GENDER INEQUALITY IN THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY: LESSONS FROM PIERRE BOURDIEU

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Despite a range of equality legislation and initiatives, the construction industry remains one of the most male dominated sectors. Women are under-represented in all construction occupations and professions. Much of the current literature describes the difficulties experienced by women who work in this sector including cultural and structural barriers, such as harassment and discrimination, limited networking opportunities and long and inflexible working hours which often result in poor career prospects and high levels of stress for women. This paper proposes that Bourdieu's theoretical framework can be used to explain the continuing homogeneity of the construction industry professions. Bringing together qualitative interview findings from several research projects with construction industry students and professionals, this paper argues that Bourdieu's thinking tools of symbolic violence and misrecognition can be used to understand women's persistent inequality in the construction industry. The findings problematise existing policy recommendations that argue women have different skills that can be brought to the sector (such as co-operation). Such policies reinforce the gendered nature of the construction sector's habitus and fail to recognise how the underlying structures and practices of the sector reproduce gendered working practices.

Keywords: Bourdieu, equality, gender, construction, women

INTRODUCTION

Despite a range of equality legislation and initiatives, the construction industry remains one of the most male dominated sectors. Women are under-represented in all construction occupations and professions. Much of the current literature describes the difficulties experienced by women who work in this sector including cultural and structural barriers, such as harassment and discrimination, limited networking opportunities and long and inflexible working hours which often result in poor career prospects and high levels of stress for women (see for example, Dainty and Bagilhole, 2006, Fielden *et al.* 2001, Greed, 2000, Lingard and Francis, 2006, Watts, 2007, Whittock, 2002). However, more work is required to understand why this situation persists. In other words we must understand why and how it is that men maintain 'their control of and through organizations' (Cockburn, 1991). The work of Bourdieu

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is useful in understanding the (re)production of gender relations, through the concepts of habitus and capital. This paper proposes that Bourdieu's theoretical framework can be used to explain the continuing homogeneity of the construction industry professions. For the purposes of this paper we focus on Bourdieu's concept of 'symbolic violence' and its role in reproducing societal gender relations within the construction industry.

Gender in the construction industry

The construction industry remains largely white, male and able-bodied, despite a range of initiatives over the last 20 years that have sought to challenge this profile. In the UK, women make up approximately 10% of employees in construction, compared to 46% across all industries (ONS, 2009). In higher education the figures are slightly better, with women representing 18% of civil engineering students and 31% of architecture, building and planning students (HESA, 2009). Evidence demonstrates that the persistence of gender inequality in construction effects women's recruitment, retention and progress and is largely attributable to cultural and structural barriers (Sang and Powell, 2012).

Calls for increased diversity are often supported by the business case which argues that diverse work teams are more effective (Ely and Thomas, 2001) and widen the available talent pool (EHRC, 2009). Loosemore *et al.* (2003) have asserted that fair treatment of all employees should be the cornerstone of good employment practice within the construction industry. However, Henwood (1996) has cautioned that the business case encourages women employees to be seen as a last resort – to be employed during times of skills shortage. This feeds into increased vulnerability for women, particularly during times of economic crisis (Government Equalities Office, 2009, Griffiths *et al.* 2006).

In parallel research addressing the dominance of white men in management studies, Nkomo (1992) considers how organisations reproduce societal race relations. Similar questions can be asked of the dominance of men in the construction industry. Much of the extant literature fails to interrogate gender relations in the construction industry. Rather it focuses on women's experiences and compares these experiences to an unexamined norm. This paper aims to use the work of Bourdieu, and particularly the concept of 'symbolic violence' to shed light on the continued dominance of white males in the construction industry and how the sector (re)produces societal gender norms and relations. This builds on the work of Gracia (2009), who argues that the notion of symbolic violence provides a useful mechanism through which to understand gender inequality in the workplace.

Symbolic violence and misrecognition

In order to avoid essentialism we view gender as a social construction (as does Bourdieu, 2001). We echo the arguments of Schippers (2007) in that that the social locations of 'man' and 'woman' are the places where characteristics of masculinity or femininity are embodied or displayed.

Bourdieu argued that symbolic violence is the means through which gender inequality is reproduced (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) and that such violence can be emotional, social or psychological (Gracia, 2009). Symbolic violence then, is not physical, but may take the form of people being denied resources, treated as inferior or

being limited in terms of realistic aspirations. Gender relations, for example, have tended to be constituted out of symbolic violence which has denied women the rights and opportunities available to men (Webb *et al.* 2002).

Bourdieu suggested that the symbolic violence of patriarchal practices embed the naturalisation of gender into individuals' identities (Gracia, 2009). "Symbolic violence... is the violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity... I call misrecognition the fact of recognizing a violence which is wielded precisely inasmuch as one does not perceive it as such" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Misrecognition thus occurs when individuals 'forget' that they are produced by the social world as particular types of people. Bourdieu suggests that this 'misrecognition' means that those who are dominated (i.e. women) put up with conditions that would seem intolerable to others, thus helping to reproduce the conditions of their oppression (Bourdieu, 2001). In other words, individuals are subject to symbolic violence, but do not perceive it as such, because their situation seems to be the natural order of things (Webb *et al.* 2002).

Evidence of symbolic violence in construction

There is a paucity of research which has explicitly applied Bourdieu's theory of practice to the construction industry. The following section of the paper draws on the concept of symbolic violence while discussing the extant literature on gender in the construction industry.

The dominant heteronormative masculinist cultures in SET organizations are often starkly expressed through the objectification of women and their bodies; this may be through use of language or imagery that focuses on sexual aspects of women's bodies. The *sex* of women can undermine their professional place in organisations dominated by men, such as the construction sector. In their study of women engineers in the UK and US, Carter and Kirkup (1990) found that women HE students were not taken seriously by men students; rather it was assumed they were studying engineering in order to find a husband. Language is also a feature of the masculine culture in male-dominated professions. McIlwee and Robinson (1992), in their US study of women engineers, also describe women's irritation at being called 'Honey' and 'Sweetie'. They suggest that this behaviour is a form of sexual harassment, undermining women's professional status and reinforcing men's views of women as merely sexual beings. Similarly, Faulkner (2005) maintains that while many would probably argue the issues described above are 'only words', they send powerful subliminal messages to both women and men. The issue of language is often epitomised through the use of humour. Numerous research studies have addressed the teasing and joking faced by women in science and engineering. While such research indicates that women 'can handle it,' and see it as 'all in fun', such use of humour is problematic. Men and women can be deterred from challenging offensive humour by the perceived risk of alienating themselves from their men colleagues and, as a result, will often join in regardless (Faulkner, 2005, Faulkner, 2006). Holmes (2000) states that while humour can be used to reduce inequalities, it is also used to emphasise or reinforce power relationships. McLean *et al.* (1997) support this stating that sexualised and sexist jokes work to undermine women by emphasising that women are inferior and do not really 'belong'. Holmes goes on to state that humour is a means of embedding risky or unacceptable behaviour in superficially harmless statements, thus allowing the dominant figure to maintain authority while continuing to appear friendly. The

sexualisation of women and use of language in male dominated occupations such as construction, then, might be perceived as acts of symbolic violence against women.

Women and men are also subject to a process of 'professionalisation', which Dryburgh (1999) suggests entails learning the appropriate theory and code of ethics, associating with the professional regulating body, and adjusting to or internalising the values, norms and symbols of the professional cultures. For women, this is likely to include acceptance of masculine values. Miller (2002), for example, found that Canadian women engineers conformed to beliefs and values consistent with a masculine value system. Accepting traditionally masculine values was seen to be key to success both in engineering and in their organisations. In their study of women sports journalists (another male-dominated arena), Hardin and Shain (2006), in their study of journalists, found that women will often attempt to become 'one of the boys' and adopt masculine values and practices. The women may 'normalise' existing cultures, refuse to acknowledge, or are blind to, the disadvantage(s) that women face as a group, and may even blame other women for their own subordination. Furthermore they suggest that through professional socialisation, the authoritarian power structures that exist in the field are idealised, with the result that many women resist taking a stand on '*women's issues*' (Hardin and Shain, 2006). Walker (2001) found that women engineering students were often either ambivalent or rejected gendered explanations of their experiences. She suggests this is a result of normalisation and that women have an investment with dominant hegemonic masculinities. Hardin and Shain (2006) found similar evidence of women sports journalists downplaying situations that made them feel uncomfortable, accepting it as 'par for the course' and resisting the view that certain behaviours can be characterised as sexual harassment. However, as Martin (2003) argues, if people believe that behaviour is not gendered, often because of a lack of reflexivity, they can deny gendered behaviour exists, even if others see or experience that behaviour as gendered. This is what Bourdieu would refer to as 'misrecognition'.

RESEARCH METHODS

This paper brings together findings from a number of research projects the authors have been involved in examining gender amongst architects and engineers. Each of these studies used qualitative, semi-structured interviews. The use of a semi-structured interview guide for the interviews meant that key issues identified by the researchers could be explored, while at the same time interviewees could define issues according to their own experiences and understanding. In total this included interviews with 14 women undergraduate engineering students and 10 women architects practicing in the UK. The students were in at least their second year of university and had limited industry experience, but some had been on work-placements. The practising architects all had several years of industry experience (between five and twenty five years) . With the agreement of participants, the interviews were recorded, then transcribed verbatim and anonymised prior to being analysed with the aid of NVivo. The data was analysed for emerging themes, the identification of which was informed by the literature. Specifically, themes included, symbolic violence (conceptualised as denial of access to resources, treatment as inferior and limitations placed on women's aspirations) and misrecognition. While men and women were interviewed in the studies reported, this paper takes a feminist stance of prioritising the perspectives and experiences of women respondents. As with any qualitative research, the aim of this

paper is not to draw generalisations. Rather our intention is to prioritise the voices of the women in our studies. Doing so enables for a rich analysis of their lived experiences, as they reported them.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following sections use Bourdieu's theory of practice, specifically the concepts of symbolic violence and misrecognition to examine the persistent inequality of women in the construction industry. We begin be examining symbolic violence.

Symbolic violence in construction

This study has adopted an understanding of symbolic violence, as violence which is not physical, but one which denies women access to important resources, limits their aspirations and being treated as inferior. Across both studies women clearly articulated examples of this. Women undergraduate students provided examples of when they had been treated differently to their male colleagues. For example, Carolyn a transport management student recalled that her colleagues had taken *'a bet on how long I'd last in this job ... they said I'd done really well'*. Her colleagues had assumed that she would not be able to last in her job.

Andrea, a civil engineering student recalled examples of where she had been denied access to resources which were important to her work, specifically, assessed group work:

> *Communication was non-existent and I was left out in one way or another. They wouldn't tell me there was a group meeting . . . It was peer assessed . . . they marked me right down, which I felt was completely unfair because within the boundaries they'd placed on me, I'd done the best I could.*

This exclusion from the group limited her ability to fully participate and this in turn impacted the peer assessment of the group work. Women working in the sector recalled similar examples of being excluded from key events. For example, Amy a practicing architect said that when she was an undergraduate student she had been the only woman on her course and that the male students carried *'on like it's a boys' organization...they just ignored me'*. This exclusion from formal and informal groups reflects exclusion once in work and has implications for career progression. A number of practicing architects (women) felt that they were excluded from informal networking opportunities which were essential to attend if they wanted to bring work into their practice (a necessity for progression). A student on work placement described how no-one showed her what to do when she first started the job, despite the fact that she was a student and the purpose of the placement was to gain experience:

> *When I first joined it wasn't very structured, my learning. I had to pick up the job on the go. I would rather someone sat me down – which is what happened to everyone else. Everyone else has had a handbook, and I've just been pushed out.*

Similarly other research about women in male-dominated occupations has found that women are repeatedly excluded from informal and formal networking opportunities

(e.g. Singh *et al.* 2002, Benckert and Staberg, 2000, Davis, 2001, Gray *et al.* 2007, Barnard *et al.* 2010). Such exclusion is also likely to mean that women in construction have less social capital in the workplace than their male colleagues (Kumra and Vinnicombe, 2010).

We can clearly see here instances of symbolic violence against women construction students and professionals with denial of access to resources – namely networking opportunities which are key to performance both at work and at university. As such this can place limits on their aspirations.

While denial of access to resources can include resources such as accrual of social capital (as evidenced through networking), there is some evidence that women in the sector experience a pay gap (European Commission, 2010). While the current studies did not ask respondents to report their pay, there was a feeling among some respondents that women working in the sector are paid less than their male colleagues.

Misrecognition in construction

Bourdieu argues that the process by which individuals fail to recognise the social origins of symbolic violence is *misrecognition* (Schubert, 2008). Misrecognition is useful when considering symbolic violence as it allows for analysis of how women may perceive their experiences as the natural order of things, rather than recognising discrimination as a form of violence. As such, misrecognition is key to symbolic violence (Bourgois *et al.* 2004). However, we are careful not to 'blame' women for this recognition, as this in itself would be a form of symbolic violence (Schubert, 2008). The following section provides examples of misrecognition from women in the current studies.

Carolyn, a transport management undergraduate student recalled a situation where a male colleague (during a work placement) was paid more than her:

> *There's a guy working there with me, he started a month before me ... I just found out he got a bonus in his pay packet for helping round the office in the first few weeks before I was there. To be honest, I don't think I'll get that, you know, he is an exceptionally good student.*

In this example, we can see that Carolyn reportedly feels that her male colleague is deserving of this extra pay because he *'is an exceptionally good student'* although how this would relate to his extra pay during a work placement is unclear. She does not perceive that her male colleague is paid more than her because he is male.

In both studies, there was also much discussion of how sexism and sexist jokes needed to be understood as nothing personal and only humour. For example, Hannah a civil engineering student stated:

> *You get the obvious, you know, bits of perving and stuff like that, but you've just got to learn to take it in the spirit that it's meant.*

This is significant because such 'humour' actually reinforces negative gender perceptions, as noted in the literature above, by presenting women as inferior. Such

humour is also notoriously difficult to challenge, particularly those that are the subject of the humour (i.e. women).

Dainty *et al.* (2000) has argued that women are focussed in office based, administrative support, roles within the construction industry, largely because of gender stereotypes beliefs of managers. Lack of access to skill development opportunities, such as working on site, limit women's career development within the sector. Our data suggests that women themselves may deselect themselves from these opportunities due to beliefs in innate gender differences which make them unsuitable for this kind of work. Andrea a civil engineering student felt that women (generally) were unsuited to site based work:

> *Although there are some women out there who want to go and play in the mud and enjoy surveying all day long, most women don't and that's because of fundamental differences between women and men.*

Katie, a practicing architect was passionately opposed to equality campaigns within the architectural profession which were intended to increase the proportion of women architects in practice. Katie felt that as a woman in her early 30s she was a 'complete liability' for an architectural practice. She went on to explain that 'maternity leave' can cripple a small practice and that:

> *[The] boys here are stronger and design and probably [stronger] technically…women and men argue it differently. They're [men] kind of more ballsy and, you know, they use long words that they don't know what they mean and things like that.*

During the same exchange, Katie went to explain that she felt 'girls' were more emotional than 'boys' and the *'world isn't equal, we don't have 50% of anything as far as I know:50/50 in nature?...we're actually built differently, were not naturally designed to do the same things'.* Katie had also refused to join any women's networking groups because she was opposed to *'that kind of thing'* despite feeling isolated due to being the only 'girl' in her office. The interaction with Katie was illuminating

The women in this research predominantly viewed their experiences as unrelated to their gender. Yet at the same time, they subscribed to gendered notions that women are not suited to careers in construction because of innate gender differences between men and women. The research also had examples of women explicitly expressing gendered views of women and their suitability for work in the sector. While these perceptions pervade, there is likely to be little resistance to the status quo (see also Powell *et al.* 2006).

CONCLUSION

Using evidence from women engineering students and practising architects, this paper has demonstrated the value of Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of symbolic violence and misrecognition. In particular, these are useful tools for understanding how and why women in construction continue to be under-represented and dominated by men. The concept of misrecognition is also valuable in understanding why women in construction do not challenge this dominance; that is, because they fail to see it as

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such. Thus as Miller (2002) has argued there is often 'an unawareness of the masculine nature of the context'.

Witz (2004), and others, have argued that symbolic violence paints women as compliant and shifts the burden of responsibility for women's oppression from men to women themselves (Witz, 2004). However, we suggest that it highlights the importance of including men in any policy initiatives to address women's under-representation and discrimination, since women, usually unconsciously, can be complicit in their domination. As Bourdieu (2000) argues, complicity is not a conscious, deliberate act, 'it is itself the effect of power'. This also reflects women's assimilation into the masculine culture of construction (see also, Dryburgh, 1999, Walker, 2001, Miller, 2002, Powell *et al.* 2009). Such assimilation occurs when women learn the rules of the game. In other words, and borrowing again from Bourdieu, women learn the 'habitus', that is the values and dispositions, of the construction 'field', and that this field is intrinsically male and respond accordingly. Analysis of the experiences of women in construction using Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field will be the focus of future publications.

This is also likely a result of the very low numbers of women in construction, which results in women individualising their negative experiences rather than perceiving them as a result of gender. In other industries where women represent a more sizeable minority, such as science, this may not be the case. This will be the subject of future research.

These findings also call into question existing policy recommendations that argue women have different skills that can be brought to the sector (such as co-operation). Such policies reinforce the gendered nature of the construction sector's habitus and fail to recognise how the underlying structures and practices of the sector reproduce gendered working practices.

This research has explicitly focused on the lived experiences of women in a male-dominated industry. Future research should examine the experiences of men in this context in order to consider how they practice symbolic violence and misrecognition. Any such future studies should be aware that the category of 'men' is not homogeneous. The framework of symbolic violence would enable an analysis of how the sector perpetuates inequalities against non dominated men, for example, ethnic minority men or gay men. Further research should also explore how symbolic violence occurs in sectors that are less male-dominated and where the organisational culture is likely to be different.

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