
Gender and the MBA

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Abstract

More than 10 years ago, Amanda Sinclair reviewed the field of gender and the MBA and found a profoundly masculine culture operating in business schools. This article takes a fresh look at the phenomenon of gender and the MBA. It argues that while the male to female ratio in business school has not changed drastically, the mindset in relation to gender has shifted in significant ways. Two aspects of this shift are particularly highlighted. First, the study indicates that while MBA education still involves learning to do business like a man, gender is understood as more of a mental construct than as the basis for a discriminatory reality. Secondly, it shows that a post-feminist climate is operating in management education, where gender is no longer seen as an important element. The article raises profound implications for management education today.

Introduction

The Master of Business Administration (MBA) has often been heralded as a ticket to the executive suite. Young managers who hope to rise through the ranks to the highest echelons of organisations are encouraged to return to school to take an MBA. However, like the executive suite, the MBA seems to be a space largely dominated by men. Despite of continuous efforts of most business schools to improve recruitment ratios, the number of women in elite MBA programmes seems to be stuck at around 30% (Dejouany, 2006; Di Meglio, 2004; Tarzian, 2007). Amanda Sinclair (1995) provided an in-depth analysis of the gender dimension of management education. Her central argument was that management education is strongly gendered masculine, making it difficult for women to fit in to the prevailing culture. This article takes a closer look at whether and how far management education has changed in the intervening period.

The article looks at how MBA students talk about the way gender shapes their everyday experiences in business school. It is structured in the following way. It begins with a description of how business schools have evolved in terms of gender diversity in recent years. The methodology for the present study is then described. An empirical section then highlights two ways in which the MBA students in the study
are making sense of gender. These forms of speech are discussed in the light of wider gender and generational changes in society, and a conclusion is then drawn.

**Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose?**

Having an MBA is increasingly a requirement for those aspiring to progress beyond a certain level within organisations. The great majority of students undertaking an MBA are between 25 and 35 years old, and it is usual to have gained some years of work experience before brushing up one’s management credentials. MBA graduates, generally considered to have acquired high levels of proficiency in technology, finance and communication, possess skills which are much sought-after in organisations (Catalyst, 2000) and therefore regularly command relatively high salaries. Doing an MBA, particularly at an elite institution, also means that one can build relationships with a peer group of those most likely to rise to the top of other companies, developing networks which aid in reaching the higher echelons of management. Management education has thus a vital role in shaping these new leaders of organisations, functioning as an inculcation into a certain habitus that is expected in business (Ehrensal, 2001).

While an MBA appears to be a good route into the higher ranks of organisations, it is striking that women still tend to be underrepresented in MBA programmes. In 2005-2006, only 39% of those taking a Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT), the common entry requirement for an MBA, were women (GMAC, 2006). Compared to medical or law schools in the US, where numbers are much more balanced, business schools are lagging behind in terms of gender ratios (Catalyst, 2000). Only 30% of the MBA students at top US business schools are women (Di Meglio, 2004), and the proportion is similar in European schools. At London Business School the number of female MBA students entering in 2006 was 28%. In other European countries such as Spain, the number of women on MBA degrees fluctuates between 20% at IESE to 44% at ESADE (Tarzian, 2007). At HEC in France the number of women enrolled in MBA programmes is 32% (Dejouany, 2006). Given that gender diversity is a factor in the all-important rankings (FT, 2006) and given that female students constitute a potential growth market for schools themselves, many institutions are attempting to improve recruitment through initiatives such as women-
only information sessions, women’s scholarships and even women-only courses, such
as those at Simmons College (Sinclair, 1995). Organisations like the Forté Foundation
aim to reduce the gender imbalance in business schools by changing women’s
misconceptions about what a career in management means, using tools like
networking and financial support. In spite of these initiatives, women’s participation
is MBA programmes is still low, which indicates that gender should be a real concern
for management education.

A number of explanations have been offered as to why women are not joining
business schools in greater numbers. Most research agrees that the masculine culture
of business schools is one of the main factors that deter women from entering MBA
programmes (Alsop, 2005; Kilduff & Mehra, 1996; MacLellan & Dobson, 1997;
Simpson, 1996; Simpson, Sturges, Woods, & Altman, 2005). The fact that the image
of the ideal manager remains a masculine one (Kerfoot & Knights, 1993; V.E. Schein,
1976; V. E. Schein, 2001; V. E. Schein & Davidson, 1993; V. E. Schein, Mueller, &
Jacobson, 1989; V. E. Schein, Mueller, Lituchy, & Liu, 1996; Sinclair, 1995) could
also be a reason why women feel less inclined to enter formal management education.
A recent study has shown that women who undertake MBA courses often confront a
mismatch between gender identity and the ideal of the manager (Kilduff & Mehra,
1996). In this context, women find themselves having to act like ‘surrogate males’
(Kilduff & Mehra, 1996, p. 118), adopting the values of ruthless competition and
domination common in business schools. At the same time the study found many
women did not feel comfortable with the dominance of masculine hegemonic values.
The authors argue that ‘[f]or women … the acceptance of male hegemonic identity is
inevitably disruptive of female identity, because male hegemony is premised on the
subordination of femininity’ (Kilduff & Mehra, 1996, p. 127). Seen in this light,
management as a profession appears incompatible with femininity. Such a situation
perpetuates the prevailing gender hierarchies, with managers of the future being
trained in a context in which women and gender issues are effectively invisible
(Mavin & Bryans, 1999). Even though the number of women in organisations is
increasing (Hakim, 1996), it could be suggested that business schools are failing to
prepare students for the changing realities they are likely to face in their professional
lives.
In her seminal article, Sinclair (1995) discussed many of these elements of the masculine culture that permeate business schools. She found that part of the culture is a tendency to worship numbers and give precedence to a quantitative outlook in which value is placed on those things which can be readily measured; if students do not excel in these areas then their management ability is put in question. Courses are mainly delivered by male professors via case studies which focus on men and men’s interests; the absence of women from samples in research quoted is simply ignored. Other research studies have confirmed that women were likely to perceive case studies as catering mainly to the interests of men and to find the lack of female professors and an overly aggressive and competitive environment problematic (Catalyst, 2000; Smith, 1997). Women are often implicitly required to tone down their sexuality through dressing down. In addition, much learning on MBA programmes is done in teams and Sinclair argues that what some women confront in teamwork is a ‘sustained exposure to systematic discrimination - their ideas are dismissed, their comments overruled, their contributions relegated to clerical and secretarial tasks’ (Sinclair, 1995, p. 305). Business school is also dominated by a learning style which is inconducive to most women, with people pretending to know everything, purportedly emulating the practices of the biggest and best corporations and using only a restricted set of analytical techniques (Sinclair, 1997). Throughout, the focus is on developing a great career, preferably in consulting. Sinclair (1995) also argued that the gendering process inside the classroom is reinforced by social rituals outside it, where masculinity is proven through heavy drinking and participation in competitive and often extreme sports. Overall, MBA programmes value elements that are commonly seen as more masculine than feminine, such as competition, individualism and instrumentalism.

Given this picture of MBA education as profoundly masculine in its values and practices, recent studies have reported surprising findings, indicating that the culture may be less estranging for women than had previously been suggested. A recent US study on MBAs, for example, found that most women on MBA programmes did not think that the gender imbalance affected their own performance, even though they acknowledged sexist undertones in class and noted that case studies were mainly about predominantly male interests such as cars (JWT, 2005). The women in the study accepted that if they wanted to be a CEO they would have to play the boys’
game. The same study suggests that women do not like not be singled out as needing special treatment, as this lowers their status and raises questions about whether they are as well-qualified for entry to the MBA as their male counterparts (JWT, 2005). The study highlighted the complex relationship between encouraging women to apply or offering women-only recruitment events and singling women out for special attention, which was perceived as giving them a status comparable in their eyes to being ‘disabled’. Interestingly, however, while women in this research did not like to be singled out, they had no hesitations about accepting specially-targeted scholarships.

Overall, these findings suggest that although the numbers of women in MBA programmes seem to have increased only slightly, perceptions of gender and its significance may have shifted significantly since Sinclair’s research was carried out. It is important that these changes be better understood if the ongoing issues around the gendering of management are to be appropriately addressed. On the one hand it is possible that women MBA student continue to perceive the culture of management education as alienating and sometimes overtly sexist. On the other hand, it might be that women on MBA courses now feel more like ‘normal students’ and do not want to be singled out as needing any special treatment. This in turn may make it more difficult for them to account for aspects of the MBA experience which are still characterised by sexism or predominantly masculine values and practices. Understanding the conceptual constructions of gender upon which MBA students are drawing is essential if we are to explore the current state of management education and its future development.

**Methods and Methodology**

The present study is based on 20 in-depth interviews with full-time MBA students on a two-year programme at a top-tier business school in Europe. Interviewees were selected based their country of origin, their year of study, their age and other elements that emerged as important in course of the study. The interviews lasted 45 to 110 minutes, with most being just over an hour, and were conducted by two female interviewers. They covered three main areas: what people had done before joining an MBA programme, how they were experiencing the MBA programme and what they
wanted to do after finishing their degrees. The interviews all covered a set of fixed questions but each of the interviewers also had the liberty to explore interesting elements in more detail. The interviews were transcribed using an accepted notation system and were coded with the qualitative software programme NVivo first based on interview topics and then using much finer codes about topics, tropes of talk and other re-emerging patterns.

The interviewees were selected to ensure diversity according to a number of different criteria. 10 men and 10 women were interviewed. 10 were in their first and 10 in their second year of the MBA. Five were of British nationality, five of other European nationalities, five of US nationality and five from all other nationalities. Most people had lived in various countries. None indicated that they had lived in one only country, six indicated that they had lived in two countries, while one person indicated that she had lived in eight countries. Interviewees had on average worked for just over six years before entering the MBA programme, with a range between three to 11 years; they had worked for around three companies on average, with one company being the minimum and six the maximum. The sample included two people who self-identified as homosexual. The ages of interviewees ranged from 26 to 35, with the average age being just under 30 years. 10 were single or divorced, six had partners, four were married and one person had children.

These figures do not reflect the gender balance or nationality balance in the School as a whole, where, for instance, in the current first year 28% of students are women and 18% are from the USA. However, it was felt that little could be gained from selecting interviewees to reflect these statistics exactly. Instead, the study aims at exploring gender and other axes of difference from different perspectives. While it is more likely that women have a clearer account of what it means to be gendered (Hartsock, 1983, 1997), it is also important to explore how men think about gender. This not only adds an additional perspective but it shows how those in relatively hegemonic positions conceptualise both their own roles and those of others. Rather than reflecting the existing ratios, the sampling strategy was intended to explore how people with potentially different perspectives think about gender. This follows a grounded theory approach in which one samples for diversity (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Methodologically the interviews are biographical narrative in form, drawing on
discourse analytic principles (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). This version of discourse analysis is well suited to the aims of this study because it allows us to identify the different resources on which interviewees draw to talk about gender and to explore how these resources are used to construct an account of the MBA experience. By paying close attention to the ways in which gender is narrated in this context, it is then possible to draw wider conclusions about the ways in which discourses appear to be shifting.

**Learning to Do Business like a Man**

When asked about whether the gender imbalance in business school matters to them, most interviewees played down its significance and asserted that gender had little relevance in the MBA context. When asked to suggest reasons why there are so few women in business school, a number of people suggested that business school mirrors the business world. Given that most of those studying for an MBA intend to develop careers in the male-dominated areas of investment banking or consulting, they suggested, business schools were simply mirroring the gender balance in these industries.

This theme comes through in Benjamin’s response here:

> Interviewer 1: If you look around at school, you will notice that three quarters of the student population are men. What do you think about that?
> Benjamin: I think it’s a function of, of, the workplace, I think. (…) I think business school is actually quite representative of the workplace per se that I know which is banking. There are very few females in banking, and especially few senior females in banking because of course the natural thing is for people to jus- to go, okay, you are a female, you gonna get married and have babies and you gonna leave. Which is not, obviously, the case, but that’s the natural precondition that we have growing up whereas, actually, in reality, this is not the case at all. So I think it’s, yeah, I mean, there are females here, but not as many as maybe anybody would like to get the diversity aspect home.
Benjamin describes the scarcity of women in business school as a function of the workplace. It is interesting that he uses the language of function as it reflects a mathematic and business mindset of causally related elements. Here the scarcity of women in business school merely reflects the scarcity of women in business, and particularly in banking, where he worked before. The reasons Benjamin offers are natural or biological as the assumption is that women are leaving before they reach senior levels of the profession because of childcare responsibilities. This explanation itself is not entirely consistent with his initial acknowledgement that there are few women in banking to start with – so that it cannot be only a matter of women ‘leaving’ but of their never entering the profession in the first place. He suggests that this notion that women will leave to have children is only a ‘natural precondition’ people grow up with. The slightly unusual usage of ‘precondition’ in this context suggests a combination of default condition and preconception. This statement thus achieves a dual purpose, in that it cites common assumptions about women’s career trajectories at the same time as discounting them as not being a true reflection of reality. Benjamin’s account is carefully tailored to present stereotypes about women as inaccurate even while using those same stereotypes to explain why there are so few women in business and consequently in business school. The final sentence is also highly interesting as it suggests that there are women in business school but not enough to ‘get the diversity aspect home’. Diversity in this context appears to be something that needs to be achieved for the sake of political correctness rather than involving a more fundamental challenge to the ways in which the business world is constituted.

What becomes explicit through these accounts is that the purpose of the business school is to educate people who can do business. Hidden within this rather tautological statement is a strong presumption that the ‘doing of business’ involves a distinctly gendered performance of professional competence. The nature of this performance became clear in an interview with Frances:

Frances: I’m not part of the Women in Business Club either.
Interviewer 1: Why not?
Frances: (0.6) ‘Cause women don’t do business, men do. So if you don’t, if you want to do business, you have to learn to play business like a man. In a way.

Frances is here talking about how certain clubs are dominant within the business school context and discussing her own involvement in some of them. It was surprising that she is not a member of this Women in Business Club, as most of the women interviewed were members (see later for a detailed discussion). The reason Frances gives for not joining this club is that men do business, not women. For her one has to learn to ‘play business like a man’. She qualifies this claim by adding ‘in a way’ but it remains a strong statement that business is a men’s world. In order to survive, one has to learn to ‘play’, according to rules set by men rather than by women.

Yatin also drew on the notion of business as being like a game. He states that the business school is very masculine and that there is a lot of machismo and aggression. We join this extract when he is talking about his own role in this masculine culture.

Yatin: Yeh, I mean, it’s it’s it is what it is. I mean, you sort of, you know, I’m a man so you can play the game if you need to, but it isn’t necessarily something that I identify with all the time. But you know, this is kind of life too, right? And there’s a lot of business environments that I think there’d be a lot more of that sort of macho camaraderie than other environments which I don’t necessarily like very much, but that’s kind of how it works. And there’ve been situations where I’ve told people that I don’t particularly like the environment or what they’ve said or comments or this and that, and you’ve backed down, but you know, this sort of happens unfortunately.

Yatin had clearly articulated his awareness of how overt masculinity, aggression and machismo shape interactions and he was asked how he deals with the pressure to adopt these traits. In this extract he answers that with the set phrase ‘it is what it is’: this is just what the environment is like and one can do little about it. However, he acknowledges that he has the advantage of being able to play the game because he is a man. He does not like doing this but sees it as part of normal life. He refers to instances when he has opposed this behaviour and later offers an example of an
occasion when he told colleagues over dinner that they should stop talking about women in a certain way. That changed the atmosphere and the group was no longer relaxed; Yatin attributed the change to the fact that his comments had disturbed the ritualistic male bonding. Yatin observes the same mechanisms at work in business school as in the business world at large. If the purpose of business school is to educate business managers and those who do business are men, then it follows that business schools tend to reproduce masculine elites.

The performance of this particular kind of masculinity involves the subjugation of women and non-hegemonic masculinities (Connell, 1995). Sexism is one of the means through which this subjugation operates, functioning to put women in their place. Another of the interviewees, Helen, talked about how difficult she found it to settle into the masculine culture of the business school after working in the more feminine culture of the media. She here talks about her experience of her study group:

Helen: I’m just think, um, I don’t know if it’s certain industries or certain cultures but, you know, someone (.) I work with kind of seems to have an attitude towards women of what I’d think of as a sort of a fourteen year old boy and he’s constantly making references to body parts and, you know, if ever we, you know, have to do anything he’s always talking about naked [women he downloaded porn
Interviewer 2: HEHE]

Helen: During one exercise, he, and I think, um, you know, while I find that vaguely annoying I can kind of deal with that, it’s more I think that sometimes he, um, (.) I’ve noticed that if I say something he will almost disagree with me instantly but if then someone who’s male in the group says the same thing as me he’ll happily adopt the views as long as it comes from him, so, um, trying to get my head around that, it’s still early days.

Helen refers here to a member of her team who is apparently not entirely comfortable with working with a woman. She attributes his behavior either to certain industries, and we may think here of masculine dominated industries, or cultures, where less egalitarian gender relations may be more common. Her team member sexualizes women’s bodies and is downloading porn while in group work. However Helen
underplays what she characterizes as childish acts which remind her of a fourteen year old boy as only ‘vaguely annoying’, and she is more hurt by the subtle gender discriminations (see Benokraitis, 1997) which she confronts, such as realizing that her comments are not taken seriously or not attributed to her. She says she is surprised by this behavior and still needs to understand it but she qualifies her unease by saying that it is ‘early days’, as if these problems would go away later on. While she clearly feels aggrieved about the situation, however, her attitude is marked by a certain unwillingness to address these issues directly or to take any formal action. Later in the interview she returns to the theme of her study group, stating that she had to learn to become much more aggressive and assertive in order to participate in discussions, a shift that she initially found exhausting. Rather than complaining about the sexist behaviour, it appears that her strategy has been one of adaptation and that by taking on more characteristically ‘masculine’ traits she has found a way to work more effectively with her male colleagues.

Another interview where this sexism was addressed openly was with Dawn.

Interviewer 1: Three quarters of the students are men. What do you think about that?

Dawn: Um (.) well (.) they’re sort of, that structure has really not uh ever felt uh like it’s uncomfortable or ‘Oh wish there were more women here’. It’s, I mean, there are certain individuals at this School who um, ^oh dear^, I don’t want to start getting upset on camera, who can say things that are quite unpleasant and pretty sexist and um ((sounds tearful)) yeh, that’s quite frustrating. But um, (.) I, I mean, how I feel about that is that it’s, unfortunately, it’s one of those things that um you just have to get on and deal with the best, almost not wanting to give those people ammunition, you know?

When asked about gender at the business school, Dawn starts by saying that it does not feel uncomfortable that there are so few women in business school. However shortly after that she almost starts crying when she talks about certain people who say things that are as she says ‘pretty sexist’. Instead of stating that some of what she has experienced has been incontrovertibly sexist, however she qualifies this claim with the relativising marker ‘pretty’. She finds this sexism frustrating but constructs it as if
it is just part of normal life. Her message is that one has to get on with it and ignore those people rather than starting to debate with them. When asked to expand, she refers to an example where the class discussed whether gender itself or different levels of experience were responsible for the gender wage gap. One student replied that the woman cannot be at work as she has to be at home making his coffee. Another instance she recalls is a spreadsheet that some of her classmates created to evaluate the women at business school based on how attractive they were. Although certainly not pleasant things, these almost seem too harmless to render a confident MBA student close to tears. Dawn may here be giving fairly innocuous examples to avoid getting more upset by recalling other things she might have encountered. Nevertheless, these examples can be described as instances of sexism and they certainly have sexist functions in that they sexualize women and put them in their place.

Such overt discussion of sexism or other masculine elements of business school were relatively rare within the interviews. What was more often discussed was sexuality. Indeed, many men answered the question about gender in a joking manner, saying things like ‘I am single’ (Vicente), ‘I’m married, so I never really gave that too much of a thought (Ganesh) or ‘I love the women’ (Stewart). These comments refer clearly to women in business school as potential sexual partners. This also arose in the suggestion that the business school is almost like a marriage market. Frances stated:

Frances: I think women are as much to blame because they don’t, you know, go out and grab opportunities and do things and, you know, they’re more interested in trying to find a husband and living off some guy, you know. So I don’t, I don’t think it’s, it’s just the way it is. But it doesn’t mean I have to like it. Or like being in that environment, I don’t. So (.) so yeh, I’d prefer it if the business school was half women, half men.

What happens in this statement is that Frances almost blames women for not coming to business school as they seem to have different priorities in life. These priorities are to find a well-off husband who can support them. These priorities lead Frances to assert that women do not make the most of the opportunities they have. The idea seems to be that women could enter business school but just do not want to because
they prefer to get married. Surprisingly, one interviewee even suggested that this may be the case for women who join MBA programmes as well. Tanya talked about how her flat mates and fellow MBA students as being ‘dead set on “I want to find my husband while I’m in the MBA programme.”’ She even asserted that the business school is promoting this through presenting slides during induction of inter-class hook-ups, with one presenter referring to business school as a dating service. This would mean not only that women come to business school to find a husband but that men also would gain access to a wider pool of potential brides if more women were enrolled in the MBA programme. This form of sexism is much more subtle than those described by Helen and Dawn, and works through sexualizing the relationship between women and men according to heterosexual norms. What is paradoxical here is that in the idea of business school as a potential dating service suggests a certain gender parity (in that professional men are partnering women who are as ambitious and successful as they are) while also subtly defining women as stereotypically sexualized objects of men’s desire and/or as aspiring primarily to marriage rather than professional success.

Other elements of the gendered nature of business school were usually swept under the carpet. One interviewee did mention that women lecturers and professors are under much more scrutiny from students than their male colleagues. Frances described how uncomfortable men in her class were when one female lecturer talked openly about sex, and gave another example of sexualised comments being made in class about the same lecturer. The fact that case studies are predominantly based on masculine experience usually did not come up, and when an interviewer suggested that this might be the case, its importance was usually denied.

Interviewer 1: And what about in terms of the few female professors that are here that are teaching you, and things like the case studies that are more dominated by male experience of the world or is that something that you do not experience as much?
Emma: Um (.). Um yeh, I mean, yeh, most of the case studies are about men, but that's just the way the world IS.
When asked about case studies about men and if they mattered or not, Emma agrees that they are about men but she does not see that as problematic in any way. It is rather swept aside by saying that this is just what business is like and she continued talking about how the same is true for her future employer. The masculine culture of the business school is rarely questioned or put under scrutiny but it is rather accepted that business is about men. Through the notion that ‘that’s just the way the world IS’, gender norms are constructed as a status quo which just has to be accepted and there is little attempt to challenge it.

If business schools are educate future business leaders and as business leaders tend to be men, it is generally accepted by MBA students that business school is likewise dominated by men. Although MBA students talked about this, there was surprisingly little awareness that this may be problematic in any way. It is rather accepted that to be inculcated into the business culture, one has to learn to do business according to the prevailing norms, and this often involves the performance of a distinctly masculine repertoire of behaviour.

**Gender as a Construction**

In the main, MBA students asserted that gender does not matter in business school. An extract from an interview with Andrew illustrates this mindset:

Andrew: Um, (.) it doesn’t mat- it it it, honestly doesn’t matter to me, um, it wouldn’t, I wouldn’t, it wouldn’t bother me if there was fifty percent women or sixty percent women and, you know, less men or more men, um, (.) uh as long as, you know, as long as the school makes an effort to pick the smartest people or the best people, whether they’re whether they’re men or women, you know, I certainly would be against accepting more women just because of their, just because of they’re women, or just because they are women, um, but um, but no I think it’s it’s it’s good, I think that, the, you know, the mix is good.

What Andrew does in this extract is first make clear that he has nothing against women and that he would not mind if there were more women in business school.
This sort of statement was common from men interviewed, almost all of whom demonstrated their egalitarian credentials by emphasizing their appreciation of or willingness to support their female colleagues. The only objection Andrew has is to the business school selecting women based on their sex rather than on merit. He thus alludes to the hotly-debated issues around having quotas for women or introducing affirmative action and positive discrimination.

The idea of quotas for women came up regularly in the interviews, with most referring to the issue implicitly:

Rafiq: Well, generally, it seems like my guess is that if more women applied, more women would get in. And you know it would change the ratios a little bit. I doubt, I don’t know, my guess is that they don’t have a quota on you know male versus female, like it’s not in their interests to do that AT ALL. And generally you know guys would l-, would pref-, you look at the female ratio and you want to be surrounded by women, you don't want to be like in a prison.

Rafiq attributes the low number of women in business school to the levels of applications, suggesting that if more women applied, the balance would change. He also states a strong belief that is the school does not operate a quota system which would positively discriminate in favour of women, although he does not make clear why he thinks it would not be in the business school’s interest to do so. He stresses that men would profit from having more women around, likening an all-men environment to a prison, which is an interesting comparison. Having quotas or practicing affirmative action seems here to be seen as unfair or as possibly jeopardising the meritocratic appearance of business schools. More generally, it appears that part of the negative stance towards positive discrimination arises from a concern about the risk of undermining the reputation of business schools as recruiting only the best people. Playing down the significance of gender and attributing the gender imbalance to extrinsic factors over which the business school has no control might then be seen in part as a defence of the elite reputation of the institution to which these students belong.
The interpretative repertoire of gender not mattering was also visible in many other comments. Caroline’s comment is particularly striking in that respect.

Interviewer 2: But does it, does it make a, does it matter to you that roughly three quarters of your fellow students are male?
Caroline: No. No, I don’t, I don’t register.
Interviewer 2: Ok.
Caroline: So I (.) I think a lot of things for me here fall away. Like I don’t register nationalities anymore, because it just doesn't seem to matter. I don’t register gender anymore, because it just doesn’t seem to matter that much. What matters is, ‘Do I like you? Can I work with you? Or are you sort of useless, basically?’ Well, it’s not quite true
Interviewer 2: HEHE
Caroline: But you start making, everything else seemed to sort of fall away.

Caroline uses the interesting expression ‘I don’t register gender’, claiming that gender is invisible to her and is not a factor in the way she evaluates her fellow students. Gender and other differences such as nationality are said to be irrelevant as long as she can work with the other person, a judgment she makes based on their competence (whether they are ‘sort of useless, basically’).

Particularly interesting in respect to how gender was talked about in business school was how people talked about the Women in Business Club. The club’s main focus is to facilitate networking among female students and recruiters from outside the business school. Various interviewees, women and men, joked that there should be a Men in Business Club as well, associating the club with women getting what one interviewee, Peggy, called ‘preferential access’ to recruiters. This emphasis reflects the fact that the major recruiters from this business school are consultancies and investment banks, which are currently seeking to increase the proportions of women they recruit in order to achieve greater gender balance. To this end, women are invited to special recruitment events such as women-only breakfasts. Men interviewed tended to adopt a benevolent stance towards this practice, saying that they did not mind that the women received special attention, and joking about wanting to set up a Men in Business Club was as far as they went towards any kind of challenge.
The purpose of the club is mainly to build networks rather than anything that could be construed as political; the group would certainly eschew any suggestion of being labelled feminist. For women students, membership in the club seems almost compulsory but few described themselves as active. Even those students who take leading roles in the club were neither keen to talk about women nor could they be described as particularly political. One of the events organized by the club for all students at the business school took place in the business school’s bar, and prior to the event notices advertising massages to be provided by a ‘gorgeous masseuse’ from the female ruby team. The male ruby club is the biggest club on campus, organising many events and perceived to be very powerful. Women cannot play on the same team as the men but they can demonstrate that they are man enough through playing the same tough game with other women. The advertisements for the event suggests that while these women are tough they are nonetheless very feminine and can act as beautiful masseuses. This suggests the accomplished performance of closely linked gender roles, with female rugby players shifting between acting like a man while still being feminine and attractive to men. It also suggests that there is little awareness that advertising MBA students as ‘gorgeous masseuses’ could be read as sexist in any way. That an event for the Women in Business Club can be advertised using such language without seeing it as at all problematic is indicative of how non-political and non-feminist the club is. Rather, this kind of image projection might be interpreted precisely as a way of distancing members from any association with the unfashionable ‘feminist’ label, linking into a discourse of what McRobbie has termed ‘post-feminist masquerade’ (McRobbie, 2006, 2007).

Nadia expressed many of the ambivalences that surrounded the Women in Business Club.

Nadia: I joined initially the Women in Business Cl-, Club here. I am still kind of following up on things, I even helped, volunteered to help with the Women in Business Conference (...) There is a fine balance. Clearly you need to help women, but I don’t understand, for example, we went to (name of investment bank) for, um, drinks, presentation and drinks, and I was trying to explain to my classmates that we went there, just 20 girls were there. But the question
was ‘Why not the guys’? Why, why are we different, you know, why is not there Men in Business Club? I know, I mean, women have more challenges with jobs, especially family balances stuff, but it can be put in a very different, it, it’s a very fine balance. (...) Every company realizes that they need to give room for women. They have people that make sure that women can balance their different responsibilities. But it should probably. You don’t need to take the step further to try to make the claim ‘you’re different’ per se by man. You see, I, it’s very difficult to explain, but I sensed in some of the meetings at the club that it was going a bit further away. You know, it’s just like, we are not that different, we do have different responsibilities.

The ambivalences quickly become clear in the first sentence, when Nadia states that she ‘initially’ joined the Women in Business Club, suggesting that she is no longer so active. She then goes on to say that she had even been willing to help organize their conference, but has since developed doubts about the club’s role. Her problem seems to start where claims about gender difference are made. She illustrates by referring to a recruitment event organized for women interested in going into banking, voicing a concern that although women ‘have more challenges with jobs, especially family balances stuff’, their differences from men should not be overly emphasized. The reasons for her anxiety are not very clearly articulated, but it is clear that for Nadia, companies demonstrating their awareness of gender by attempting to ‘give room for women’ risks tipping over into an unhelpful position in which women are considered different ‘per se’. She is visibly uncomfortable with statements about gender difference that go beyond acknowledging that women having ‘different responsibilities’, and as a result any specially targeted recruitment Women in Business club events borders on dangerous territory.

Apart from the Women in Business Club, to which most people had a rather ambivalent and careful relationship, women tried very hard to be an invisible group and to be seen simply as ordinary students in business school.

Dawn: And in fact a discussion did sort of start in one of the classes that I took last term, when we looked at a string of adverts, and then we were asked to
comment on them. And the string of adverts had been sewn together by a woman giving a lecture about how women are portrayed in the media. And I said, ‘I don’t actually feel like that when I see those ads, I think this woman has basically turned this how she wants’. Because she was being quite extreme, like it was a black model who’d had make-up to make her look like a tiger, and she was like, ‘Oh, you know, the black women shown you know as lower than an animal’. So I felt it was very extreme, the way she portrayed certain things. And, then this almost, there were like five comments or so about you know, the women, the number of women in School, and (.) uh I can’t remember what else was said. And one of the other girls in the class put up her hand and said, ‘Can we not turn this into a women in business school thing, please? Because we do everything we can to, you know, just be one of the, like everyone else, and not be, oh, here’s the women and here’s the men.’ And she said, ‘Can we not have this conversation be like this? Can we have it about something else?’ And basically when she said that, we all sort of went, like, ‘Yeah, that’s right.’

Dawn refers to a particular class when gender and the media were discussed. However she makes quite clear that she found the views of the lecturer ‘extreme’, using the word twice in close succession. She did not agree with the lecturer’s suggestion that a black woman was being associated with the animal realm by being made up to look like a tiger. This interpretation is itself seen as ‘extreme’, which is probably a euphemism for feminist. She describes how the discussion then moved to women in business school but Dawn presents herself and other women in the class as agreeing with a fellow female student who said that she did not want to discuss this issue. Dawn then quotes her as saying that women try to be invisible as a group and do not want to set up any division between men and women. Her phrasing ‘we do everything we can to, you know, just be one of the, like everyone else’ suggests that she is on the verge of saying ‘one of the guys’ but this is then amended to ‘like everyone else’. What is clear is that it is women who have to do the work of becoming invisible, and that being ‘like everyone else’ involves the careful avoidance of any recognition that they might have particular needs, traits or experiences which could differentiate them from their male colleagues.
One might ask why it is that such an emphasis is placed on ignoring gender in this business school context. Part of it may have to do with the fact that students have an interest in presenting business school and the workplace in general as gender egalitarian. We join this extract when Caroline talks about an informal group of female students to which she belongs. They meet regularly to discuss work and life, including the challenges of combining relationships and careers:

Caroline: Well, you sort of talk about those kind of things. The sort of things we don’t talk about, which sort of strikes me when I think about it, we don’t talk about glass ceilings, we don’t, (…) if there’s a Women in Business Club, there should be a men in business club. Once it starts to get big and organised I sort of go like, ‘Aaagh! <I don’t know>.’ And at the conference (the Women in Business Club organizes) it bor- sometimes it borders on whining, what I feel is whining. In my, where I worked, I never saw a glass ceiling. There never was. If there was one, it was, I worked in a very Christian company, and I wasn’t. (.) But then I wasn’t treated any differently for it. I didn't have those problems, so I can’t really empathize with that that much.

Caroline notes that issues such as the glass ceiling are not among the things she and the other members of her small group discuss. While she is comfortable in that group and appreciates being able to ‘touch base with them’, as she puts it in the section preceding this extract, she does not like the Women is Business Club because is it is ‘big and organised’ and she worries that events such as the conference the club runs ‘borders on whining’. The notion of ‘whining’ is often associated with feminist-oriented women’s groups (Phipps, 2006). It carries derogatory connotations of being childish, complaining, fault-finding and irritable. The reason why Caroline worries about whining is that she does not see complaints about gender inequality or the glass ceiling as justified. She bases this on her own experience, referring to the fact that she worked in a Christian company as non-Christian and was treated like everybody else. Earlier in the interview she has said that she was one of the few women working for that company, but rather than discussing gender in this context she links religion to gender, emphasizing the lack of importance of differences between Christians and non-Christians. Caroline was previously working in relatively junior positions and it is unlikely that she would have faced a glass ceiling at that stage. However as gender
discrimination accumulates over the life course (Agars, 2004), she may be confronted with it later in life. However, her disclaimer of the glass ceiling is important rhetorically as it allows her to present the world of work as gender egalitarian, and to claim that gender no longer matters.

The issue of how far women encounter discrimination in the workplace was latently present in many interviews, but Frances talked explicitly about the phenomenon.

Frances: And I also get nervous around women, because (. ) I feel like women and minorities often cause a lot of their own problems in the workplace because (. ) ‘cause there is a lot of sexism. Ok, there isn’t. There is sexism, ok, so let’s say there’s 30 percent sexism. But also, working is hard, right? So if you’re a woman or a man, you’re still going to get (. ) battered around and you’re still gonna, you know, you’ve got competition and, you know, things aren’t always going to go your own way. I think the danger is that (. ) if you’re a woman, if you’re not careful, you start to think that every time that happens to you it’s because you’re a woman, not just because that’s the way the odds went or, you know, that’s the way it unfolded and it could quite easily have happened to your male colleague. And I kind of feel like, I mean, ‘cause when I was working I felt like I actually got caught into that trap. And I mean, a third of what happens is because you’re a woman, so, you know, it’s not like it doesn’t happen. But mentally, and I’ve watched minorities do this as well, I’ve watched women and minorities do it as well, and I’ve seen myself do it. You, the, you’ve actually got to just focus on (. ) you know, you’ve just got to kind of step back and give yourself a reality check all the time. And I think I get nervous with things like the Women in Business Club, that like you’re not really doing that reality check, you know? It’s more about how we’re being held back, or, I mean, I worked in a, I worked in the engineering construction industry with guys who build nuclear power stations and dams and I don’t know, put out fires in Iraq. And I was not held back because of that.

The extract is fascinating from various perspectives. Frances first acknowledges that she sometimes feels uncomfortable around women because she feels they can cause their own problems in the workplace. She goes on to say sexism does exist and then
reduces her estimate of its prevalence from ‘a lot’ to about 30%. It is not clear whether she means that 30% of workplace interactions are influenced by sexism or that 30% of women and minorities experience sexism at some point. The context seems to imply the former, in which case she is estimating that a substantial proportion of all workplace interactions are indeed marked by sexism. Either way, she does not deny that women and minorities face special challenges, but she sets sexism alongside the claim that working is hard and inevitably involves having to deal with competition and being ‘battered around’. In her view, the danger is that women forget that this is so, and if something unpleasant happens to them they do not consider the possibility that it did not necessarily happen to them because they were a woman and that it could have happened to anyone. She sees the problem of knowing how to interpret other people’s behaviour as a ‘trap’ which distorts women’s vision and leads them to over-interpret events based on gender, leading them to believe that they are experiencing discrimination, even though that may not be the case. The strategy she recommends to avoid this trap is to stand back and have a ‘reality check’ of why you are held back. To illustrate her point, she also draws on previous work experience in a male-dominated work environment and, like Caroline, she asserts that her being a woman was not an issue there.

Both Caroline and Frances use very similar constructions based on their work experience to make the point that ultimately gender has little relevance in the workplace. One of the problems with the explanation Frances offers is that it is difficult to pin point the 30% of situations in which women are experiencing discriminated and to address that. Here sexism is invididualised and de-politicised and becomes something that happens only in women’s minds. Another aspect of this construction is that it assumes that the competitive and sometimes bruising interactions which take place in the workplace are not themselves gendered, thereby demanding that women and minorities ‘toughen up’ rather than acknowledging a potentially legitimate desire to change working practices in ways which might be more conducive to them.

Intriguingly, most of the women and men interviewed denied gender discrimination in similar but often less explicit ways. A number of women acknowledged that they belong to friendship groups made up of women, and that these groups offered some
support and solidarity within a male-dominated environment, with friends reviewing each others’ CVs, for example (Peggy). Women interviewees described friendship group as a refuge (Helen) or as a support network (Ursula). Dawn even stated that she wants to set up her own women’s scholarship when she is rich and famous. While denying the relevance of gender in business school, these women did talk about the positive aspects they gain from women’s groups. These women’s groups are based on friendship but they are not institutionalized like the Women in Business Club. Institutionalization appears to stress gender too much but having closer friendships seems to be an acceptable way to get support from other women without being classified as a women’s rights activist. This is indeed what most women tended to orient against. They did not want to be seen as too feminist or to be playing the gender card.

Playing the gender card might then be seen as at odds with what these young women are trained to be. They are supposed to be future leaders of organizations and the MBA is tailored towards providing them with confidence to succeed in that endeavour. Acknowledging the salience of gender has no place in this world; to do so would suggest that it is not individual ability that counts but rather being a woman. Emphasizing structures beyond the individual would risk depriving women of their agency and part of being a business leader is being agentic and self-determining. One therefore has to ignore the possibility that gender can function as a structuring mechanism in society as it would endanger one’s self-perception. Men and women may have slightly different reasons for mobilizing these discourses. For men downplaying the importance of gender may be a way to show their tolerance, open-mindedness and support for gender equality. It could also be that the problems associated with being a woman are less accessible by men who indentified mainly with being the hegemonic group in business school. For men it seemed also more important that there were no quotas for women, given the implications for the purportedly meritocratic structure of the business school. Women, in contrast, defend against being passive victims of gender discrimination. For men as well as women it seems a better option to insist that gender does not matter.
Discussion

It seems that a lot has changed in MBA programmes since Sinclair (1995) conducted her study. Although the percentage of women in business school has not improved, the mindset in business school around women seems to be very different from what Sinclair found. It is still the case that learning to do business means to learn doing business like a man. This reflects Wajcman’s (1998) landmark study, which found that women manage like men, and it also shows that business continues to be gendered masculine (Alvesson & Billing, 1997; Calás & Smircich, 1991, 1992; Kerfoot & Knights, 1993, 1996). However, what was not present in this study was an explicit acknowledgement that this masculine culture of the business school makes it difficult for women to be at business schools. While some interviewees alluded to the possibility that women are not coming to business school due to the masculine climate, the actual day-to-day experiences of forms of hegemonic masculinity in business school were all but ignored.

What has also changed is how women in business school are talked about. This new ambivalence reflects the emergence of post-feminism. Post-feminism suggests that feminism was so successful as a social movement that discourses for gender equality are no longer necessary (Coppock, Haydon, & Richter, 1995; Gerhard, 2005; Projansky, 2001). Feminism has indeed entered the cultural and social fabric and is now a mainstream discourse. Through incorporating feminism into media representations of advertising, the critical potential of feminism has been annulled (R. C. Gill, 2006; Goldman, 1992; Winship, 2000). This leads to the assumption that gender inequality has either been eradicated or remains only marginally relevant for the experiences of women. The new generation of women, also called women of generation Y, are portrayed as ambitious, confident and smart, believing that they can achieve everything (Carpenter, 2007). Part of the generation that followed second wave feminism, they grew up with feminist ideas being part of mainstream discourses. It is indeed due to second wave feminism, with its focus on equal rights, that these young women can enjoy institutional equality such as formal access to professions and education. This new generation of women grew up with the spirit that they can have everything and some have suggested that they adopt a different form of feminism as a result (Levy, 2005; Walter, 1998, 1999). Often they have not
experienced explicit gender discrimination. If they do experience more or less subtle forms of discrimination, they may be missing the tools or the will to identify it, since doing so might impede them in their ambitions. This was clearly reflected in the talk MBA students produced.

This does not mean, however, that gender ceases to shape women’s experiences. There is still a lot of evidence that the glass ceiling is a persistent barrier for women’s advancement. The number of women in senior positions has been stagnating or even declining in recent years (Catalyst, 2007; Singh & Vinnicombe, 2006; Treanor, 2007). Besides this vertical segregation, the workplace continues to be segregated horizontally, with men and women working in different areas (Anker, 1998; Charles, 2003). In spite of these ‘hard facts’ that women in business school may have seen as convincing, these facts and figures were largely ignored. Instead, there was a tendency to impute the problems some women still face as resulting from an oversensitivity on the part of the individual. Doing a ‘reality check’ would then involve acknowledging that gender discrimination may not account for all of the problems a working woman is facing, because many issues are faced by working men as well. The difference may be that men have learnt how to play the game more effectively and do business like a man. However, these two versions of reality are rarely considered together. Even though a few women, such as Frances, drew on both interpretative repertoires in the interview, the potential link or conflict usually remained unvoiced. The problem this created for some women was that if structures of hegemonic masculinity could not be identified, this left individuals having to account for sexism as primarily a mental trap or something caused by men’s immaturity or cultural differences. Situations where sexism was explicit then had to be minimised, sometimes leading to frustration and emotional distress for the women concerned. In the absence of explicitly feminist discourses, women adopted largely individualised strategies, deliberately learning to play the game like a man while also relying on the support of informal female friendship groups.

It is not unusual for people to avoid seeing the environment they work in as discriminatory or sexist. Studies in the area of science and engineering have highlighted that both educational institutions and workplaces are seen as gender neutral spaces where gender does not matter (Eisenhart & Finkel, 1998; Jorgensen,
2002). It has also been argued that in many of today’s organisations gender equality is assumed without being proven, and that this assumption seems to be maintained even where there is evidence to the contrary (Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998; R. Gill, 2002; Hoeber, 2007) (author’s citation). What is interesting about the MBA context is that in some cases people acknowledged that sexism and gender discrimination can happen but then repudiated their own claim by saying that it only accounts for part of reality and does not therefore influence every working experience. This echoes debates in gender theories, where the ethnomethodological concept of the omnipresence of gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987) has been questioned and it has been argued that a partial relevance of gender is also possible, i.e. that gender may matter less in some situations than in others (Hirschauer, 1994, 2001). The problem seems to be to establish when it matters and when it does not matter. People who are sensitive towards these issues, either as a result of education or experience, may react strongly to situations which those less sensitive towards these issues might ignore or interpret differently.

The denial of gender as a relevant category for social interaction in MBA education might also be explained by the fact that highly ambitious students do not want to be perceived as a part of a group that is disadvantaged. MBA students are educated to be future leaders and they invest a substantial amount of money in the MBA as a passport to a successful career. If this career is undermined by discriminatory practices at work, the danger is that the investment may appear as less worthwhile. One way of distancing themselves from this possibility is to deny that being a woman is relevant in shaping experiences of business school. This includes institutionalised elements of the MBA, such as the Women in Business Club, where women are nominal members but not do not want to be seen as too active. Being a woman is of use for networking and getting a job but placing any greater emphasis on gender may have negative consequences and is therefore avoided. This is because one may be seen as too feminine or even potentially as a feminist who is whining about the state of gender relations; neither would be appropriate behaviour for a future business leader who expects to create opportunities wherever she goes. A training in business is also a formation in individualism and in becoming a rational homo economicus (Ehrensal, 2001; Ghoshal, 2005). In this individualistic environment, there is little room for acknowledging the potentially collective experience of sexism as a factor
that could hinder individual success. Denying or understating the importance of being a woman is, in this context, a safer bet.

**Conclusion**

This article argues that while the numbers of women in management schools have not changed greatly in the last decade, what appears to have changed is the mindset in relation to gender. Business schools still educate future business leaders based on a masculine model, but this model is rarely seen as problematic. Indeed it has been shown that most MBA students ignored gender in business school and thought it did not matter. The idea that it might be relevant was regularly discounted and characterized as leading to a distorted world view which could hold women back from achieving their potential. This poses new challenges for management education in general and for business schools in particular. Management education has to question how it is possible to train future business leaders in respect to diversity in a climate where explicit reference to gender diversity is not an acceptable repertoire. The teaching material has to include reference to gender and other forms of diversity but it appears that gender cannot be too obvious if negative response by students are to be avoided.

The article also poses questions for business schools aiming to attract more women. One attempt the business school studied undertook was to produce a brochure featuring photographs of lots of women. MBA students experienced this as misleading since it did not reflect the proportions of women at the school. This overcompensation did not work and it is necessary to think creatively about how the image of business schools can change to attract more women. However, attracting more women might also involve challenging many of the dominant ideas about women in business and society and would require business schools themselves to change. As long as the culture of the business school remains as masculine as Sinclair described, there is a lot of work to do. That gender is less easily discussed and often ignored in post-feminist times does not make this work any easier.
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The transcription system is an adapted and simplified version of the Jefferson system. (.) is a short notable pause, (0.9) an exactly timed longer pause (more than 5 seconds, here 9 seconds), (inaud) inaudible, (text) transcriber clarification on unclear parts of tape, ((text)) annotation of non-verbal activity or supplemental information, (...) material deliberately omitted, ‘...' direct speech reported by interviewee, word sharp cut off, abrupt halt or interruption of utterance, word extreme stretching of preceding sound, prolongation of a sound, HAHA loud laughter, HEHE laughter, TEXT strong emphasis or loud volume of speech, ^Text^ quieter than usual, [...] start and end point of overlapping talk, = break and subsequent continuation of a single utterance, <text> indicates that the speech was delivered much slower than usual for the speaker, >text< indicates that the speech was delivered much faster than usual for the speaker, (hhh) audible exhalation, (.hhh) audible inhalation.