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Topic (iii) Attitudes, norms and values

COMBINING QUALITATIVE AND SURVEY METHODS TO STUDY
EXPERIENCES OF EQUALITY AT WORKPLACES

Submitted by Statistics Finland¹

Invited Paper

Abstract: A study on experiences of equality at workplaces in Finland was published in January 2002. The publication has only come out in Finnish under the title of "*Worth a little bit more*" *A study of experiences of equality at workplaces*. The study was part of a research project focusing on *work-related stress, time pressure and gender*. The project was divided into two parts: the first part, completed by Noora Järnefelt, studied experiences of time pressures at work and the second part, conducted by Pia Pulkkinen, experiences of equality at work. The research co-ordinator, Anna-Maija Lehto, has written her doctoral thesis about working conditions as a research subject (Lehto 1996).

The study of experiences of equality at workplaces stemmed from a need to improve the Quality of Work Life Survey, which had been conducted in 1997, 1990, 1984 and 1977, and the Gender Barometer, compiled in 1998 and 2001. Equality at workplaces is a diversified subject. Yet, the traditional, positivistic survey questions are structured and the tested hypotheses are fixed. When analysing the survey responses it was not completely clear what people meant with their answers and what they were thinking when giving specific answers. A need to improve the survey questions arose. The research co-ordinator, Anna-Maija Lehto, wanted to combine qualitative and quantitative methods in order to enhance the possibilities for understanding the data obtained with the survey and to improve the questionnaire so that it would be more compatible with reality.

¹ Prepared by Ms Pia Pulkkinen, Statistics Finland. The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of Statistics Finland

1. Combining qualitative and quantitative research methods

The reasons for combining qualitative and quantitative research methods were many (Lehto 2002 and 1996):

Shortcomings of the traditional, positivistic survey

- Fails to discover new information (research approach presupposes ready hypotheses which are simply tested; data are collected by using established measuring systems),
- Focuses on averages (fails to find those in the margin),
- Fails to see the importance of meanings (never fully complies with the meanings of the surveyees; differences are interpreted as errors),
- Does not relate to people's everyday life (concepts and their operationalisation always detached from everyday life),
- Detaches individuals from their groups,
- Treats the surveyee as an object,
- Fails to see the processive nature of phenomena (data always cross-sectional, do not apply to people's everyday lives),
- Fails to consider social structures (no relativity to other social activity).

Qualitative method at its best

- Capable of discovering new (theories, research concepts and questions are born in the research process),
- Recognises difference (can detect deviations from the average),
- Recognises meanings (meaning structures and their differences a core subject of study),
- Can relate to everyday life (tries to discover everyday phenomena, practices and language),
- Can see individuals within their groups,
- Considers the subjects' activities and experiences (surveyees are active subjects in both the studied phenomena and the research relationship),
- Offers the possibility for studying processes,
- Understands the significance of tradition (meanings, experiences, activities can be interpreted through history and tradition),
- Strives to reveal the general, essential structure while adhering to the local one.

The two qualitative methods

Altogether 15 people were chosen for the interview. They all had responded to the 1997 Quality of Work Life Survey and recognised unequal treatment or discrimination at their workplace. They represented different sectors, branches, educational levels, age groups, and both genders.

Each interview was conducted using two methods: the theme interview method and the "thinking aloud" method. The interview started with the theme interview. The freely discussed themes were division of work; professional competence and its appreciation; advancement opportunities; recruitment policy; decision making and leadership; pay; reconciliation of work and family; conflicts and sexual harassment; attitudes towards equality. The basic questions were the same to all the interviewees, but the discussion advanced according to their experiences.

After this, the questions concerning equality of the 1997 Quality of Work Life Survey, as well as some of the questions of the 1998 Gender Barometer were presented in the same form as they had been asked in the relevant surveys. However, the interviewees could "think aloud" while answering. "Thinking aloud" meant that the interviewees explained why they chose a specific answer, how they understood the question, how they applied the question to their context and what they were thinking while answering. Sometimes they also gave suggestions to improve the question(s) or the formulated alternatives. Some questions were also repeated in a different form by using a different expression.

This was done in order to test whether the meanings of some expressions diverged and whether new information could be brought to light by varying the used expressions.

2. Some methodological results

The freely discussed themes gave new information that could be used – at least partly – to form structured questionnaires and to understand the answers. The most important reason for using the qualitative method was to find new aspects and understand the answers given to the survey questions. These interviews also supported some previous results and hypotheses of the Quality of Work Life Survey, as well as certain other studies conducted by other researchers.

- 1) It seemed that the **gender structure at workplace** had a bearing on how the interviewees perceived gender equality at work and what kinds of examples they could give about inequality. This question was asked as a freely discussed theme. The interviewees gave an account of their tasks and the tasks and the gender of their co-workers. This discussion gave a good basis for the subsequent interview and helped in understanding some of the interviewees' other answers.
- 2) The interviewees gave responses that often described their **workplace as quite equal**. Answers to the survey questions about equality at workplace and the position of women and men in society, and comparisons of these to the theme discussion showed that the interviewees viewed their own work unit as being more equal than the organisation or society as a whole. However, the gender structure at work influenced this. Some women in very male-dominated organisations or units considered that gender equality in society as a whole was better than at their own work unit.
- 3) The answers were inclined to **median alternatives** instead of extreme ones. Often the interviewees were “thinking aloud” about unequal practices before choosing their answer to a formulated survey question. Despite recognising unequal treatment or discrimination, the answers were more inclined to state that “equality at work is fairly good” or “moderate”, rather than “rather poor” or “extremely poor”. Often the answers given to the formulated survey questions gave an idea of the situation at work, but they rarely represented any extremes.

Sometimes the interviewees wanted to clarify their answers because they thought that the formulated answers failed to give an accurate account of the situation. They explained their median answers by saying that sometimes, in specific cases, unequal treatment might occur and in others not. The median answer was a combination of different things and the interviewee had given her/his particular answer depending on what she/he thought was the most important issue to emphasise with regard to gender equality.

- 4) **Different words and expressions** have different meanings. Having first asked the formulated questions as they were presented in the Quality of Work Life Survey, the expressions *unequal treatment* or *discrimination* were then replaced with *disadvantage*. This made it possible to obtain information on less grave behaviour and on attitudes putting people into unequal positions. The interviewed women faced more disadvantage than discrimination because of their gender. Discrimination was regarded as a serious matter, while disadvantage was not.

Some attention should also be paid to expressions that can be interpreted as either positive or negative. The “thinking aloud” showed that unequal treatment was interpreted more often as a negative experience by women while few men suspected having received disadvantageous unequal treatment because of their gender. In both cases the answer to the formulated question was “yes”: unequal treatment or discrimination had occurred. The interviewees commented that their answers did not indicate the direction of the unequal treatment and could possibly be misinterpreted if the researcher was not aware of this.

Understanding what people mean with *equality* is also important. Some of the interviewees saw it in a wider context than just gender equality. They talked about equality among the same gender and

between people in different positions, but could also restrict the meaning to equality between women and men. The more the work organisation was dominated by one gender the wider the perception of the concept of equality easily became among the representatives of the dominating gender.

Most of the interviewees were of the opinion that equality concerns pay, division of tasks, participation in decision-making and possibilities for participating in seminars, trips abroad, occupational training, and equal career advancement opportunities. Inequality revealed by the attitudes of co-workers or superiors was regarded as less severe and was not mentioned unless specifically asked about.

5) When asked about the **basis of unequal treatment** – i.e. whether the inequality at work was dependent on age, gender, favouritism or some other reasons – the interviewees found it difficult to define. Inequality was often seen as a combination of several factors of which the influence of gender was difficult to separate. Inequality could also be caused by something else than gender or the other mentioned alternatives. The interviewees seldom mentioned gender as the main reason for unequal treatment. However, women mentioned gender as a disadvantage more often than men did.

There could also be combined discrimination because of both age and gender that affected differently younger and elderly women or men. Favouritism was also quite often mentioned, especially by men, and in situations where no other formulated basis could be identified. Some of the interviewees regarded education or position at workplace as a more important cause for unequal treatment than gender.

6) Laws and practices were regarded gender neutral or equal to men and women. However, the interviewees mentioned that inequality and disparaging show up in **everyday behaviour, speech and attitudes** which, according to some studies, affect women's careers more than men's (Korvajärvi 1998) and which are neither easily observable nor researchable by surveys.

Some of the interviewees mentioned that, in general, decisions are made on equal basis. The survey question concerning unequal treatment or discrimination in remuneration or at the time of hiring did not reveal much inequality. When "thinking aloud" the interviewees suspected that although no illicit discrimination was observable, the preferences of the employer might have advantaged some people more than others.

7) By **combining** the freely discussed themes and the answers to the "thinking aloud" part, it was possible to understand the context of inequality. Discussion in the theme interview advanced according to the experiences and memories of the interviewee. On the one hand, the themes were a good method for establishing what the interviewees viewed as unequal treatment. On the other hand, the interviewees only related experiences they could remember. Combining the survey questions with the "thinking aloud" method was practical. The interviewees were given some alternative cases of which they could report specific incidents. The alternatives sometimes refreshed their memory more than the free theme discussion only could.

Also, the interviewees might have given to a formulated question an answer describing the situation as equal, the theme discussion, or "thinking aloud", could reveal that there were, in fact, attitudes, behaviour, traditions or structures preventing equality between men and women. These attitudes and structures varied by branch, workplace, gender distribution at workplace, and by certain other variables.

3. The message from the theme and the "thinking aloud" interviews

Equality is a very multifaceted matter and seems to affect women and men differently. The interviewees mostly defined equality as equal pay, and equal advancement and other opportunities. Some of the interviewees saw it as a more complex issue than just equality between women and men.

Women had discussed equality, unequal treatment and discrimination at their workplaces more often than men had. Women were more prone to believe that unequal treatment may occur than men were. However, women also believed that everyone can influence the treatment they receive by their own behaviour and they did not believe they were victims of unequal treatment. Yet, many of them mentioned that women had to be twice as good as men in order to succeed.

When division of work and tasks was discussed the interviewees had observed that there was a clear segregation to women's and men's work and positions, but they did not necessarily regard this as representing inequality. Nevertheless, they thought that it influenced pay and participation opportunities, and caused appreciation of male-dominated jobs and lack of appreciation for female-dominated occupations.

Appreciation of work was tied to the gender segregation of work. Men received more appreciation in both female and male-dominated branches, as well as in branches of equal gender distribution. Men held more often valued positions and positions in which they could gain merit. Some women had noted that women were treated as secretaries even though they officially held same positions as their male colleagues. Many women pointed out that men's competences were valued and trusted, whereas women's were distrusted and undervalued. This affected women's career advancement and participation opportunities.

Only a handful of the interviewees suspected that unequal treatment had occurred at their workplace in hiring, because this was subject to prescribed rules and done according to laid out competence requirements. It was generally not claimed that men and women would have had different opportunities to influence hiring because of their position. Nevertheless, some interviewees said that the attitudes of some selectors could be disparaging towards certain applicants, thus placing them to an unequal position. Women's career development was believed to progress more slowly than men's. Furthermore, men were appointed to higher positions than women. A few interviewees wondered why women sought lower posts than men.

Differentials in pay arose mainly due to the division and appreciation of tasks. In practice this meant inequality between the genders in situations where women and men worked in positions of different levels. Performance-based remuneration was viewed as a factor promoting equality in branches where performance is easily measurable. Contrastingly, performance measurement problem could be viewed as an aspect encouraging inequality.

Many of the interviewees felt that superiors and forms of leadership influenced the atmosphere at work and the way women and men were treated or appreciated. Nevertheless, employees themselves played a major role in the forming of attitudes and atmosphere. The views concerning the influence of the supervisor's gender on the style of leadership fell mainly in line with the convention that women manage human relationships and men hard facts, although some role mixing had also been observed.

I mentioned discrimination, drawbacks and unequal treatment in connection with the earlier methodological discussion. The significance of gender was difficult to identify from other causes for discrimination. The interviewees reported no personal experiences of sexual harassment. Very few examples of it were given – the subject is embarrassing and not spoken about. It is not raised among fellow employees, so no facts about its generality emerged. Efforts had been made at workplaces to create channels through which it could be raised.

Many had experienced problems in reconciling work and family when the children were small. Nevertheless, those with small children at the time of the interview reported no major problems in fitting together work and family life. It has often been thought that family responsibilities influence women's career development opportunities, but the mothers of small children among the interviewed women held good positions without experiencing problems. They had good social networks, their children's fathers and their grandparents bore a share of the responsibility for childcare and their children had good daycare places.

Equality issues were discussed at workplaces at the general level. Such discussions had generally become more widespread as a consequence of public debate about equality. At some workplaces discussing the subject was considered unsuitable or not viewed favourably. Diverse studies on workplace atmosphere and equality have grown increasingly common after the imposition of the injunctions of the Equality Act (1995/2006). Similarly, equality committees or working groups had been set up at some workplaces.

In conclusion, equality seemed a highly diversified issue. It rested deeply on attitudes and even where these were perceived as disadvantageous to one gender they were not necessarily regarded as discrimination. Obtaining information about attitudes is problematic because they are difficult to concretise and observe. It may be a question of disparaging or unintentional ignoring of a person in a work community. At least one question that remained open was whether unequal treatment or discrimination could be something the interviewees did not regard as such, but according to other researches could be interpreted as such.

4. Formulated Questions

Questions from the Gender Barometer 1998

Looking at the position of Finnish men and women in general at the present moment, which of the following five statements corresponds most closely to your views?

1. Men on average clearly enjoy better position in society than women
2. Men on average enjoy a slightly better position in society than women
3. Women on average clearly enjoy a better position in society than men
4. Women on average enjoy a slightly better position in society than men
5. Men and women are equal
6. Don't know

Is the equality between the sexes at the place where you work

1. Extremely good
2. Fairly good
3. Moderate
4. Rather poor
5. Extremely poor
6. Does not apply
7. Don't know

Questions on equality in Quality of Work Life Survey 1997

In working life, unequal treatment and discrimination can occur in pay, hiring, opportunities for career advancement or access to further training. Do you reckon that unequal treatment or discrimination occurs at your own workplace on the basis of:

- Age, especially the young?
- Age, especially the old?
- Sex, especially women?
- Sex, especially men?
- Political views?
- Activity in the trade union movement?
- Having a family or being pregnant?
- Favouritism?
- Race, nationality or colour?
- Temporary or part-time employment relationship?

Have you fallen subject to unequal treatment or discrimination in working life in the following situations?

At the time of hiring?

In remuneration?

In career advancement opportunities?

In access to training arranged by the employer?

In receiving information?

In the attitudes of co-workers or superiors?

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The Equality Act 1995/206

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