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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

Equality at workplaces is a diverse subject that has been addressed by surveys like the Quality of Work Life Surveys in 1997, 1990, 1984 and 1977 and the Gender Barometer in 1998 and 2001. However, it has not been completely clear how the survey answers on equality should be interpreted. There was a need to improve the survey questions on equality.

The study of *experiences of equality at workplaces* combined quantitative and qualitative methods in an effort to uncover new information on equality, understand people in their personal contexts, and appreciate the processes and meanings for which the qualitative method can bring answers but which the quantitative method alone cannot answer. (Lehto 1996.)

Besides the *survey questions*, two qualitative methods were used: *theme interviews* and *thinking aloud*. The interviews started with the theme interview during which eight themes on equality were freely discussed. Some of the questions on equality used in the 1997 Quality of Work Life Survey and in the 1998 Gender Barometer were presented using the thinking aloud method. Thinking aloud meant that the interviewees explained what they were thinking while answering, why they chose a specific answer and what cases they had in mind. They also explained how they understood the question and how they applied it to their context. By combining the answers to the theme interview and the thinking aloud part, the researcher could understand the dynamics of unequal treatment at work and people's reactions to it.

The gender structure at workplace had a bearing on how the interviewees perceived gender equality and what kinds of examples they gave. The interviewees were inclined to choose median answers rather than extreme alternatives. They often described their own unit as more equal than the whole organisation.

Laws and practices were mostly seen as being equal to men and women. However, unequal treatment came up in everyday speech and attitudes. It seemed difficult to define whether unequal treatment was based on gender or some other reason, or a combination of reasons like education, position at work, age or gender. Most of the interviewees defined equality as equal pay and opportunities. They believed that women and men had equal possibilities to succeed in their careers.

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Equality and inequality seem to rest heavily on attitudes. Not everything that could be regarded as unequal treatment was interpreted as such by the interviewees. The picture drawn by combining qualitative and quantitative methods helped to understand some of the questions that had remained unclear when using the survey method only. Some of the findings of this study can be used to improve the survey questions on equality.

Sources: Anna-Maija Lehto (1996): Työolot tutkimuskohteena (Working Conditions as a Research Subject). Research Reports 222. Statistics Finland.