Being Able To Do What You Aspire To Do

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Those women who have made their mark in Australian public and private organisations have challenged traditional Positions allocated to women. However, for the most part these Positions have not changed. Positioning Theory was in part based on the notion that people are able to challenge and change the Positions they are allocated in every social encounter. While there have been changes in society that have generally re-Positioned women as leaders in public and private organisations, it remains the obligation of each person to establish four components of a social order that supports themselves as what they specifically aspire to be able to do. These are (1) their right to perform the work they aspire to, (2) the duty of others to respect them as competent, (3) the moral order that enables such rights and duties, and (4) actions that reinforce these rights, duties and morals. Positioning Theory – that has in part evolved through feminist literature – provides a framework for each individual to align the social order to their individual and collective purposes.

INTRODUCTION

Those women who have made their mark in Australian public and private work have challenged traditional Positions allocated to women. They have harnessed the momentum created by popular feminist literature that has shattered traditional Positions in wider society. In this paper Positioning Theory will be harnessed to demonstrate that, while traditional Positions have been redefined on a macro level, many women need to carry these new paradigms into their places of work. Then from the micro level of Positioning Theory, a framework will be introduced to understand how individuals can re-Position themselves to enable to do what they aspire to do. Positioning Theory was in part based on the notion that people are able to challenge and change the Positions they negotiate in social encounters.

During the early 1990s, when the author was a management consultant at KPMG, a colleague presented a photo of the board of a national sporting body and then asked what was wrong with the picture. After a variety of ways to improve the photo were suggested she said, ‘wrong – they are all men’. Indeed, there was cause for women to be on the board of this body; an equal number of women and men were active in the sporting competitions overseen by that board. The author’s response to her concern was that it was a matter of time, because businesswomen in Australia had only relatively recently been enabled to hold significant management appointments and
few had yet achieved the sort of experience where they would be invited to join boards.

At the same time, Margaret Jackson was a Partner of KPMG management consulting division and already serving on several boards. A decade later – albeit in a new millennium – Margaret Jackson has been awarded the highest honour in the Australian Honours System for her leadership and service to business and the community. Thirty years ago, the person leading QANTAS would have been a man and have likely been knighted under the former Imperial Honours System. Indeed, Margaret Jackson is today perhaps the most impressive corporate director in Australia; she was even a strong contender in the last appointment of Australian Governor General. Sadly, the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency (EOWA) Australian Women in Leadership Census suggests that Margaret Jackson’s ascent to greatness is an anomaly and that too few women have achieved such heights.

While some women hold senior management appointments, there remains a great opportunity for more women to do so. A path must be opened for competent women to follow and fill out the leadership ranks of Australia. However, the measure of merit used to select business leaders is seen to be based on a male benchmark of life and experience that works against women (Burton 1988). Bacchi (1993) describes this limiting factor as ‘a brick wall, preventing women from becoming senior’ and suggests a diversity agenda to deal with this injustice (Bacchi 2000). Sinclair (2000) agrees that pursuing diversity will enable people to short circuit ‘systemic barriers’ invented and imposed by an ‘older and hardened generation’. The challenge put forward in this paper is to change the wider culture of a workplace so that merit is defined in terms of a female benchmark and then for individual women to harness that changed paradigm and Position themselves as leaders.

In the next section the burden of women at work who aspire to lead is to realign the four components of their work culture to support them in their aspirations. A social constructionist model of culture is used to explore these components. This model suggest that any culture is composed of (1) a local system of rights, (2) duties and obligations, (3) a local moral order, and (4) public and private actions. This social constructionist model will provide a practical framework for women to understand the residual fields of opposition (flux) that may be impeding their progress and take action to neutralise that residue.

FOUCALT, FEMINISM AND POSITIONING AT A MACRO LEVEL

The author noticed (Boxer 2003a) that Positioning Theory has in part evolved through feminist literature that relies in part on Foucauldian ideas. The obvious contribution made by Foucault to women and work is his reconstituted psychoanalytic understanding of sexuality as referred to by Sinclair (1998). However, a deeper exploration of Foucault’s ideas about discourse and power (Boxer 2003a) reveals technologies of far greater value to those who find themselves subjugated or subordinated inappropriately (Foucault 1978, 1977, 1973, 1972, pp. 50-5). Burton (1985, p. 6) explains that ‘the (P)osition of women … can be typified as an economically-determinist (P)osition’ and later explains that it is not a social, but
rather ‘personal nature of the female’s lack of self esteem and the female’s lack of power to define her own life in many respects’. Murphy (1994, p. 24, p.68) supports this view in demonstrating how paternalism stifles the full potential of women while at the same time doing an even greater disservice to most men by denying them their personal feelings and sensitivities. Although affirmative action policies are in place in many corporations, Ross-Smith (2000) concludes that there is a potential for women to slip into stereotypical feminine roles in the presence of male managers.

For the purpose here, discourse is understood to be all those ideas, concepts and beliefs that collectively provide a powerful framework for understanding and action. Foucault observed that people and societies are constrained by the subjectivity imposed on them by the dominant discourse of their society; the power effects of discourse produce certain types of knowledge. Feminists – and other radicals – suggested that subjectivity can be changed and have drawn on Foucault’s discursive technologies to show how the dominant discourse can be altered. For example, Gilman (1982, p. xi-xii) extends Foucault’s observation of how epistemological myths become real to discuss root metaphors that have led to what is perceived as ‘culturally acceptable’ normal and abnormal. Halperin (1995) beatifies Foucault for his contribution to the queer politics that enable normal behaviour to be challenged and the residue of dominant discourse to be dismantled. Warner (1993) introduces a volume of queer theory proposing the articles he has assembled demonstrates that ‘the confrontational word ‘queer’ has been applied outside of queer such that ‘traditional academic models have ruptured.’ Indeed Foucauldian ideas threaten some. For example, Cheney (1995, p.129) warns conservative America of the threat to stability from Foucauldian tactics. She warns that critical legal studies uses his ideas to ‘destroy any illusions that might exist about stability and objectivity in the law by deconstructing its arguments.’

Hollway (1984) was the first to use the concept of Position in the social sciences. In doing so, she drew on Foucault’s use of discourse and his exploration of power/knowledge relationship. When Davies and Harré (1991) introduced Positioning as the discursive production of selves they did not draw on Foucault directly, but they did refer to Hollway (1984) and eight other Foucault inspired works amongst the 22 references listed in their bibliography. This observation led the author to explore Foucault for the ideas that might have inspired Positioning Theory and to arrive at a social constructionist model (Boxer 2003a, 2003b) to model the residue caused by a dominant discourse. Bearing in mind Foucault (1994, p. 524) said ‘I write for users, not for readers’, Harré explains (in an email on the 14th May 2002) he has drawn on a discursive practice (as is shown to have been influenced by Foucault) to understand the way people construct realities. In Positioning Theory, Foucault’s (1972, p. 52-5) insight that ‘positions … are defined by the situation’ and ‘not established by the synthetic activity of a consciousness’, but produced by ‘discursive practice’ and that ‘discourse … is a space of exteriority’ (Foucault 1972, p. 55) has been applied into a realist paradigm; human conversation is going on in ways individuals are neither aware of nor can they influence.
DEVELOPMENT OF A CONCEPTUAL MODEL

Positioning Theory concerns the discursive production of self. What this means is that people come to understand themselves and others as they engage in conversation and other encounters with other people. When people meet they speak and listen as they engage in conversation. In entering into a conversation they bring with them a Position based on their current understanding of themselves and their relationship to the other people involved in the encounter. How they react to the Positions brought to the encounter is one part of the Positioning Theory puzzle. While there are other perspectives on self, this paper does not explore these. Further research could lead to compare various ways of looking at self to validate the assumptions made here.

Of interest in this paper is how people present themselves in a social encounter and then how they may challenge one another as the social encounter progresses. The initial self is here referred to as first order Positioning and the way the self evolves through the conversation is here referred to as second order Positioning. It provides an understanding of both what happens when people are subjugated and subordinated as well as how people deal with that subjugation and subordination.

For many years women have been subjugated and subordinated (Burton 1985) and in recent years there have clearly been changes. There was a dominant discourse that allocated women unjust Positions and the residue remains until it is neutralised by an alternative discourse (Weedon 1987). Neutralising the residue requires that it is identified in the context of a specific social situation and dealt with during each encounter. Positioning is understood to be an effect of discursive action that happens within any social order. That discourse takes place at the intersection of the four components that define that social order – or culture – as shown in Figure 1 (Boxer 2003a, 2003b).

People do not realise the full implications of culture on how they behave. When trying to understand cultural change it is helpful to consider a fish swimming in water. The fish does not realise that it is in water until it is removed. People engage in discourse within a culture that is not noticed until aspects of the culture have changed (Murphy 1994, p. 10).
During each social encounter, those individuals involved in the conversation generate discursive action that is tri-polar as shown in Figure 2. Each participant in a social encounter brings with them their existing Position that has been developed over previous social encounters and their own self-perception. The context and events of a social encounter define the story-line of the social encounter that the participants play out as they engage in various speech acts.

Each social encounter that occurs combines with all previous social encounters to create expectations of how people will behave and how they can be expected to be Positioned. If it were not for radical behaviour then Positions would not change; people would continue in their place and accept their fate. This residue is expressed in terms of a social flux as shown in Figures 3 and 4.

The construct of social flux (not to be confused with the symbolic act of flux defined by Johnson (1990)) here draws on electromagnetic theory to express a social field generated by a culture (Boxer 2003a). Nippes (1994) has shown how electromagnetic flux can leave a residue that can interfere with or damage mechanical components. With prevention in mind, he goes on to suggest that the various causes of the electromagnetic fields need to be adjusted and tuned to neutralise inappropriate electromagnetic flux. Realism holds that there is a world beyond the cognition of any individual. In physics it is the material world, in the human sciences it is the human conversation, which occurs in ways that individuals are neither aware of nor can they influence. In this sense Positioning is about personal constructionism (not social constructionism); a realism paradigm. Building on the analogy, it is suggested that every culture suffers from residual social flux and that the components of the social order need to be adjusted and tuned to prevent inappropriate social flux. CEOs of well known large organisations have been observed ‘adjusting’ the rights, duties, morals and actions of themselves, their subordinates and other stakeholders (Boxer 2003a).

**A FRAMEWORK FOR INDIVIDUALS TO APPLY TO THEIR SITUATION**

Figures 3 and 4 provide the foundation for a personal Positioning framework. Any person can understand their social situation in general and then manage each specific social encounter to their benefit. The data used to express the measure of all
parameters of both the Social Constructionist Model and Tri-polar Discursive Action is qualitative: richly descriptive transcripts of what people say.

To understand the social order it is helpful to listen to ordinary conversation and create transcripts of what is said. Deconstructing this into phrases that relate to rights, duties, morals and actions (Table 1) provides a description of the social order (Boxer 2003a, 2003b). An individual can then consider the implications of the social order on their aspirations in particular. With that in mind, each social encounter can be entered into in such a way that residual social flux that might obstruct one’s aspirations may be neutralised. To do this it is necessary to alter one or all of the components of the social order.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Social Constructionist Model</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. <strong>Rights</strong></td>
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<td>2. <strong>Duties</strong></td>
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<td>3. <strong>Morals</strong></td>
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<td>4. <strong>Actions</strong></td>
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Each person in a social encounter is able to influence the tri-polar discursive action. They can do this by engaging in self-Positioning and other-Positioning so that there is an understanding that they are enabled to do what they aspire to do. They can also influence the story line through various speech acts in a way that favours their ambition (Table 2).

Through various social encounters, one can progressively align the social order with their ambition. Appropriately aligned, the social order or culture will provide an environment for one to do what they aspire to do. If we want to establish a more equitable society we have to start with ourselves and then work with others on an individual basis.

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<th>Table 2: Components of Tri-Polar Discursive Action</th>
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<td>1. <strong>Position</strong></td>
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<td>2. <strong>Story Line</strong></td>
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<td>3. <strong>Speech Acts</strong></td>
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A LITTLE SELF REFLECTION

While it may appear that the author is a converted feminist, he remains biased. Influenced by the society in which he was raised. For example, he still looks twice when boarding a bus driven by a woman. However, he realises that the most satisfying employment he has experienced has tended to be when his direct superior was a woman (although he has observed some unpleasant female leaders and some very effective male leaders). With the benefit of his research (Boxer 2003a) he realises that those superiors – whether male or female – he has been most impressed by have in one way or another dealt with the four components of the social order and in doing so Positioned themselves and others appropriate to each situation.

He notices that many of his male peers – even those committed to explore their own sensitivities – are obstructed by the paternalistic culture that invisibly envelops all social encounters. Furthermore, institutions that are in principle devoted to exploring men’s sensitivities are bound up in those trappings, practices and correct form – that men do enjoy – of paternalism. The problem is men not knowing how to deal with the changes in their lives, the workforce and women’s Position (McNicholas 1994).

If an individual cares about changing society they must begin by changing themselves. How they engage in self Positioning will effect those they come in contact with and perhaps will lead to greater change in society and their own ability to do what they aspire to do. Each person needs to sort that out for themselves.

In conclusion, the social flux model provides a representation of the relationships of the various components of discursive action with the various components of culture. It follows that components of culture could be altered by components of discourse. Hence, in the case of women and work, a woman who is dissatisfied with her opportunities to achieve senior leadership appointments can alter her Position, engage in storylines, and use speech acts that relate to her being a senior leader in the organisation.

Perhaps this is simply a display of self-confidence, but perhaps self-confidence has never been broken into components as simple as the three components of discursive action. Furthermore, perhaps the impact of a self-confident person has never been mapped onto organisational culture in such a clear way. It would be interesting to observe the discursive action of women senior managers to test this theory. Perhaps a doctoral student will pursue such a study using this framework. Another opportunity for further research would be to consider the framework from another perspective of self, such as that put forward by Jacques Derrida or other continental philosophers.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


