Rethinking rationality: locating thinking in gender

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ABSTRACT: The specific objectives of this article is to show how the concept of rationality is tied up to old paradigms and to unpack media discursive practices in which text producers of *The Economist* use language when portraying male and female executives and present the internal world of the mind of the sensers   to discriminate against women through the stereotypical semantic devaluation of a concept that people might think of neutral: rationality.

Key words: Executives; Rationality; Gender representations

Introduction

In spite of having legislation, affirmative action programs and diversifying efforts to implement the principle of equal treatment for men and women as regards access to employment, vocational training and promotion, and working conditions, women are still underrepresented in managerial positions. However, even though a small percentage reaches top positions, these women are still devalued through stereotypic views of genders.

The mass media plays an important role in the production, maintenance and reproduction of these views, which, in my view, do not keep pace with the European legislation of narrowing sexual asymmetries in the professions. This is the case of the magazine under analysis: *The Economist.*

The overall aim in this paper is to unpack media discursive practices in which discrimination is materialised through the stereotypical semantic devaluation of a concept that people might think of as neutral: rationality. I also want to add that these social practices constitute an invisible constraint on promotion within the framework of equal opportunities policies, hence perpetuating patterns of relative disadvantage and marginalisation. My focus will be on rationality. I will try to show how reason, one of the most highly-valued traits representative of those in power, is unevenly distributed among male and female executives. So, the specific objective of this paper is to show the differences in cognition, affection and perception (Halliday, 1994) and highlight how media text producers use language when portraying male and female executives and present the internal world of the mind of the sensers (male and female).

As an analytical tool, I will analyse mental processes that encode meanings of cognition, affection and perception.

My *corpus* is composed exclusively of FACE VALUE, a regular weekly feature article of *The Economist*, devoted to different prominent people in the business world who occupy high positions in well-known companies. Data is gathered from January to July 2001 (six months) totalling 26 articles.

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1. On rationality

My main concern is to establish a relationship between assumptions about the concept of rationality and to show how it has been seen throughout time and what its relation is to gender. My point here is to take Foucault's perspective of genealogy, the re-reading of historical texts for a period of rapid change such as ours is. This provides an opportunity to examine androcentric discourse and see how truth has been constituted to marginalize women throughout time.

Departing from this idea, my concern is directed at the role of rationality with its applicability in the domain of the professions (executives, managers, entrepreneurs) and the role it plays in practices of discrimination when, for example, selection or promotion are in question.

Falmagne and Hasse (2002) mention a series of influential books and articles within the feminist philosophy tradition that show the traditional stance of the man-of-reason, a term in itself a definition, (independent, neutral, and unemotional) to be an illusory ideal. They add that the traditional dichotomy between the man of reason and the emotional woman would need to be rethought in terms of a more complex single human subject, able to reason *and* feel (their italics).

From Plato and Aristotle to Kant and beyond, the philosophical tradition of the West has designed the concept of reason where women and other oppressed groups were excluded (Plumwood, 2002, p. 11). For Plato it is those who represent reason (the Guardians) who should rule over the other elements in the state. Following this tradition, Aristotle explicitly conceives the social and natural orders as a rational meritocracy in which the rule of men over women, of masters over slaves, of Greeks over barbarians, and of humans over animals is justified and naturalised by the supposed lesser degree of reason inherent in the latter (Aristóteles, 1977). These ideas encapsulate the dominant traditions of Western thought where areas of exclusion are associated not only with women but also with other subordinate groups such as the colonised, subordinate economic classes, etc.

Out of this tradition, Theodor Hippel, an eighteenth-century German thinker, asserted that women could not be rational because the German word for 'reason' is masculine (Cameron, 1985, p. 21). Cameron adds with some irony that history does not record whether he felt rationality to be the exclusive property of women in France, since the French word *raison* is grammatically feminine! The same happens in the Portuguese language where words like *razão* or *racionalidade* are grammatically feminine. In fact, believing in what Cameron says, the Greek Sophists, for example, are usually credited with originating the notion of gender, believing that the gender of a word must reflect its essential qualities.

In the 19th century, in this same tradition, the German grammarian Jakob Grimm was to see gender classification as the metaphorical extension of sex to the rest of the world. He spoke of the concept of grammatical gender as an extension of a "natural" order onto each and every object (Romaine, 1997, p. 53).

Most authoritative nineteenth-century writers on logic believed that their discipline was the science of thought and that logic was the basis of all mental processes. John Stuart Mill (1874), for example, thought that it was logic that constituted the "science of reasoning".

It was only in the 1930s, with the separation of psychology as a discipline from philosophy, that writers suggested that everyday thinking was not based on pure logical forms. Bruner, Goodnow and Austin (1956), for example, concluded that:

> much of human reasoning is supported by a kind of thematic process rather than by an abstract logic. The principal feature of this thematic process is its pragmatic rather than its logical structure (OLIVER, 2002, p. 211).

In spite of this trend that in their ordinary thinking people tended to prefer empirically reasonable propositions to logical ones, it remained implicit in psychological discourse that logical, analytical thinking was superior to and different from "intuitive" thinking. According to Oliver (2002, p. 11) the acceptance of logical thinking as superior remained relatively unquestioned within psychology as a discipline.

Rational thinking assumes that rationality and emotionality are, if not mutually exclusive, certainly incompatible. Thought and feeling are seen as separate processes where emotionality takes the form of subjective, passionate expression and therefore, incompatible with "objective" logical thought. In sum, the polarity that opposes rationality to emotionality has been regarded as a natural antinomy.

Oliver (2002, p. 213) mentions the work of Letwin (1987) in a reevaluation of this dualism, where he presents arguments which show how rationality has two distinct but interactive senses, where one is based on cognitive or logical judgements, and the other on the individual's subjective sense of what is "right" for them. Considering the coexistence of the two interrelated processes, the author sees no "struggle between reason and desire", since they are essentially interdependent and both intrinsically rational in the personal/pragmatic sense.

António Damásio (2001), a Portuguese neuroscientist, in his influential book *Descartes's Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*, argues that reasoning requires affect, denying the split between cognition and affection. Reasoning, he argues, is not as pure as people want to believe, and emotions and feelings are intertwined in reasoning.

Taking this axiom into account and bearing in mind that rational judgement or decision making is an instrument used in executives' daily lives, the equation of rationality is going to be discussed below in relation to the polarising treatment that gender is still submitted to.

2. Method and Approach

Rationality is generally defined in terms of behaviour that satisfies the conditions of consistency and fulfilment of certain aims. A rational (adj.) person, according to the definition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford – 20 volumes, OUP, 1989), is:

1. having the faculty of reason, endowed with reason
2. on pertaining or relating to reason
1. based on, derived from reason or reasoning
2. agreeable to reason, sensible, not foolish, absurd or extravagant

3. applied to quantities or ratios which can be expressed without radical signs
4. of a conjunction: that indicates reason

Looking at these 6 entries provided by the dictionary, we easily see that 5 entries privilege the traditional semantics of the concept (cognition), whereas only one, number 4, conveys a certain hybridisation between affection and cognition, but the latter is emphasised by the expansion of the explanation. In fact, in spite of the scientific developments in areas such as psychology or neurobiology, there is still a heavy tradition that is felt in the semantics of the concept.

Following Halliday (1994), who divides mental processes into: cognition (verbs of thinking, knowing, understanding), affection (verbs of liking, fearing) and perception (verbs of seeing, hearing), I shall analyse my data in accordance with his terminology and I shall consider what my findings indicate with respect to the concept of rationality.

As Eggins (1994, p. 241) puts it, mental processes usually answer the question: - what do you think/ feel/ know about X?

On the other hand, Halliday (1994, p. 114-117) gives five criteria for distinguishing between material and mental processes:

1. The involvement of at least one human participant;
2. The kind of entity which can fill the other participant (the Phenomenon) is less restricted;
3. The tense;
4. Reversibility;
5. The need of different type of questions to probe the process.
These criteria were taken into account for probation of the data.

3. The Results

In this section I shall look in some detail at the way in which media text producers use language when portraying male and female executives and present the internal world of the mind of the sensers. In this context, I shall give some examples of cognition mental processes.

1.“He predicts a slowdown to 7% in 2001.”
2.“Though he, like Alan Greenspan, does not believe that the party is over for the American economy…”
3.“As he admits: “I now know how my father must have felt..”
4.“the inspiration was this: the semiconductor industry, Mr Chang understood, was in fact not one but two industries, and it would be best to separate them out.”
5.“he clearly thinks he can make the transition work.”
6.“Ms Wachner initially underestimated the importance of big discount stores such as Wal-Mart…”

Considering that in the 26 articles, 23 were written about male top executives and only 3 about female top executives, the following table shows the distribution of

the different mental processes, materialised here as verbs, in relation to male and female executives:

Table 1: Distribution of mental processes by gender

SENSER	Cognition
male	think(texts3;3;6;6;8;10;10;11;13;20) admit (texts 7;8;16) predict (text 8) know (text 15) understand (text 20) believe(texts1;6;8;12;21) find(texts 1;8;18;18;20;20;20) reinvent (text 9) imagine (text 2) divide [classify] (text 3) plan (texts 6;6;6) consider (text 16) intend (text 18) decide (text 18)
female	know (text 4) underestimate (text 24) miscalculate (text 24)

The comparison of the verbs shows two different logics. The differences of representation are asserted through the semantic devaluation of the chosen processes to portray women and their mental ability: cognition. The verbs that were chosen show the negative evaluation materialized through the prefixes *under-* and *mis-*. On the other hand, a large amount of positive and diversified evaluation is used to portray male executives.

Within the perception sub-group of mental processes, men and women are portrayed in an apparently similar way, as the following examples show:

7."Mr Chang <u>sees</u> nothing positive about the present slump."
8."What the company needed, Ms Bravo <u>saw</u>, was better operational and financial"

However, the small amount of verbs included in this group and its relation to the proportion of portrayed men and women show the disproportion, as table 2 illustrates.

Table 2: Distribution of mental processes by gender

SENSER	Perception
Male	see (texts 18;19;20)
Female	see (texts 5;24) recognize (text 5)

Finally, within the affection sub-group of mental processes, I emphasise the semantic evaluation attributed to female and male executives as it is shown in table 3. The negative evaluation expressed through the verb "hate" when the senser is a woman contradicts the positive evaluation expressed through the verb "love" experienced by a male executive. Besides these opposing verbs, other verbs with positive semantic evaluation are chosen to portray male executives. Affection, traditionally associated with women, occurs differently in my results. Some evidence should be given to the fact that there is a certain tendency in these processes to associate men with affection, as the following examples show:

9."He <u>loves</u> cock-fighting"
10."Mr van Vlissingen <u>likes</u> to fly in the cheap seats."
11."What Mr Stonecipher saw <u>horrified</u> him."

Table 3: Distribution of mental processes by gender

SENSER	Affection
male	horrify (text 23) dislike (text 6) love (text 12) like (texts 13;14;16;18) enjoy (texts 16;20) fancy (text 16)
female	hate(text 5)

Exclusion of women from cognition is expressed in table 1 through the omission of these processes when portraying women or through devaluation, that is, by using negative prefixes to these processes. The maintenance of exclusion of women from this domain contrasts with the inclusion of men within the sphere of affection, as it is shown in table 3. On the other hand, a process of inclusion is observed when portraying male executives. Men are not only seen as belonging to the "man-of-reason" category, but are also men capable of affection.

Conclusion

The archaeology of the common sense belief that rationality is the male's domain goes back to the scholarly tradition of the Greek Sophists and spans the eighteenth century and then to the present days. In spite of the development in areas such as psychology or neurobiology, among others, giving some evidence that reasoning requires affect, denying the polarity between cognition and affection, common sense knowledge today still massively neglects such scientific advances, which has serious consequences for gender issues. The exclusion of women from reasoning and the exclusion of men from affection are located in history as if they were opposing fields. Today, reasoning is believed to be intertwined with emotions and feelings, rather than these two planes being conceived as opposing separated spheres.

Fairclough (2000), for example, states that people live in ways that are mediated by discourses that construct certain domains, namely, work, gender, among others, that emanate from experts attached to social systems and

organisations, and which come to them through the mass media. Considering *The Economist* as a magazine inscribed within the professional domain, this is arguably one of those cases where mass media constructs gender professional roles.

Looking at the output of the companies represented here and paying detailed attention to how text producers represent their executives, looking at them as groups, i. e., as men and women, it is worth noticing that, once the concept of reasoning is de-mystified, text producers frame gender according to old rational theories, perpetuating the maintenance of stereotypes. In fact, male and female executives are portrayed according to polarized essentialist definitions of gender. If gender is regarded as socially constructed (Cameron, 1996, 1997; Freed, 1996; West, Lazar, Kramarae 1997; Simpson 1997; Coates 2003) as it is nowadays, then this belief implies a shift in perspective, from viewing male executives as the exclusive "man-of-reason" of organisations to regarding male and female executives as one of many important constructors and executants of organisations whose reasoning requires cognitive skills among cognition and affection.

RESUMO: O objectivo deste artigo é mostrar o aprisionamento do conceito de racionalidade a um paradigma ultrapassado e evidenciar como os jornalistas da revista *The Economist* usam a linguagem para apresentar o mundo interno da mente dos experienciadores - executivo(a)s de topo. Os processos mentais, que codificam significados de cognição, de afeição e de percepção, são o instrumento de análise para mostrar como as mulheres são desvalorizadas semanticamente em relação aos homens.

Palavras- chave: Executivo(a)s; Racionalidade; Representações de género

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