidates to ensure fairness. Perhaps the university philosophy of decentralization has prevented the articulation of such a centralized policy.

3. In my faculty, criteria for promotion, tenure and review appear to change with the group of individuals who are going

forward -- being norm rather than criterion referenced. If one academic has a very strong record, for example, others are "competing" with that individual, rather than being compared to an established standard. As I see it, the game plan currently is to determine who else is going for promotion, tenure or review at the same time, in order to determine one's own degree of success. The literature has reported the prevalence of vague and ambiguous criteria for evaluation by review/promotion/tenure committees (e.g., Graham et al., 1985). Other instances documented by these same authors are where department heads have neglected to notify female faculty of the date on which those dossiers are due, where department heads have neglected to act in a timely fashion to secure external reviews of the women candidates' qualifications for promotion and tenure, and where the committees have distorted the interpretations of external reviewers' evaluations unfavourably or have even ignored these positive evaluations.

Recently, a female faculty member applying for early tenure articulated the latter concern; she (and I) deemed her dossier to be exceptional, but the committee did not. I knew the contents of her file and from my reading, the referees were very positive. But because the woman was untenured, she would not file a formal grievance. She believed that her dossier had been evaluated from an anti-women perspective. Hyle (1993) writes of the same thing occurring to other women academics.

4. Newly-hired women for both contract and tenure-track faculty positions have been offered less as starting salaries than were

their male counterparts. This issue is not new to our faculty; others, such as Acker (1987), have pointed out this situation. Not only did this happen to me, but I saw it being applied during my tenure. As Graham, O'Reilly and Rawlings (1985) attest, I too believe that the salary recommendations have been made without considering the unique experiences and backgrounds of these women.

5. Women in non-traditional faculty positions are concerned that their review/tenure/promotion committees are inappropriately structured and that their work will be scrutinized and assessed by those who are not their peers. This concern has been voiced by our university faculty association and by Fuehrer and Schilling (1985) who note the problem of "peer" reviews due to a lack of *de facto* peers because of their different sex, attitudes, backgrounds and experiences. Some female faculty members have also mentioned to me that their administrative and committee responsibilities which they <u>were asked</u> to take on are now, at review/tenure/promotion time, being undervalued or dismissed.

6. The recruitment and hiring of new faculty have been carried out in a very *ad hoc* manner within our faculty, despite the existence of a university-wide hiring kit. In my term of office, I attempted to ensure that selection committees were truly representative and were seen as being representative by discipline, and that the committee agreed upon and put in writing the criteria for selection <u>before</u> they read any applications.

The third category of systemic discrimination I entitled the inequitable allocation of resources. Examples within that category are provided below.

1. Previously, senior university management requested that departments compare the salaries of women and men academics and report any discrepancy within rank. Unfortunately, no determination was made as to what was considered a significant salary differential. Consequently, salaries which I considered as unequal (and favouring the men) were thought of those senior to me as "comparable."

2. The registrar has tabulated that male faculty members initiate about 95% of the special requests (regarding class scheduling and room allocation) to her office. Moreover, male faculty members have made more change-of-room requests to the Registrar's Office than have women faculty.

3. I and several of the other female graduate faculty have argued that we, as advisors, have been assigned more graduate students than our male colleagues. This inequity toward women academics has been observed by Chamberlain (1988) and by Robbins and Kahn (1985).

Another concern raised in the same literature is that women faculty have heavier teaching loads than men. But as Associate Dean, I tried to ensure that this was not the case. Here, all faculty's teaching assignments are written down, available for public scrutiny and comparable.

4. I have undertaken the development of an orientation program for new faculty. Now, in documented form, are a list of resources which any incoming academic can expect to receive and a list of other resources they can qualify for, such as start-up grants. I did this as a reaction to my feelings of distrust of "the system" and because I believed myself to be powerless when I first arrived at the faculty. I had no mentor or network to show me "the ropes" or to ensure that I was allocated what other (male) colleagues received. By opening up and regularizing this process, I hope to inform and hence empower others.

5. In our facility, the administrative wing of the building housing twenty-two women and three men, had only one women's washroom and two men's washrooms. Even the physical structure of that wing of the building was discriminating against women! I had another female washroom installed last year.

The literature offers three more examples demonstrating the inequitable allocation of resources within the university. The first is that women faculty have been assigned less desirable and less permanent office space than men faculty (Graham et al., 1985). Two, women have less access to secretarial and technical support than men (Hyle, 1993; Robbins & Kahn, 1985). And lastly, women have less access to graduate students and doctoral fellows who can assist with research and publications (Robbins & Kahn, 1985). To date, however, I have neither observed nor recorded any such discrimination here.

As Abella stated however, equality in employment does **not** necessarily mean that both parties must are assigned an equal amount of resources or are necessarily given the **same** opportunities. To Abella, equality in employment means (p. 4)

> treating people the same, despite their differences [in some instances], and [in other instances] it means treating them as equals by accommodating their differences.

I wish to expand on this latter point. To say that women should have access to or should be given the same as what men have, implies that the one (male) standard is the appropriate norm with which to compare these two groups (Eckart, 1985). Rather than assuming a male norm, as Eckart (1993), Fuehrer and Schilling (1985) and others attest, the controls/standards/ criteria must take into the account the different experiences of **both** women and men. By doing so, the "out group," i.e., women, has a greater chance of being understood and accepted. Accordingly, the women might be more readily accommodated as part of the more-inclusive "in group" or the "one group" (my terminology).

To reiterate then, to apply a single standard based upon the male *status quo* gives a false impression of equality. Moreover, this single male standard is said merely to perpetuate rather than to eradicate systemic discrimination (Robertson, 1990; Taub, 1993). "Indeed, it has been suggested that in some circumstances, it is the essence of equality to make distinctions between groups to accommodate their different needs and

interests" (Sheppard, 1993, p. 6). The concern, now, is who will determine these new standards, how these new standards will be determined, who will apply these standards, and how inclusive will these standards be not only for white women, but for the other three groups (aboriginal people, visible minorities and people with disabilities) who are also currently under-represented within the academy.

Conclusion

As should be clear from the examples above, I and other women academics have been subjected in different ways to discriminatory attitudes, behaviours, policies, practices and structures. While I am uncomfortable in documenting these examples, I feel the anger that Lewis referred to. I am trying to be a fully participating member of the academy and to be all that I can be, as I assume similarly of all my colleagues. But these discriminatory demonstrations continuously reinforce the belief that I am working within a system that extols and upholds stereotypes, rather than attempting to eradicate them, and in doing so is working against the best interests of myself and other women academics.

My five suggestions for institutional change are from the macro rather than the micro perspective. The first four are intended for the university, the last for women academics. The first is for the university to acknowledge that systemic discrimination exists, i.e., that the <u>effect</u> of our institutional

policies, practices, structures and conventions have impacted adversely on, in this particular case, women academics. Second is that the institution should articulate as an objective the eradication of those discriminatory policies, practices, structures and conventions. The third suggestion is one that is stated in the Federal Contractor's Program: senior management should have in their letters of appointment the responsibility and the accountability for employment equity. And the fourth step is to reconstruct policies, practices, structures and norms based upon some new assumptions, establish more objective (not male-based) evidence and criteria, and acquire an increased understanding of both women and men and of their different backgrounds. "It seems clear that most gender differences are socially created and therefore may be socially altered" (Epstein, 1988, p. 231). "We make our realities; therefore, we can also change them. If we can see discrimination, we may be able to combat it," (Hyle, 1993, p. 21). Instead of the university merely perpetuating discriminatory social norms, the university must take the responsibility for bringing about these social changes.

In addition to these social and concomitant institutional changes, my fifth suggestion is to reiterate to those women in the academy and to those of us in (albeit few) positions of educational leadership that recommendation of Aisenberg and Harrington (1988, p. 142):

As a general strategy, we would emphasize the importance of women's continuing to press for positions in the profession as if their holding public authority were the norm, continuing to claim authority as rightfully theirs.

Time has demonstrated that systemic discrimination, by its very nature, will not disappear of its own accord. "Too much is personally at stake for most people in the universities to end discrimination against women. It will not end voluntarily; it must be required," (Pottker, 1977, p. 407). Every policy, institutional custom and traditional practice should be scrutinized for its potentially adverse impact. Differences within gender groups should be accommodated. And structures require reconfiguration. In order to call itself an employment equity organization, the university must root out systemic discrimination very methodically and deliberately. Can it set the example for society and the sorely-needed social change? To move toward becoming the *inclusive institution*, first it must move away from perpetuating systemic discrimination.

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