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**WOMEN, POWER, GENDER AND SELF:
A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS APPROACH**

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ABSTRACT.

Previous research that has provided information about the concepts of power and self has come largely from the traditional empiricist paradigm. This research generally reflects the notion that there are different kinds of power which are equated with masculinity and femininity. In general, power based settings and women are viewed as incompatible. Sense of self has been traditionally presented in the research as something identifiable and consistent. Gender is a thread that runs through the research and the literature on both power and identity, and it is a constructive part of our understanding of them.

This study uses a qualitative approach to look at the accounts of ten women in terms of power and how this relates to their sense of self. Potter and Wetherell's (1987) model of discourse analysis has been used in analysing the research interviews. The results of the study tend to support Potter and Wetherell's contention that "self" will be constructed in various ways depending upon context. It also appears that these constructions are inextricably linked with power and gender. Trait and role discourses are used by the women and described in the study. The function of each enables the women to talk about different presentations of "self" that do not contravene the dominant discourses when discussing themselves and power.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.	i.
Acknowledgements	ii.
Table of contents	iii.
List of Tables.	iv.
INTRODUCTION	1
1. THE RESEARCH APPROACH - Discourse Analysis.	9
2. PREVIOUS RESEARCH: SENSE OF SELF AND POWER	18
i) Gender	19
ii) Sense of self and gender	24
iii) Power and gender	35
3. METHOD	
1. Context of study.	46
i) The sites	46
ii) The participants	50
2. Interview procedure	54
3. Interview questions	56
4. Method of analysis	57
i) Interview transcription	57
ii) Coding	57
5. Ethical concerns	59
4. ANALYSIS - WOMEN AND THEIR SELF DESCRIPTION	61
1. The women's essential self	61
2. The women's self perceived by others	64
3. Women and self: Learned behaviours	67
4. The women and their roles.	69
5. ANALYSIS - THE WOMEN AND POWER	78
1. The women and power defined	79
2. The women and power - the women's way	82
i) Trait characteristics	83
ii) Role features	89
3. Women, power and the essential self	95
i) Power in the work role	95
ii) Power in a cultural context	97
iii) Power and the essential self	98
4. The women, power, their work role and its effect on self.	102
6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION	107
APPENDICES	
I Letter of approval.	117
II Information sheet	118
III Consent form.	119
IV Interview guide	120
V Transcription notations.	121
REFERENCES.	122

TABLES

Table 1.	Characteristics of power using traits	83
Table 2.	Features associated with the role	89

The topic selected for this thesis is a study of women's constructions of power, and what this means in terms of their sense of their identity or sense of themselves. The women who participated in the study are in middle management positions within structured settings which traditionally accord power to men (Kanter 1977).

My particular interest in this as a research topic has evolved out of observing and talking with women who have taken up management positions. They have legitimate power as a consequence of holding their particular positions. (French and Raven 1959). However, their own expressed concern about participation in organisational life, and my observations of their relationships with other staff (superiors and subordinates) has indicated some difficulties. At times, their relationships have appeared to be inadequate and/or inappropriate, particularly in reaction to difficult situations. The resulting response of subordinates has been ambivalence, with a reluctance to respond to the authority held by the women, and at worst a covert undermining of her position.

Some of these women in management positions have also expressed concern about their effectiveness in the eyes of others; an evaluation of the reactions of others to a particular strategy.

This step involves not so much questioning their own effectiveness as questioning subjective reactions - asking, 'what will others think of me'?

The kind of information we have available to us about power and power styles has come largely from research conducted under the traditional empiricist paradigm. Our expectations about leadership and management, and who should hold decision making positions is reflected in the literature with the underlying assumption that "male is normal" and most leaders are not only male but quite masculine (Harriman 1985). Conversely, women who adopt traditional feminine roles (as nurturing, cooperative and dependent) are regarded as normal, healthy women; women who adopt non-traditional roles may be seen as competent (and powerful) but are also regarded as unfeminine and deviant (Broverman, Broverman, Clarkson, Rosenkrantz and Vogel 1970; Harriman 1985).

Women appear to have different experiences to men in relation to power. Power behaviours that are evaluated as appropriate for men are not appropriate for women (Broverman, Vogel, Broverman, Clarkson and Rosenkrantz (1972). The opportunities for power use that are routinely available to men are often lacking for women, and Kanter (1977) suggests this is because women are "few" in number in organisations and tend to be isolated. It thus becomes difficult for them to gain control of critical activities or to successfully establish essential alliances to enact their role.

Women and men also differ in their use of power styles. Both masculine and feminine styles may be effectively used by men but masculine styles are not effective when used by women. (Wiley and Eskilson 1982).

For women in managerial positions then, the incongruity between femininity and power represents a dilemma. Those that use a power style considered masculine risk being perceived as less effective and may suffer interpersonal costs. On the other hand, if a woman adopts a style that is in accordance with the stereotypical female, she will be seen as less powerful and less effective than a man. (Wiley and Eskilson 1982). Either way, the traditional research indicates that power based settings and women are incompatible, unless the woman is in a position of no power.

A woman in a management position also has heightened visibility, and is more vulnerable to critical scrutiny than is her male counterpart (Kanter 1977, Marshall 1984). This suggests that the potential for a woman to be effective as a manager may lie in the way she is seen and treated, rather than in any personal characteristics she brings to the position.

Thus, the research would suggest that the way a woman functions in a management position may well be confounded by the expectations of others within an organisation, and their injunction that men are the standard by which a woman's behaviour shall be judged.

Miller (1976) notes that when women enter employment, they breach traditional expectations if they cross the invisible barrier between public and private, that is they are expected to be always on the boundary's private side.

This notion of "public" and "private" as dichotomous spheres, each appropriate to the different sexes, has developed with industrial capitalism, and resulted in the prevailing ideology that -

"...men would govern the society and women the homes within it. The result was a model of social life that separated the 'private' domestic sphere from the 'public' sphere..." (McDowell and Pringle 1992, p.15)

Thus, a woman speaking, or writing, in public represents an inherent contradiction in that she has both crossed into the public sphere and broken the silence that patriarchal order expects of women. These principles and expectations are inculcated into our everyday system of meaning and become represented in the dominant discourses. The breaching of the barrier presents a dilemma, even for those of us who are arguably aware of the dichotomous relationship.

If women breach this "invisible" barrier, by undertaking roles traditionally regarded as male, then they risk becoming marginalised.

Much of the traditional research has explored beliefs about power, its organisation, who has it, and the characteristics associated with it. My concern in this study is less with organisational principles or the characteristics of power, but more with the womens' own accounts of their experience and understanding of power: What does it mean to be in a position of power or authority, and what do the women's accounts reveal about their relationship with power? These questions will be explored in the interview process with the participants of this research.

The focus then, is on the language used by the women to talk about power, rather than explicating particular beliefs or characteristics. This is where discourse analysis offers an alternative way of exploring our understanding of power. It works from the assumption that people have a range of discourses available to them, and language is the medium for action in revealing the discourses used (Potter and Wetherell 1987).

A further area of interest which arises out of this is what it means for women in terms of their own sense of themselves, when they enter and take part in this "public stage" as a manager.

Sense of self or identity is an area which has generated much controversy and a vast literature aimed at identifying and describing the self.

Various and competing theories have been advanced to describe the individual. For example, the trait theory argues for a "stable" self in terms of response predisposition; a varied response pattern depending on situational determinants is suggested in role theory (Mischel 1968).

More recent work in social psychology suggests that there is not

"one self waiting to be discovered or uncovered, but a multitude of selves found in the different kinds of linguistic practices articulated..." (Potter and Wetherell 1987, 102).

This approach argues for a "discursive model of the self" (Potter and Wetherell 1987, 102). That is, a person may at any moment construct themselves using one or more of the models available. In this way the definition of identity or sense of self can be specific or general depending on the context. The women's talk will reveal their particular and different constructions of self as they describe themselves and their experiences in relation to power.

Traditional research has tended to assume that the characteristics of power are gendered, in the sense that some characteristics are associated with males and others with females. Even though there has been a growing awareness over the past 20 - 30 years that women have been under-represented in research and that psychological knowledge about women has been androcentric (male centred), the dominant explanatory frameworks have continued to prevail (Hare-Mustin and Marecek 1990, Unger and Crawford 1992).

For women then, who are in positions of authority or power, they face a dilemma. They can conform to appropriate gendered expectations (of nurturance, dependence etc.) and risk being regarded as ineffective; they can adopt the masculine stance (which research shows is appropriate for males in positions of power) and risk being marginalised, or some combination of the two. Whatever their choice, which may vary from situation to situation, their sense of self will likely be affected by and have an effect on any conflict they experience.

I am interested in how the women respond to the experience of holding a position of authority and how they see themselves. For example, do women in these situations describe themselves in trait terms, or in terms of their role, or both? Do they experience any conflict with this or these selves, and if so how is this accounted for or understood? How do women talk about power, and do they see themselves as "having it"?

This present study sets out to explore women's own talk in terms of power and sense of self. It focuses on the women's language and how this is organised as they construct accounts of their experiences. The study does not seek to lend support or otherwise for previous research that has been conducted on power or sense of self. Rather, it seeks to explicate the strategies used by women to account for their experiences in particular settings, and the specific discourses they identify within their accounts.

Chapter 1 describes the particular perspective of the research approach selected for this study, and my reasoning for moving away from empirically based quantitative research. Chapter 2 develops the theoretical background relating to gender and sense of self, and Chapter 3 backgrounds gender and power. Both these chapters present traditionally based research which provides a basis from which to explore the issues of gender, self and power. —

In Chapter 4, the methodology for this study is described. An open-ended interview was used to document the accounts of ten women in relation to their experiences and constructions of power and identity. Also included here is the method of analysis of the transcribed interviews, plus discussion of ethical concerns.

The analysis and discussion are presented in chapters 5 and 6. Chapter 5 deals with those extractions from the transcripts that relate to issues of self and identity. The women employed several different means of discussing and describing the self. Chapter 6 focuses on power, and this section highlights the inconsistencies apparent in the women's accounts when attempting to coherently construct notions of power and their relationship with it. Gender is a thread that permeates these two chapters, and much of the inconsistency and variation in the womens accounts can be justified by the gender discourse. Chapter 7 offers some discussion and concluding comments.