

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Symbols of organisational culture: describing and prescribing gender integration of navy ships

Charles H. van Wijk^{a*} and Gillian Finchilescu^b

^a*Fish Hoek, South Africa*; ^b*Psychology Department, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa*

(Received 20 March 2007; final version received 16 April 2008)

The symbols of organisation culture can both describe and prescribe human behaviour within that organisation. This paper examines experiences of gender integration of South African Navy ships through the use of symbols of military culture. Accounts from female and male sailors were collected through interviews and focus groups, 18 months after the gender integration of their ships, and revealed the symbolic use of rituals, metaphors, artefacts and physical space. Military organisations typically do not allow deviations from either their hegemonic masculine orientation, or official gender-supportive policies. To express either resistance or acceptance of gender integration, sailors used accepted (naval) cultural symbolism to covertly communicate and enforce their relative positions. Rituals were used as expression of inclusion and to communicate organisational norms, while metaphors reflected the ambivalence in the fleet. Further, as metaphors were constructed from familiar images, they served to regulate interaction in novel situations. Uniforms acted as organisational artefacts of oppression and resistance to women. The use of corporate space acquired different meanings, of both resistance and acceptance, within the context of gender integration of naval ships. The paper concludes by discussing some issues that arose from both the descriptive and prescriptive use of these symbols – in particular for the expression and maintenance of identity, and for the regulation of behaviour in unfamiliar situations.

Keywords: symbols; military culture; rituals; metaphors; cultural artefacts; physical space

Introduction

Recent political developments in South Africa have opened up new opportunities for the advancement of women. For example, the new Constitution of 1996 led to the total gender integration of the South African Navy (SAN), opening up all positions at sea (previously the exclusive domain of men).

This gender integration was not expected to be all smooth-sailing, as the SAN maintains a highly patriarchal cultural ideology (Motumi 1999, Van Breda 2002), and naval ships constitute a particular example of ‘masculine space’ (cf. Neville 2003), dominated by men.

The gender integration of the Navy has inevitably brought changes to the organisational culture. Organisational culture then has become not only an indicator of change, but also a vehicle to express the responses of women and men to the gender equalisation of their workplace.

*Corresponding author. Email: chvanwijk@gmail.com

Alvesson and Billing (1997) described three basic forms in which corporate culture is often expressed and reproduced. *Rituals* are activities that include certain repetitive patterns which contain symbolic and expressive elements. Meetings may function as rituals, expressing power relations or corporate values and attitudes. Corporate culture may also be expressed through *artefacts* – physical objects like furniture, logos, and dress that convey meaning within an organisation. Dress is a highly gendered artefact, and may serve to convey corporate values regarding the roles or status of women and men. *Metaphors* are ‘culturally rich verbal expressions’ (p. 109), or verbal symbols, creating ‘vocabularies to facilitate and guide interpretations’ (p. 112) of what is going on in an organisation. One example may suffice, that of an organisational member as ‘team player’. Higgins and McAllaster (2002) add another dimension of corporate culture, namely *corporate space* – the physical surroundings of a particular organisation.

In gendered organisations, the expression of corporate culture may become a mechanism for resistance, as Martin and Jurik (1996) described in the police service. The division of space (e.g. bathrooms), the presence of images and symbols (e.g. ‘pin-ups’), rules regarding appearance (e.g. hair length, jewellery), and prescribed uniforms (designed for and tailored to men’s bodies) were clear expressions of the reigning corporate culture. The military itself is steeped in traditions of rituals, metaphors and artefacts. Daily military interaction is expressed, facilitated, and regulated by symbols of the military culture. Examples include saluting as symbolic gesture (ritual) of respect and submission to military discipline, while uniforms act as symbols for identification and status.

Acker (1998) suggests that symbols in organisational culture fulfil many functions – e.g. to explain, express, reinforce, or oppose gender divisions (or lack thereof). It is argued here that military structures in general, and naval policies specifically, leave little space for protest or open opposition. Men who oppose the presence of women on warships have to go underground. As such they may use expressions of the very culture that prohibits protest, to protest. Everyday symbols are then used to convey covert opposition. At the same time, the hegemonic masculinity of the armed forces would prohibit open expression of acceptance or support of women, and positive sentiments would also have to be expressed through covert means. The SAN as an organisation has its own unique culture, rich in symbolism, and both resistance and support could thus find expression through accepted cultural symbolism.

This paper investigates SAN sailors’ use of the symbols of their organisational culture to express their experiences (of both resistance and acceptance) of the gender integration of SAN ships. In particular, their use of the corporate culture signifiers – rituals, metaphors, artefacts and physical space – is examined in terms of both their descriptive and prescriptive effects.

Method

Context of study

SAN women have only been allowed to serve on ships since the late 1990s. Women initially joined the ships in small numbers, forming a distinct minority. The driving force behind the gender integration of the fleet was embedded in national political developments, which had a number of implications: firstly, gender integration of the ships must be seen within the context of national changes in the status of women; secondly, the changes were welcomed by some from within the SAN (especially those with the same political views as the national government); and thirdly, the pace of political developments sometimes left official naval policies and regulations lagging behind the practical implementation of gender integration. At the time of this study, some ships were gender-integrated, while others were still being prepared to receive women sailors.

Informants and data gathering

Sailors from three ships participated in this study. They had all been part of gender-integrated crews for the past 18 months. Twenty unstructured interviews and four focus groups were held, focusing on individuals' experiences of gender integration.

Interviewees were invited to participate in the study after visits to their workplaces by the first author. Women sailors were keen to participate, while men were generally more reluctant to become involved in 'interview' research. The interviews were initiated by asking the participants to briefly describe their naval background and then to 'share their experiences of gender integration' with the researcher. The invitation to 'tell their story' appeared to encourage the informants, and led to wide-ranging and open discussions. Interviews were audiotaped, and afterwards transcribed.

Focus groups are essentially group interviews that rely not on alternating questions and answers, but the explicit use of group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group (Morgan 1997). Focus-group members ($N = 26$) were recruited through their departmental heads who indicated which of their employees might be available and willing to participate. Groups were formed from homogeneous rank and gender populations, but were mixed in terms of cultural background and work sections. Again, the discussions were audiotaped for later transcription.

Data analysis

Accounts of the interviews and focus groups were transcribed verbatim from audiotape, which led to 'cleaned data' being analysed, as the talk on the tapes had to be reconstructed (e.g. punctuation added) so that it made sense in the written form (Denscombe 2001). Other factors of 'narrative' – pacing, pausing, volume, intonation and emphasis – were not transcribed.

The written accounts were then subjected to thematic analysis. This was done broadly following the guidelines put forward by Neuman (2000). The thematic analysis produced a number of themes, of which only the 'use of symbols of organisational culture' is reported in this paper.

The discussion extracts that are provided aim to support the analysis presented in this paper, in an effort to allow the participants to speak for themselves. Using extracts from transcriptions always carries the limitation that they are, to some extent, presented out of context (Denscombe 2001). Quotes from the interviews and focus groups will be used only to illustrate a particular point.

Results and discussion

This paper reports on data that formed part of a larger study which investigated the psycho-social effects of gender integration of SAN ships. This broader study (Van Wijk 2006) indicated that men feared this integration due to the threat it posed to their identity and lifestyle. This threat permeated their interpretations and their use of corporate symbols. Within this context the use of organisational symbols served a number of purposes. This paper reports the uses of organisational symbols through the use of rituals, metaphors, artefacts and corporate space.

Rituals

Rituals are cultural activities that include certain repetitive patterns which contain symbolic and expressive elements (Alvesson and Billing 1997). Within the gender integration of the Navy context, rituals were particularly used to express inclusion and identity.

1. *Rituals of initiation*

On the ships women were subjected to the same rituals of initiation as men. Women were apprehensive about how they would be received by the men, prior to joining the ships. They knew that they were entering an environment that could be hostile, and were generally prepared for the worst. One young woman initially thought that she experienced the worst:

The first time I came here, I'll never forget it. We came onboard the ship, and he [the desk supervisor] just looked at me and he said to go to stores to get an overall. I go off, myself and my friend, go fetch our overall, come back. First job, bilges.¹ I don't know if they purposely threw rotten pieces of meat or something down there, we were fishing out that stuff and now we didn't want to act all squeamish, because then we knew they were going to nail us. Just shut up and pick up the stuff, you know, really, it was gross. Then at about half past nine, 'Get up, wash your hands, get out of your overalls, make neat'. (Female sailor)

In one sense, this example constituted a form of extreme equality. Rituals of initiation were typically used for three purposes: as a condition of acceptance, as an equaliser, and to indoctrinate organisational values. The acid test for any new member of the ship's crew was to clean the bilges. Sailors had to pass the 'test', and once they had proved themselves, were accepted as part of the team. Cleaning the bilges was also seen as the ultimate equaliser for new sailors. In the fleet there were no exceptions made for the women joining the ship, a fact that the woman relating the story appreciated afterwards. She saw it as both a test passed, and 'a way in', because of her acceptance afterwards.

While women's interpretations were positive (at least in hindsight), the question remains whether men applied these rituals as 'test' or as 'protest'. Was it a normal (i.e. gender-neutral) use of ritual or a case of active resistance? It appeared to be a little of both. Men made sure that women felt the full brunt of the test but once they 'passed' the test, they were accepted into the ranks.

But then they were like really hard on us as well, and we got all the crappy cleaning – all the junk work – they wanted to see if we were going to moan, and they were waiting for us to get upset or something. And then, I'd say after about a week of that, they laid off, then things were fine. (Female sailor)

The ships further used rituals such as these to inculcate and project local values, e.g. that all are equal when there is dirty work to be done and that there is no favouritism or special treatment when things get rough (during military missions, etc.). Rituals of initiation therefore served to express inclusion, while at the same time serving other purposes as well – in this example to construct and prescribe organisational norms.

2. *Rituals and identity*

Naval men have, in the past, expressed their identity through the organisation's rituals and customs. Expressions of naval culture were therefore also expressions of their own identity. Women threatened this identity by bringing changes to these rituals. One example of this is the 'crossing of the line' ceremony, an internationally-used ritual of sea-life, in this case referring to when SAN ships cross the polar circle. Sailors who have never 'crossed the line' before are subjected to a ceremony with elements of potential embarrassment or humiliation. After gender integration, the SAN had to effect changes to their version of the ceremony to accommodate women.

[Previously, the men on their way to Antarctica . . .] They had to do everything. They had to take the cold, there was no warm water, now the water gets specially warmed for them [women]. Just for them. Yes, then they start to 'paint' from the youngest person, right, he gets 'painted', and then the rest follow. No, but now, maybe the women, they go first. They go first and then come the other boys, which is wrong. That way it's not good anymore. (Male sailor)

Through these changes the men felt that the ceremony had lost its ritual meaning, and to counter this challenge to their identity they tried hard to maintain their culture through other rituals. If they could not do so through onboard rituals where the mere presence of women had already changed things, then they did so through other traditional activities like sports days. Sports days retained their character as men doing masculine activities through the type of sports played. Women had little success in challenging this situation. A female senior non-commissioned officer (NCO) described her unsuccessful efforts when confronting her captain: 'I asked him, I said the women must also participate in the sport. Everyone must do sport. But I lost that one, and now if they have sport days it is rugby and cricket' (female sailor).

Sports days became an expression of male dominance through the making of decisions that favoured men and (partially) excluded women from fully equal participation (cf. Lindgren 1996 cited in Alvesson and Billing 1997). Further, they served to (re)construct the masculine organisational identity (which was eroded by the emergence of women) and therefore the individual identity of sailors (e.g. as masculine).

3. Working together as ritualised expression of integration

Neville (2003) described how men in the Irish Naval Service used their specialised work to ensure recognition and status. In contrast to her experience, a number of men in the South African group interpreted working together as a ritualised expression of full integration and acceptance. For the women, working in teams regardless of gender was seen as an expression of ultimate integration. Some women found their full inclusion encouraging:

Okay, with us, we normally just get tasked. If it was my chief, if you're standing in the right or the wrong place, whichever way you were, you must go, because essentially we're all trained to do that. On our ship, I don't think they view us as a female anymore. They just view us as 'Right, you are on hand, you must do that'. (Female sailor)

Metaphors

Alvesson and Billing (1997) described metaphors as 'culturally rich verbal expressions' (p. 109), or verbal symbols creating 'vocabularies to facilitate and guide interpretations' (p. 112) of what is going on in an organisation. Metaphors are the figurative use of language accomplished through comparison and analogy (Coffey and Atkinson 1996, p. 85), and based on a shared understanding of images.

Coffey and Atkinson (1996) suggested using metaphors to examine how individuals and groups organise and express their experiences. Three useful metaphors emerged from the data: (1) 'The Navy is a man's world', which provides illumination of the ambivalence within the fleet towards gender integration; (2) 'Forms of address', which indicates the use of metaphors to presume acceptance; and (3) 'Family', which provides illustration of the use of metaphors to construct (i.e. regulate) interaction.

1. The Navy is a man's world

The often-used metaphor of the 'Navy is a man's world' refers to both identity (where people do masculine things) and to space (as a place where only men come). As such it is closely linked to notions of male dominance, which came under attack with the emergence of women. There were divided perspectives on the relevance of this metaphor, underscoring the ambivalence towards gender integration. One woman officer responded as follows to the question, 'Is the Navy still a man's world?': 'No, but more than 50% of the men still think so'. However, she represented

a deviant view (at least an expressed deviant view), as other sailors (both women and men) understood that the South African Navy was not seen as a ‘man’s world’ anymore. Many men expressed more modern ideas:

But – if you actually think like that – this ship was catered for the purpose of men, you know, but this is the Navy. The Navy is catering for everybody. And a ship must change. Because the ship was made for men doesn’t mean it’s right. (Male sailor)

This excerpt comes from a focus group, and was supported (both verbally and non-verbally) by other members of the group. This appeared to reflect the general view of the wider Navy, where the notion of male exclusivity is fading (Van Wijk 2006).

As the metaphor of a ‘man’s world’ receded within the broader Navy, differences in the integration status of ships gave birth to new inter-ship metaphors as response to the perceived threat to status identity. The men on male-only ships used their all-male status to enhance their own status identity (that of ‘real sailors’) by touting the superiority of their position, and ridiculing the men on the gender-integrated ship. They used the metaphor of the ‘love boat’, implying intrigue, romantic relationships and a lack of military masculinity.

Sometimes they [male-only ship] say, ‘Hey this is a love boat. You’ve got women’. You know – that is what they say, ‘This is the love boat! How do you work if there are women?’ (Male sailor)

2. *Forms of address*

The way officers are addressed carries significant meaning – it denotes respect, acknowledges authority, and serves to maintain the status position of officers. Officers may be addressed as ‘Sir’ by non-commissioned officers,² irrespective of their rank. One female officer remarked how this form of address came to have strong metaphorical value for her and other female officers. She recounted a few cases where she has been addressed as ‘Sir’. To her it was simply a culturally appropriate way to address an officer. But she also viewed it as extremely positive as it conveyed to her that she was seen as an officer first and then as a woman:

It is actually nice if they don’t differentiate, because it feels to me that they accept me as a combat officer, not as a female combat officer, but officer, period. (Female officer)

In the same way, being called the ‘man running the ship’ was not perceived as negative or offensive, but seen as acceptance that she was an officer, nothing more and nothing less. It is not clear if men meant it in such a positive way, as their use of ‘male address’ can also be interpreted as resistance – for example, as not recognising the gender of women officers, refusing to allow the gendering of their ship, and so forth. Metaphors can carry ambiguous meanings (Akin and Palmer 2000), and it is noteworthy that women consistently interpreted such behaviour as presumed expressions of acceptance, which may have reflected their own needs within the situation.

3. *Family*

Coffey and Atkinson (1996) paid attention to analysing the outcome of metaphors in terms of function and the meanings they impart. Metaphors are grounded in socially shared knowledge and conventional usage, and may be used to structure new and unfamiliar situations by casting them in terms of something that is familiar (Akin and Palmer 2000). Analysis of the metaphors used by participants in this study revealed that they functioned not only as descriptions, but also as prescriptions.

One surprising metaphor was often invoked to describe relations onboard ships, namely that of ‘family’: ‘It is just like we were all brothers and sisters’ (female sailor). Women and men alike saw

themselves as siblings – sisters and brothers. The ‘family’ metaphor as description was invoked often, and voiced a number of symbolic meanings. For many, it symbolised acceptance: ‘We are becoming like a family, they [women] get treated like part of the ship’s crew’ (male sailor).

On a prescriptive level this metaphor fitted the context extremely well, too. It invoked feelings of oneness and of being part of the same team. It also invoked the principle that blood is thicker than water, and thus that shipmates are more important than sailors on other ships. As a result, it was often used to regulate (prescribe) appropriate behaviour in a new, unfamiliar situation, e.g. men don’t sexually harass their ‘sisters’, and moreover they protect their ‘sisters’ against such harassment from others. The sibling relationship also served to focus attention away from sexuality, and therefore eased the interaction at sea. The same taboo as that which prevents sister–brother sexual relations thus also operated between female and male sailors on the same ship. It is noteworthy that both women and men used the same metaphor as strategy to desexualise shipboard life:

You know what I mean, the people on the ship is like a family, he [the officer] is like your father.
(Female sailor)

Even when we’re at sea, I don’t look at them as if they are women, I look at them as brothers and sisters on a social level. (Male sailor)

The ‘family’ metaphor played a dual purpose: it was used to indicate inclusion (‘acceptance’) and also served to structure relationships onboard ships. These metaphors were not only used to communicate meaning amongst sailors, but further served to prescribe and regulate interaction with newcomers.

Artefacts

Alvesson and Billing (1997) described how corporate culture is expressed through artefacts – physical objects that convey meaning within an organisation. Dress is a highly gendered artefact, and may serve to convey corporate values regarding the roles or status of women and men. Organisational dress serves two key functions: it asserts control, and it conveys identity (Pratt and Rafaeli 1997). Corporate uniforms can become a subtle, yet effective, mechanism of gender oppression. Some corporate uniforms (e.g. policewomen and men wearing the same clothing) serve to desexualise the workplace and suppress women’s femininity (Martin and Jurik 1996). Alternatively, corporate uniform can serve to invoke sexuality and accentuate femininity (e.g. the use of a short skirt by some waitresses) (Martin and Jurik 1996). Corporate uniforms like those of the police or military are also important symbols of identity and status within society (Martin and Jurik 1996).

Military people in particular are identified by, and identify with, their uniforms. The uniform makes visible their status, through rank and qualification badges, and gives them a sense of belonging – to the Navy in general, but also to particular subgroups within it. In the context of gender, uniform is of particular significance.

At the time of this study, women’s uniform consisted of a white dress with stockings and heeled shoes. When at sea all sailors wear a heavy-duty blue uniform. The trousers and shirts are tailored differently for men and for women and all women prefer to wear men’s ‘blues’ as they deem the women’s version to be unflattering and impractical. Women’s uniform has been a constant source of complaints (Steenkamp 2001).³

Women effectively saw their uniforms as artefacts of oppression. The naval uniform was a symbol of the ‘real’ naval culture and women were constantly barred from that culture symbolically by being prohibited from dressing in the symbols of that culture (even when wearing other symbols, e.g. rank insignia, qualification badges). For women, their uniform was

not an expression of their identity, but an enforcement of a separate identity on them. The women in this study were consistently negative about their uniform, and the lack of change that they could effect on it. They raised a number of objections to the uniform.

1. Oppression through impractical uniforms

Life onboard ships is characterised by wind, gangways and stairs. All women complained that the uniform dress was simply impractical. The use of dresses on ships further created constant opportunity for humiliation. All the women respondents had an embarrassing or humiliating story to recount about dresses and stairs. It ranged from deep humiliation to simple inconvenience and discomfort.

2. Segregation and subjugation through separate uniforms

Dress confers identity on individuals as it communicates positions within social structures (Roach-Higgins and Eicher 1992). Uniforms kept women in a separate category which maintained the salience of gender in a very visible way. Dresses were enforced in spite of their impracticality. Women were expected to wear dresses because the Navy perceived these to be ‘what women wear’: [on the white dress] ‘It’s symbolising that you’re a female, you know?’ (female sailor).

Officers receive a ceremonial sword when they are awarded their commission. It is a symbol of their authority and status. Since swords are only worn with men’s dress uniform, women were excluded from wearing a sword as it was deemed unseemly to wear this with a dress. This created a distinct separation between male and female officers.

The female uniform code affected women’s own sense of identity and status. Firstly, it depicted them primarily as women and not as sailors, thereby relegating them to a lower status. Secondly, the uniform dress (and hat) was also seen as degrading because it did not allow women the status that goes with a uniform, and it seemed that they felt relegated by it:

For one, these white dresses. I’m in the Navy, I’m not a nurse, okay. I don’t know, the dress is very degrading. It makes you look like a – I think the correct word in English would be a ‘waif’ . . . and our hats, I don’t know, it looks to me just like a ‘doily’. (Female sailor)

3. Organisational resistance expressed through separate uniforms

Women experienced little success in countering this discriminating separation. Many vented their frustration at an apparent lack of understanding and support from the ‘powers that be’.

From four years back, they said the new uniform, we are getting it. We are still waiting for it, and it is totally impractical to walk around the ship in a dress, and by this time they know it, but they don’t do anything about it. (Female officer)

Organisational resistance was seen to come from the far-away hierarchy, and to persist in spite of the support of local leaders. When the captain of one ship made the decision to allow women to wear trousers on ship, a faceless senior female officer quickly overruled it:

And eventually he [the captain] said, ‘Just wear it’ and we did until some senior woman saw us and sent a signal, ‘Thou shalt not’. (Female sailor)

Some of the women expressed anger at the fact that others – either older women (part of the establishment), or women at the Navy Office who had no understanding of the realities of their lives – determined their uniform code.

I don't even wear my white high-heel shoes and I get stopped time and time again by some old warrant officer – this woman who's falling apart, 'Ja, you must wear high shoes', and I just tell her straight, 'But Warrant, I am at sea'. And I give her this long sappy story about how it is a safety hazard and I broke my ankle already, and I said, 'You come to my ship, Warrant and you will see for yourself how dangerous it is!' And eventually she gets tired of my story and she leaves me. (Female sailor)

When men determine the dress code and require women to wear impractical or uncomfortable uniforms it could be regarded as a subtle form of resistance. Moreover, such men could claim that it is a requirement of the organisation without having to acknowledge that it is in fact men who control decisions on corporate dress (Martin and Jurik 1996). However, in the cases quoted above and below, it was women who controlled these decisions and who were seen as making life difficult for female sailors. The anger expressed by the female sailors above was thus directed at 'other' women who appeared to be undermining them:

And then we did wear the tropical,⁴ we feel as if we're part of the guys. Everybody said that we looked smart and then somebody turned around and said, 'No'. I mean, some female in Pretoria made that decision. I bet you she doesn't even know what this ship looks like, but she said, 'No, no, no. You must wear it [dress]'. (Female sailor)

Corporate space

Corporate space refers to the ways in which corporate culture is expressed through the physical surroundings of a particular organisation (Higgins and McAllaster 2002). Corporate space, in this case 'the Navy as a man's world', can refer to both identity – where people do 'masculine' things, and to space – as a place where only men come. Naval ships are designed, both structurally and socially, to accommodate men (for example, multiple-bunk cabins), and some men understood this consciously: 'I'll say it's clear that this boat is actually for men' (male sailor).

Still, ships were originally built for men, and as such, naval corporate space can be seen as not only metaphorically 'masculine', but also practically for 'men only'. The use of the 'man's world' metaphor was important to denote identity, as discussed previously. Apart from that, the uses of the actual space also became powerful expressions of resistance and acceptance. Within that context space acquired different meanings for different people – namely restriction, maintaining segregation, and indicating integration.

The SAN ships were designed as a single-sex environment, allowing for little privacy and individual space in the accommodation of people. Before women joined the ships structural changes had to be made to provide some form of gender-privacy (not necessarily individual privacy). The physical construction of the gender-integrated ships provided for separate sleeping and ablution facilities and a common mess area that served as both dining room and recreational space.⁵

1. Space as restriction

The initial SAN policy stated that women had to have their own (private) sleeping accommodation, which could be interpreted as an example of the construction of physical division along the lines of gender (Acker 1998), so that when women could not be kept off the ships any longer, they were restricted to specific parts of it. This insistence that women have their own space was seen by the women themselves as restrictive. The greatest resistance from women to the separate sleeping arrangements resulted from the career obstacles that this appeared to represent. If there are no separate sleeping quarters available, women cannot serve on that ship, thereby foregoing exposure to opportunities that may impact on a later promotion.

I also think it is unfair that they changed the ships, threw the women on it, and said, there you go. They never thought about promotion, and they never thought where we will work one day, because they never thought that men can move from ship to ship, but we can't. There was one example of a guy who got a promotion post above a girl who was already overdue for the promotion, all because she was a girl and she could only come here. (Female sailor)

2. *Space as maintaining segregation*

In contrast to women arguing for more integration, men used social space to maintain gender segregation. Most men argued for the maintenance of separate accommodation. In doing so they often cloaked their insistence on segregation as 'support to women'. This included strong patronising attitudes and became a form of benevolent patriarchy. The arguments were based on the assumed natures of women and men, exemplified as follows.

(a) *Women need privacy.* Women were believed to 'need' more privacy, which was deemed to give rise to the need for a separate sleeping compartment. The notion of 'female space' was mentioned a number of times by men. Superficially, men expressed their objections to shared accommodation as concern for the safety and comfort of women. Some men indeed understood the challenges facing women on a navy ship and propagated a 'female space' in support of the women living in a 'masculine space' (the ship). Yet others used it to emphasise women's essential difference (i.e. women not being able to cope in an 'open' ship), and used concern for privacy as a way to restore their own patriarchal position, at least in their own minds (i.e. the ship in general was still a 'male place', with only certain sections allocated to women).

They need privacy, they must have their own place. Also, from the emotional side, for them, they can sort of equalise when they go into their sort of spot and they can share experiences and sort of ... so definitely to sort of calm things down they definitely need their own space. (Male officer)

Proposals in favour of a special female space implied further sexist attitudes; giving women a special space implied that the rest of the ship was 'male space'. It also implied that women were not able to cope with the demands of shipboard life, and therefore needed to have their own space in which to 'recover'.

Women rejected the constraints placed on them by the 'privacy' argument and argued in favour of increased integration. Some argued that they would be able to maintain themselves in common sleeping spaces and that formal separation would not prevent deliberate indiscretions. Other arguments to support the position that privacy should not be an argument for exclusion, described perceived successes of integration on other ships:

Because on [ship's name], they've got bunks like that and all they do is put a curtain rail on top and a curtain. I don't see why it can't work. If you need your privacy, you're not going to get any, you're onboard this ship. The only privacy you get is when you're on the toilets or when you're showering. That's it. That's all you need. (Female sailor)

(b) *Boys will be boys.* Some men professed that 'boys will be boys'. The nature of men (i.e. how they are and how they behave) was cited as a reason why separate facilities are necessary. Notably, younger men gave accounts describing men as sexual beings who see women primarily through that lens. Consequently, they argued that men cannot be held responsible for what might happen in shared accommodation:

The guys would get hellava distracted and things will start happening, and just now there'd be a lot of maternity leave on the ship. (Male sailor)

While their argument drew on the presumed nature of men, it also articulated their views on the nature of women – as primarily sexual objects as well.

3. Use of 'common space' as indication of integration

In contrast to the gender-resistant constructions of corporate space, the use of the common spaces – the messes – became signals of normalisation. When women and men started to socialise together in the recreational spaces, it was seen as a sign of successful integration.

At first when we got women, the women were more apart from us. They never joined us in the messes, watched TV with us. Later on, like I said, they came down and we socialised. And as [two of the women] moved off the ship, they actually felt a bit sad, because we got attached to each other later. (Male sailor)

Summary and conclusion

This paper has described sailors' enactment of naval culture to express their experience of the gender integration of SAN ships. Manifestations of corporate (naval) culture were used to demonstrate and interpret both resistance and acceptance. For some it became a vehicle for underground resistance, for others, evidence of successful integration. In an environment where open opposition or support would have negative organisational or social implications, expressions of resistance and acceptance were covertly channelled through the use of organisational symbols rather than through overt positioning. The four areas of symbolic enactment (rituals, metaphors, artefacts and physical space) revealed five notable issues in the use of the cultural and organisational symbols.

Firstly, they served to express and maintain (masculine) identity and through this also resistance to the gender equalisation of naval ships. New rituals developed to replace those rendered impotent through new policies or practical integration as male sailors tried to maintain a 'masculine' identity through other work-related (though not actual-work) rituals. The example of sport as an expression of masculinity fits closely with other South African experiences (cf. Morrell 2001). Men further countered the attack on their identity (e.g. the 'Navy as a man's world') through the introduction of new metaphors to establish masculine identities in specific contexts (e.g. 'love boat'). The purpose of these metaphors was not to change the culture (as described by Akin and Palmer [2000]), but to reflect identity, and through it, resistance. Uniforms were used to maintain separate masculine and feminine identities (and the associated status-differences). While changing rituals and metaphors were informal actions at grass-roots level, women perceived their exclusionary uniform standards as a deliberate attempt by the organisation to maintain their separate identities and lower status. This perception was reinforced by attempts to create specific space for women on ships, which in turn served to identify ships as predominantly masculine spaces.

Secondly, in contrast, symbolic enactment also served to express acceptance of integration of, and support to, women. Both women and men respondents interpreted working together, and socialising together in the same space, as signals of true integration.

Thirdly, through the above, symbols reflected the ambivalence towards gender integration that existed in the fleet. Some symbols expressed inclusion, while others served to exclude. The ambivalence was most clearly expressed through the receding of certain rituals and metaphors, countered (sometimes) by their replacement with others serving the original purpose more subtly. The ambivalent environment may have been more hostile than women consciously realised, or at least reported, as evidenced by the high rates of health-related complaints among women onboard SAN ships (Van Wijk 2002).

Fourthly, understanding symbolic meaning was often a matter of interpretation, especially when corporate symbols were used as covert communication of both resistance and acceptance respectively. At times women and men interpreted the same symbolic expression differently. For example, women saw acceptance of their position (in terms of rank superseding gender) in specific forms of address, while men may have intended it as resistance to the gendering of their ship. Efforts of the SAN to measure organisational change need to be mindful that the individual psychological needs of sailors (e.g. acceptance) may influence their reports, and easily create a false impression, which in turn might be accepted uncritically, especially if that serves the needs of the senior management.

Lastly, symbols became powerful mechanisms to regulate behaviour in new and unfamiliar situations. Rituals (e.g. at initiation) functioned to construct workgroup norms, thereby regulating expectations and work output of new members joining the particular group. The example cited conveyed the norm that all sailors are equal, that all have to participate in dirty work when required, and so forth. The example of the metaphor of 'family' is particularly instructive in articulating the use of metaphors to structure new situations in terms of familiar images. It conveys not only a description of interaction, but also a prescription for appropriate social behaviour. The same metaphor further served to convey workgroup norms, like teamwork, loyalty, and so forth. Separate and combined spaces further structured interaction, e.g. women and men eat together but sleep apart.

In conclusion, this paper demonstrated the value of using organisational symbols to interpret the divergent oppositional and supportive experiences of sailors regarding the gender integration of SAN ships, and its descriptive and prescriptive effects. In general, organisational symbols, being descriptive, can be used as a barometer of organisational change, although this needs to be interpreted critically. As the symbols are also prescriptive, this can further be used to understand what values are really being communicated and what behaviours are really being reinforced in an organisation undergoing change. This could, in turn, allow the SAN to facilitate appropriate interpretations of prescriptive symbols, to enhance positive organisational norms amidst that change.

Notes

1. Space in bottom of ship where water and waste drains to.
2. Female officers are usually addressed as 'ma'am'.
3. The SAN has changed their uniforms and uniform policies since the time this study was undertaken.
4. White uniform worn by men in summer.
5. The SAN has changed their policies regarding privacy and facilities since the time this study was undertaken.

Notes on contributors

Charles H. van Wijk is a psychologist practising in Fish Hoek, Cape Town.

Gillian Finchilescu is Chair of the Psychology Department at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

References

- Acker, J., 1998. Hierarchies, jobs, bodies: a theory of gendered organisations. In: K.A. Myers, C.D. Anderson and B.J. Risman, eds. *Feminist foundations: toward transforming sociology*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Akin, G. and Palmer, I., 2000. Putting metaphors to work for change in organizations. *Organizational dynamics*, 28 (3), 67–79.
- Alvesson, M. and Billing, Y.D., 1997. *Understanding gender in organizations*. London: Sage Publications.

- Coffey, A. and Atkinson, P., 1996. *Making sense of qualitative data*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Denscombe, M., 2001. *The good research guide*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.
- Higgins, J.M. and McAllaster, C., 2002. Want innovation? Then use cultural artifacts that support it. *Organizational dynamics*, 31 (1), 74–84.
- Martin, S.E. and Jurik, N.C., 1996. *Doing justice, doing gender*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Morgan, D.L., 1997. *Focus groups as qualitative research*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Morrell, R., 2001. The times of change: men and masculinity in South Africa. In: R. Morrell, ed. *Changing men in Southern Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press.
- Motumi, N., 1999. Gender equality: a challenge to the Department of Defence. *African security review*, 8 (3), 23–31.
- Neuman, L.W., 2000. *Social research methods: qualitative and quantitative approaches*. 4th ed. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Neville, P., 2003. In with the new, only more so . . . : the politics of change and gender in the Irish Naval Service. *Journal of gender studies*, 12 (2), 115–124.
- Pratt, M.G. and Rafaeli, A., 1997. Organizational dress as a symbol of multilayered social identities. *Academy of management journal*, 40 (4), 862–898.
- Roach-Higgins, M.E. and Eicher, J.B., 1992. Dress and identity. *Clothing and textiles research journal*, 10 (4), 1–8.
- Steenkamp, W., 2001. Girls in uniform made to measure. *Sunday Times*, 27 May.
- Van Breda, A.D., 2002. Family violence in the South African National Defence Force. Paper presented at the XXXIVth International Congress on Military Medicine, Sun City, South Africa, 15–20 September 2002.
- Van Wijk, C.H., 2002. Sex differences in health care utilization onboard SA Navy ships. Paper presented at the XXXIVth International Congress on Military Medicine, Sun City, South Africa, 15–20 September 2002.
- Van Wijk, C.H., 2006. *Gender integration of male dominated environments: the experience of SA Navy sailors*. Thesis (PhD). University of Cape Town.

Copyright of *Journal of Gender Studies* is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

Copyright of *Journal of Gender Studies* is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.