How would a case study look from a feminist perspective?

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ABSTRACT
The issue addressed in this article is how a feminist case study would look like. This includes that the one who does the research, the purpose of the study, the content of the study and to whom the case study contributes should have feminist perspectives in order to be a feminist study. The case studies mapped in this article are limited to case studies about leadership, education and organizations. By analysing 20 different case studies with feminist point of views, I concluded that feminist case studies often includes gender inequality issues like acceptance of gender inequalities or gender employment discrimination but some of them cover how feminism ideology in organizations operate.

Keywords:
Case study, feminist, gender inequality, feminist perspective

Introduction
The purpose of this article is to map feminist perspective within case studies, to investigate how they are structured and what the main standpoints are. I will also compare similarities and differences between the case studies to get a fair view of what a case study would look like from a feminist point of view. This includes determining which specific terms and angles that are common and recurrent.

It is difficult to define feminism because it has different directions and various opinions. The main standpoint is women’s equal rights and to change the current imbalance of power between the genders (Hannam, 2013). Feminist researches are described as researches written from a theoretical perspective that recognize gender inequality in social life. Researches that are by, for and about women are considered having a feminist perspective (Heywood & Drake, 1997).

The problem I will be investigating is following; how would a case study look from a feminist perspective? This means I will examine different case studies with a clear feminististic viewpoint that are concentrated on women’s equal rights. I believe that different parts of the case study can have a feminist perspective and can also be applied in various ways in different case studies. According to Mills, Durepos and Wiebe (2010), feminist researches are often connected to issues within organization, leadership and education, which in this current article are three topics I’ve tried to define the case studies into.

By analysing 20 different case studies that are all focused on feminist incentives and women’s equal right, it’s possible to get a clear picture of what a case study from a feminist perspective would look like and what it would contain. The analysis of several different case studies with feminist point of view can give me a better understanding of the feministic
approach and how it’s structured. However, the case studies were different and were covering completely different subjects and units, but my main objective was to analyse common denominators and patterns.

Note that this article only presents different feminist approaches and their structures regarding case studies. It doesn’t include roots to gender inequality or improvements in the area. It is difficult to generate a fair and authentic conclusion in this article, since is limited and only examines the similarities and differences of feminist perspectives in a few cases.

Method

The article is based on secondary data, collected from different databases such as Google Scholar, Emerald, Web of Science and Scopus together with Halmstad University’s own database. The case studies I examined and adapted to the content of this article were found with search words like “gender inequality”, “feminist organization”, “feminist perspective” etc. Some books and popular scientific articles have also been used. I have studied different kinds of case studies with different subjects but all of them had a feminist point of view or included feminist approaches. The information I obtained was used to find feminist similarities and patterns and to compare the different cases.

Research Findings

Myers (2013) means that a “case study research in business uses empirical evidence from one or more organizations where an attempt is made to study the subject matter in context. Multiple sources of evidence are used, although most of the evidence comes from interviews and documents” (p. 78). The definition signifies that in case studies there are almost always an organization involved, although the main topic or issue that is the objective of the study might be something else (Myers, 2013). It is difficult to define feminism because it has meant different things to women during the ages the concept has been present. According to Hannam (2013), the main standpoint is women’s rights. Feminism gathers women in criticism towards the male supremacy and encourages changes in current imbalance of power between the genders. The importance of women representing themselves, making their voices heard, and achieving independency in their lives are central beliefs of the feminism. Feminists claim that women’s conditions are socially constructed and therefore possible to change. The word féminisme was used in debates for the first time in the 1800’s France. Women’s rights, to be equal to men both legally and in the civil society, were hot topic already by then (Hannam 2013).

Feminism is a philosophy, ideology or a drive that speaks women’s equal rights. In the context of case studies, is feminism a framework that can be used to examine, analyse and critique the lives of women. Thus, it is both a theory and a research practice. The main objective to feminist researchers though, is to examine the terms of domination and oppression of women and the sources behind them, in order to make changes (Mills et al., 2010). In feminist theory, the analytic lens and the topical focus is shifted away from viewpoints and experiences of men. The theory emphasizes social issues connected to discrimination, exclusion, objectification, structural and economic inequality, power differences and oppression in the context of gender (Crossman, 2016).

According to Heywood and Drake (1997) are feminist researchers describing the main characteristics of the practise as a theoretical perspective that recognize the pervasive influence of gender inequality in social life. The feminist researches distinguish from other
researches in the research question, the way they locate themselves within the question and the purpose of the work, by other means, when the researches are by, for and about women (Heywood & Drake, 1997). Reinharz (1992) suggests that a research, that includes women’s experiences as a central part and is made by women who consider themselves as feminists, is a feminist research. A qualitative approach is often connected to feminist research since they are grounded in women’s experiences (Heywood & Drake, 1997). Researchers have previously examined management and organisations through feminist theories. These theories can also be used to study other groups of individuals that are considered dominated or oppressed in some way. Feminist researches are conducted in different kinds of fields, often connected to gender issues in organizations, education, leadership etc., although not all researches that focus on gender has a feminist perspective (Mills et al., 2010).

Putnam Tong (2014) argues that there are categories within feminism, which individually can have different mindsets, and they make it easier to communicate feminism as not monolithic, to a broader public. The categories, such as liberal, postmodern, radical etc., are used as frameworks so that feminist scholars can make suggestions how oppression of women should be eliminated. They also inform about the range of perspectives and approaches and ease the explaining of feminism. Although the categories are different all of them grounded in the recognition of male dominance in social arrangements, such as the patriarchy and sexual division of labour (Putnam Tong, 2014).

Jackson, Fleury & Lewandowski (1996) made a research about the construct of feminism among collage students – how they defined it, whether they supported it or not and if personal characteristics such as personal traits and gender attitudes are connected to it. The researchers noted that feminist scholars had broad definitions of feminism in previous studies, and that feminism, defined in terms of issues of equality, was highly valued but feminists were associated with negativity. They predicted that female respondents would have a stronger support than male respondents and that collage students would support feminism more than the general public, due to students’ more liberal attitudes towards society issues. The study proved the hypothesis and both feminism and feminists are evaluated favourably to the collage student respondents (Jackson, Fleury, Lewandowski, 1996).

The case study by Smulyan (2000) examined gender issue experiences of three female principals through a qualitative feminist research. She investigated how these experiences in life and work could possibly affect them and also if the response to school changes would be affected. The researcher was a feminist, but the principals were not, thus there was little awareness and little perceived influence of gender issues in their work and lives. According to Smulyan (2000) female superintendents might developed own solutions to gender inequity or ignore the gender issue rather than take an activist stance, since they are operating in social and institutional structures that don’t support an approach that are collective and activist (Smulyan, 2000). The female superintendents were considered hesitant and guarded when asked about their experiences of gender issues and found it difficult to generalize discrimination or conflict in their own experiences, in the study by Chase (1995). Smulyan (2000) saw experiences of gender discrimination and gender expectations of others affecting actions in the stories of the all of the three principals, which might gave them an example of how gender seemed to influence them and their actions (Smulyan, 2000).

The gender inequality in Chinese
Employment was examined in the case study by Tatli, Ozturk and Woo (2016), which was specifically focused on women’s under-representation in the management of companies. By using the primary data from 30 interviews with women that had management positions in companies in different industries, together with Acker’s (2006) concept of inequality framework, the researchers found out how the inequality among female managers is perceived (Tatli et al., 2016). The framework consisted of three components of gender inequality, namely invisibility of inequality, legitimacy of inequality and control and compliance (Acker, 2006). The perspective on gender inequality has changed, although women in management position was still underrepresented. According to the findings of the study, cultural context highly affected what the three different dimensions of inequality signified in China. The research findings suggested that gender inequality in management was considered legitimate, which was influenced by political and economic conditions. For instance, gender hierarchies was seen as natural (Acker, 2006), and references to biological and cultural differences between genders could be regarded as a central feature of work and used as explanation of underrepresentation of female managers, thus legitimating gender inequality in management. Gender inequality invisibility was grounded in how much awareness in gender imbalances there were in the organization, which in the case study was an essential part of the women’s experiences within the management (Tatli et al., 2016). Although it might not was intentional, gender inequalities tend to be invisible to the privileged part (Acker, 2006). The case study illustrated that female drawbacks in acquiring management positions was retained due to accepted organizational gendered norms. This resulted in female managers often limited their capabilities to keep within these norms and automatically accepted organizational culture and work practices that were based on the male norm. The case study also underline that it was difficult for women managers to disagree with the gender inequality within workplaces since they currently were underrepresented (Tatli et al., 2016).

The lack of women leadership within organizations was connected to political ideology and personal circumstances, according to the case study by Unger, Sheese and Main (2010). The case study was focused on the organisation Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSSI) with the aim of investigating organizational structure, ideology and cultural change among women leaders. According to Unger et al. (2010), the limited career options in comparison with the male counterpart and the lack of attention to gender could be explained by the exclusion of women in management positions. The late recognized inequality between genders together with its early theoretical structure may have contributed to the minority of female leaders’ in psychology (Unger et al., 2010).

Bird (2011) illustrated the underrepresentation of women in administrative positions in higher education within science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). Women’s opportunities and advancement in university had great gender barriers due to gendered bureaucratic structures. The author formed a strategy to make the university administrators notice the structural gender barriers that aimed in raise awareness and emphasize the gender issues. The case study approach resulted in a 4.5 hour workshop where eleven men and women faculty and administrators of various academic ranks participated. The recognition of gendered bureaucratic structures was expressed by most of the participants and they viewed the issues
as systemic and gendered. However, some of the participant acknowledged the bureaucratic structures as unavoidable or not associated with gender issues (Bird, 2011).

Women’s cultural and contextual associations and experiences of leadership in a university in Papua New Guinea were analyzed in the case study by McNae and Vali (2015). Through a feminist poststructuralist theoretical framework the researchers got recognition of different viewpoints and better understanding of the subject. Based on experiences of the women leader’s in this university, the authors found out that the women perceived challenges and barriers within the leadership, due to several cultural practices. They also concluded that the women were simultaneously controlled by the culture of male dominance, which formed the basis of discrimination within the university structure and influenced the representation of women in leadership positions. Many of the respondents claimed that the cultural practices from the Papua New Guinea society, such as the common violence against women, were embedded in the university structure that changes were difficult to carry out since they didn’t felt that they had the position to affect (McNae & Vali, 2015).

The case by Norman (2010) also covers the term leadership, although within sports. Women remain excluded in the coaching profession but previous researchers have questioned the inequality between the genders in sports for a long time. The aim of the qualitative research was to compare female coaches’ experiences with male coaches and to understand the socially constructed relationships. The interviews pointed at the dissatisfaction of marginal position among female coaches. The case study also demonstrated the strength of masculine domination in the area, which made it difficult for women to coexist in that kind of culture. As women coaches tend to accept, adapt or not realize the current oppression there were few incentives to change the attitudes of those in power. The study showed that several respondents’ reaction when their coaching skills were doubted was to try getting acceptance by working harder and proving their competence, thus it doesn’t changes the masculine domination and the image of men having natural superiority (Norman, 2010).

Powell, Bagilhole and Dainty (2009) deconstructed women engineering students and their workplace experiences in their case study. The 26 female respondents in the qualitative research were second-year women engineering undergraduates. The interviews were optional but since it was broad enough due to the range and numbers of interviews, it was indicative of the respondents’ experiences. The study examined how gender gets “done” and “undone” in organizational environments and practice by using theoretical arguments. What they meant by that was men and women thought that they were acting gender neutral in social interaction but actually they “do” gender. Doing gender within organizational environments could increase gender inequality (Powell et al., 2009). Undoing gender on the other hand, for instance meant that the women performed in particular ways to get acceptance from men that could result in indirectly undervalued femaleness (Butler, 2004). The theories comprehended gendering of organizations and the construction and performance of gender. To explicate how behavior and attitudes of women engineering students in environments that were male-dominated the construction of gender performance was used. The study showed that, in engineering, women undo their gender by acting like one of the boys, adopting anti-women approaches and accepting gender discriminations. The experiences indicated that the female engineering students have failed in challenging the industry’s gendered culture and
implicitly maintained the female adversarial environment (Powell et al., 2009).

Visits at 14 different health care center established in the 1970’s, which all of them were owned and operated by women and based on female philosophy, education and empowerment, constituted the basis of the case study by Thomas (1999). 34 women were interviewed; ten of the women were administrators and the rest of them were staff. The study aimed to investigate to what extent the feminist ideology influenced the structural changes in feminist organizations from the 1970’s to the 1990s. According to Thomas (1999), to understand the evolution and transformation of feminist organizations and feminist women’s health centers in particular, it was necessary to clarify how the consequence of being both political and a service provider reconciled through feminist ideology. Another organization with feminist structure was investigated in the case study about the Nicaraguan feminist center for communication, education and research, called Puntos de Encuentro. It was written from a feminist perspective, through interviewing the two female founders. Gender integration and equal power relations were central parts of the organization. The organization also had a feminist management style and practice. The respondents said that all workers had to go through a process that aimed to ensure that all actions are consistent with feminist ideas, values and practices. By having gender power relations as a central part of the institution, people were allowed to participate and contribute to the vision of the institution through broad forms of organizations and common processes of management, according to Hernández and Campanile (2000). The case study about CheckpointView, a women’s peace and human rights organization, focusing on reporting human rights violations in Palestine and Israel, also had female organizational practices. The study proved how important feminist ideology was to integrate in organizational processes, activities and structure. The interviews with people from the organization and documents from the organization’s internal network showed that sociopolitical and cultural contexts were central parts of the female organization (Desivilya & Yassour-Borochowitz, 2008).

The case study by Fotopoulou (2016) investigated the values and ideologies that form practices of networks, in the context of feminist organizations in London. The 12 respondents were activist members from a wide and diverse feminist network. They were personally interviewed and observed during events like the Feminism in London 2009 annual Conference, all of them arranged by women’s organizations. The study concluded that digital engagement was necessary for women’s organizations today in order to compete for recognition, publicity online and a political voice. However, the activists’ digital way of communicating and campaigning made them concerned that their capacity as political subjects would decrease. The author claimed that the organizations needed to adapt their digital platforms and networks to the feminist values and practices in order to keep their social and political intention to support women (Fotopoulou, 2016).

Bobbitt-Zeher (2011) covered the difficulties with female employment discrimination. By using 219 narratives constructed from different cases the researcher explored women’s experiences of it and common attributes and concluded that women were discriminated in their everyday work settings. It contained of different types of discriminatory actions, which come from cultural and stereotype views of genders together with formal institutional policies within organizations that affect women and
men differently. Stereotypical assumptions about how women were; that they were less capable as workers and that they were viewed as sexual objects, was a big source of discrimination in many different organizational contexts. Although, according to the study, the women’s experiences of discrimination were often a result of workplace policies and their use. In most of the cases, the policies were gender-neutral, which may be a reason why managements didn’t realize the discrimination, yet treated women and men workers differently. The key was the implementation. The cases also showed that policy-related issues and the expressions of female stereotypes varied by the gender composition of the workplace (Bobbitt-Zeher, 2011). The case study by Healy, Bradley and Forson (2011) also analyzed gender inequalities in organizations, yet in the UK public sector. By utilizing Acker’s (2006) framework in inequality, the study investigated how inequality can be sustained, despite policy developments, in the public sector. It was concluded through 50 in-depth interviews that managers didn’t acknowledged or identified the inequality of others, even though their had been efforts in raising awareness of inequalities in the public sector (Healy et al., 2011).

The current male domination in management positions in Swedish universities is enlightened in Peterson’s (2015) case study. It aimed at demonstrate how equal representation policies change the imbalance of gender in the management positions of universities but also to explore the issues behind these policies through individual interviews with 22 female managers in Swedish higher education (HE). The findings illustrated that the equal representation policies created greater awareness of the gender imbalance and enabled changes in the symbolic masculine image of management due to an increased female representation. However, the respondents argued that the policies could have unfair consequences for individual women, since the differences in gender imbalance between disciplines could result in the equal representation policy might not actually be equitably (Peterson, 2015).

Employees of different levels of the EAA, an international airline company in Hong Kong were interviewed to get insights of their experiences and attitudes towards background, work and family. Previous researches showed that men in management positions are more supportive of equal opportunities (EO) policies than male employees at lower levels. The study aimed to explore the reasons for this attitudinal changes. Female employees of different levels of the organisation together with different marital and parental status desire different EO policies, therefore the female attitudes were also compared. The study concluded that EO policies are not as effective as hoped since they were based on traditional stereotypical views of the genders. It also contradicted the previous studies of male employees – male employees at every level did not have significantly different opinions regarding the EO policies. However, among women, the lowel-level employees were more supportive to EO policies than managers. The interviews also reveled some of the attitudes, for instance, the female managers that rejected the polices believed that women should give up family time if their desire was to be successful at work (Ng & Fosh, 2004).

Brumley (2014) wrote a case study about the Mexican beverage producing company BevMex and the obstacles of women’s employment in Mexico in the context of global restructuring. It was studied from a feminist perspective, which through interviews examined how employees’ on every level perceive changes of a work policy that forced women to quit working due to marriage or pregnancy in the past. As a part of restructuring and creating a liberalized environment, the
policy was removed in 1997. The study also examined women’s and men’s perceptions of women’s opportunities and obstacles after the removal of the policy. It highlighted that the policy change were considered significant to both women and men, since it acknowledged the women’s value and gave them more opportunities. According to the qualitative research, however, women still faced cultural and social restraints in their workplace and the policy change reinforced gender-segregated job allocations. The opportunities for women to advance to management positions were still restricted due to male domination, both female and male respondents agreed on. The case study aligned with other previous researches of inequality in the workplace, in factors such as challenge in female career advancement, harassment in organizations dominated by men and female exclusion (Brumley, 2014).

The case study by Lam (2004) examined how middle-aged women in Hong Kong experienced and evaluated gender inequality in their social surroundings through their own principles of justice. Political power, employment opportunities, freedom, health, status and income were some factors that the author brought up, that all had gender inequalities. Since the perception of justice is individual, the author argued that the inequalities might be underestimated if the respondent failed to describe the experienced situation of inequality. The respondents either endorsed or opposed different types of gender inequality according to their principles of justice and the endorsers tend to underestimate the gender inequality (Lam, 2004).

The case study by Bryant and Garnham (2014) was built on in-depth interviews with 16 women working in different position in one of the largest wine organizations in south Australia. The authors used a case study approach in order to explore how the respondents experienced gender issues within their work and how they progressed in the industry, since the industry still faced gender-related cultural and structural issues. The analysis of the gender inequalities in the wine organization was conducted with Foucault’s post-modern feminist theorizing together with Acker’s (2006) framework to understand how organizations are gendered in everyday structures and that the body mattered concerning gender norms and gender performance. The study concluded that normalized meanings of women’s working bodies are different from the “ideal body”, which in this industry is masculine as the work roles are shaped by assumptions regarding gender and that masculine culture and norms are embedded in the everyday work. This diverted attention from the cultural and structural issues (Bryant & Garnham, 2014).

A fundamental part of gender equality is equal pay. The case study by Koskinen Sandberg (2016) illustrated that performance-related pay don’t always support equal-pay objectives and also analyzed the practices that hide gender-based differences in pay. The study was conducted through interviews with 122 respondents in 18 Finnish organizations from different sectors in order to get a picture of the current situation in the organizations in the context of gender pay equity. None of these organizations had job demands that promoted equal pay. The study concluded that unequal treatment within the organizations got invisible due to higher evaluation of work done by men, assumptions of gender neutrality and a strong gender segregation (Koskinen Sandberg, 2016).

Analysis

I noticed differences between the cases but also many similarities. A lot of them were focusing on the issues, such as the lack of awareness of gender inequality and female employment discrimination, and some were investigating
the organizations that had incorporated feminism in their structure. Although, all of the cases were written in favour for women; how women were affected, how they perceived the different situations and how the different factors were described.

An issue that I discovered consistently in the case studies were the acceptation or lack of awareness of gender inequality. In the case study of Smulyan (2000), the female principals seemed to ignore the gender issues rather than take an activist stance, although they all had experiences of gender discriminations. According to Chase (1995), female superintendents have difficulties in generalizing discrimination in their own experiences and therefore might act guarded when asked about gender issues. In the case study by Norman (2010), the women leaders experienced such masculine domination in sport that they tended to accept, adapt or not realise the oppression. This didn’t make those in power willing to change the situation. In some cases it’s not intentional, but gender inequalities tend to be invisible to the part that’s privileged (Acker, 2006). In the case study by Healy et al. (2010) it was concluded that none of the examined public sector managers acknowledged or identified gender inequality of others. According to Koskinen Sandberg (2016), unequal treatment within the organizations investigated got invisible because of assumptions of being gender neutral and strong gender segregation. Policies that were considered gender-neutral may also be a reason why managers didn’t realize discrimination (Bobitt-Zeher, 2011).

Seven of the cases covered the under-representation of women in leadership or in management positions. According to Crossman (2016) were power differences, exclusion and structural inequality of gender connected to the feminist theory. Tatli et al (2016) concluded that accepted organizational gendered norms caused the female drawbacks in acquiring management positions. It remained difficult for women managers to disagree with the gender inequality in the organization due to the under-representation. Unger et al. (2010) agreed that the exclusion of women in management positions could explain the limited career options compared to the male counterpart. It was concluded in Brumley’s (2014) study that the respondents believed that the opportunities for women to advance to management positions were restricted because of male domination. According to MacNae & Vali (2015), the culture of male dominance formed the basis of discrimination and also influenced the representation of women in leadership positions in the case. Bird (2011) claimed that the bureaucratic structures were the strongest barriers on women’s opportunities in organization advancement.

In some cases I noted that stereotypical gender norms formed the basis of discrimination of women. It’s connected to the feminists’ view that women’s conditions are socially constructed (Hannam, 2013). Biological and cultural differences between genders was used as explanation of women’s under-representation in management, thus the gender inequality was considered legitimate (Tatli et al., 2016). Biological differences could be the normalized meanings that women’s bodies are not the “ideal working body” in some industries due to the stereotype assumptions about women and the masculine culture and norms that are embedded in the everyday work for women (Bryant & Garnham, 2014). Women were considered less capable as workers, which was a big source of discrimination in many different organizational contexts (Bobitt-Zeher, 2011).

The issues with organizational policies were frequently examined in the case studies I’ve analysed – mostly about gender-neutral policies that have functionality problems and
policies that operate discriminatively to women. Women of different levels also individually perceived these policies positive or negative. For instance, an equal representation in management policy could have unfair individually consequences for women because the gender imbalance could differ between academia disciplines and the policy won’t fill it’s purpose. Although, the policies could create gender imbalance awareness (Peterson, 2015). The cases of Bobbitt-Zeher (2011) showed that the policy-related issues varied by the gender composition of the workplace. Ng & Fosh (2004) concluded in their case study that lower-level female employees were more supportive of an equal opportunities policy than female managers. The case of Brumley (2014) investigated the perceptions of a discriminative policy removal. It was concluded that it acknowledged women’s value and gave them opportunities. However, the policy removal reinforced gender-segregated job allocations and the opportunities for women to advance to management positions were still restricted due to male domination.

Some of the case studies described how feminist organizations operate and how feminist organizational structures contribute. According to Heywood and Drake (1997) are feminists researches by, for and about women. It also includes women’s experiences as a central part and is often made by women who consider themselves as feminists (Reinharz, 1992). The case study about health care centres and their structural development were owned and operated by women and based on feminist philosophy, education and empowerment (Tomas, 1999). Feminist ideology in organization, management style, practise and structure were considered important and several other cases (Hernández & Campanile, 2000; Desivilya & Yassour-Borochowitz, 2008; Fotopoulou, 2016).

**Conclusion**

This article is based on only 20 different cases regarding feminism and it’s limited to cases about leadership, organizations and education. The case studies are based on in-depth interviews with few respondents, which makes it difficult to generalize about the problem definition. If the resources were greater, an article based on 100 case studies with feminist perspectives could show a more clear and fair view. It is possible when only having analysed 20 cases to see past some patterns and common denominators.

The research suggests that a case study from a feminist perspective would comprehend a female point of view of gender inequality issues. According to my research, the over-represented issues in this area are acceptance of gender inequality, low awareness of gender inequality, gender-policy issues and discrimination in employment, especially in advancement to management positions. Four of my cases do not cover the issues that feminists want to change, but speaking highly of the importance of feminist ideology in organizational structure, management and practise.

For further studies I would recommend to investigate the underlying roots to the problems I’ve mentioned above. This would lead to a deeper understanding of the issues and why they occur in some organizations.
References


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