Differences between Managers' and Employees' Perceptions of Gender-Based Discrimination in a Selection of South African Organisations

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Abstract

Introduction: The relationship between employees and employers depends, among other things, on the level of consensus on what is perceived as fair or unfair in the workplace. When these perceptions are similar, a certain harmony results, but when there are appreciable differences, conflict may follow. Objective: To gauge the levels of difference in gender-based discrimination perceived by managers and employees. Method: Information was gathered from 145 managers and 1 740 employees working for 29 organisations, using the Fair Treatment at Work Survey and the Gender-Based Discrimination Questionnaire. This was a cross-sectional quantitative research design. Results: Both managers and employees pointed to gender-based discrimination as the primary source of discrimination in the workplace, more so than race or ethnicity. When presented with a list of the consequences of discrimination, managers and employees provided similar ranking orders. Confronted with the question of whether males or females enjoyed more privileges at the appointment, promotion, training and development levels, or whether remuneration for both gender groups was perceived as fair, managers and employees answered similarly. They agreed that most gender-based discrimination occurs at the appointment and promotion levels, and that less discrimination is experienced at the training, development and fair remuneration levels. They also concurred that discrimination sometimes occurs in favour of males and on certain occasions in favour of females. Conclusions: No real differences were found in the ways in which both managers and employees viewed the levels of discrimination in the workplace. The fact that gender-based discrimination was the most frequently listed type of discrimination suggests that more interventions should be implemented for its elimination.

Introduction

This article discusses managers' and employees' perceptions of gender-based discrimination in the workplace. According to Robbins and Judge (2011), managers are concerned with the employee attitudes reflected in shifting perceptions of race, gender and other diversity issues. This concern may be valid, as perceptions often influence behaviour (Myers, 2008). The greater the difference in perceptions on an important issue, the greater is the possibility of conflict (Robbins & Judge, 2011). Moorhead and Griffen (2008: 411), referring to the context of the workplace, state that "conflict also may arise between people who have different beliefs or perceptions about some aspect of their work or their organization".

Conflict between managers and employees may be considered intergroup conflict. This type of conflict could relate to the fact that managers and employees have different goals (Moorhead & Griffen, 2008) or mutually exclusive aims (Ivancevick, Konopaske & Matteso, 2014). Intergroup conflict may also be the result of status incongruence (Ivancevick et al., 2014). The matter of status incongruence and conflict can be grounded in critical theory (Max Horkheimer), which suggests that the truth is created and uncreated by human beings, mostly by people in positions of authority (Higgs & Smith, 2006). Other theories that may be applicable are the social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981; Turner & Reynolds, 2004) and group-serving bias (Pettigrew, 1997), which explains differences in perceptions based purely on group membership. Social identity theory states, inter alia, that individuals contrast their own group (in-group) with others (out-group) and develop a favourable bias towards their own entity (Myers, 2008). Group-serving bias builds on this and suggests that in-group members explain away or negate the positive behaviours of out-group members (attributing them to situational circumstances) and ascribe negative behaviours disproportionately to out-group members' dispositions (personality and values), rather than more appropriately to situational circumstances (Myers, 2008). Tension between management and employees therefore seems inevitable.

In the context of South African labour legislation, the tension between

employers (who often include managers) and employees is evident. The Basic Conditions of Employment Act (RSA, 1997), for example, describes the duties of employers when dealing with situations involving employees. Empirical studies conducted in South Africa suggest that employers are involved in gender-based discrimination (see Ncayiyana, 2011; Pretorius, De Villiers Human, Niemann, Klinck & Alt 2002; Stone & Coetzee 2005). The topic of employers as agents of discrimination who therefore occupy a different and unequal position to that of employees is also evident in human resources management literature. Grogan (2007), for example, defines discrimination as the action whereby some are afforded benefits and others are denied access to them. Cascio (2010) adds a group element, stating that discrimination entails a group of individuals being given preferential treatment over others. Referring to gender-based discrimination, Channer, Abbassi and Ujan (2011) maintain that discrimination entails giving an unfair advantage or disadvantage to members of a particular gender rather than to members of the other gender. It is therefore through actions or activities that employers and managers discriminate in the workplace.

The aim of this article is to contrast the perceptions by managers and employees regarding gender-based discrimination in the workplace. Should managers and employees differ in the way they perceive discrimination in the workplace, tension may arise, which could lead to disputes. However, knowledge of such differences, and knowing exactly where the greatest number of differences occur may lead to awareness, which could minimise the likelihood of disputes. Awareness of where differences occur may also give rise to interventions that could create greater congruence between managers and employees.

Method
Respondents
Two groups of respondents participated in this study. The first group was comprised of managers who had a direct influence on the appointment, promotion and remuneration of employees. Five managers per organisation were targeted, namely the most senior human resources manager, the general manager, and three other senior managers, all of whom were directly involved in decision-making relating to personnel. Purposive sampling was used when selecting the managers (Cooper & Schindler, 2011). Only

managers from relatively large organisations were involved. In order to qualify for inclusion in the study, the organisations had to have a diverse workforce of at least 30 males and 30 females. The second group involved in the study was comprised of employees of these relatively large organisations where the managers worked. In each organisation, a random sample of 30 males and 30 females was drawn. This amounted to the stratified random sampling (Cooper & Schindler, 2011) of employees. In total, 29 organisations participated in the study. The companies approached were those to which students enrolled for the Master of Business Leadership programme at the Unisa Graduate School of Business Leadership had access, primarily on account of their own employment in these organisations. It was therefore a convenient organisational sample (Cooper & Schindler, 2011).

Procedure and Approach
Data on discrimination was collected by means of the Fair Treatment at Work Survey and the Gender-Based Discrimination Questionnaire. Respondents were asked to rank items (using the Fair Treatment at Work Survey) and to select options (in the Gender-Based Discrimination Questionnaire). The method of data collection represented a quantitative study. As the data was collected at a particular point in time, it can be seen as a cross-sectional design. This particular design is suitable for describing the population and relationships between variables (Shaughnessy, Zechmeister & Zechmeister, 2009). Before the managers and employees were asked to complete the questionnaires, they were given informed consent forms. After consenting, they were requested to answer all the questions that applied to them. They were requested to provide answers based only on their perceptions of their workplace, and not workplaces in general.

Measurements
Managers and employees were asked three questions about their work situation. The first two came from the Fair Treatment at Work Survey (Grainger & Fitzner, 2007). The questions in the Fair Treatment at Work Survey held different emphases for managers and employees. The first question put to managers read as follows: "In the last two years at this

organisation, has anyone been treated unfairly because of any of the following?" The equivalent question to the employees was: "In the last two years with this organisation, have you been treated unfairly because of any of the following?" The respondents could select any one (or more) of 19 possible reasons for saying they had been treated unfairly. This list included age, gender, nationality, religion, race or ethnic group, and 14 other possible reasons. The second question, also originating from the Fair Treatment at Work Survey, related to the consequences of the unfair treatment listed. For managers, it read as follows: "To what did the unfair treatment you have personally witnessed relate?" Question 2 for employees read as follows: "To what did the unfair treatment you have personally experienced relate?" The respondents could select any one (or more) of 18 possible consequences of being treated unfairly. These included salary, pension, other benefits, perks and bonuses other than pay, as well as 13 other possibilities. The data generated was ranked in order of the frequency of endorsements.

Question 3 related to access to the organisational resources and was comprised of four similar sub-questions. (Managers and employees were asked exactly the same question). In answer to the first sub-question, the respondents had to select one of three options:

(1) It is easier for a woman to get appointed to this organisation than it is for a man;
(2) It is equally difficult for a man or a woman to get appointed to this organisation; and
(3) It is easier for a man to get appointed to this organisation than it is for a woman.

The next three sub-questions were identical in structure to the first, except that the content related to promotion, access to training and development, and equal pay for equal work, instead of appointments. This measure was called the Gender-Based Discrimination Questionnaire, which was developed specifically for this research. Answers were treated as categorical data.

Data Analysis
The data was presented as frequencies and per organisational position, as

differences in scores between managers and employees were expected. In the case of the Fair Treatment at Work Survey, the statistical difference in ranking between the organisational position groups was calculated by using the Spearman rank-order correlation formula. The differences in scores for males and females on the Gender-Based Discrimination Questionnaire were calculated using the Pearson chi-square test. In all cases a significant level of less than .01 was seen as significant.

Ethical Considerations

Several ethical considerations were applicable in this study. The first was the use of students as fieldworkers. The students benefitted from collecting the data, which they used when writing their Master of Business Leadership research reports. A possible second ethical concern could be that students accessed respondents in the organisations where they were working, which could have allowed them to exercise undue influence over the respondents. This matter was addressed partly by the requirement that the Chief Executive Officer or Director-General first had to grant permission to conduct the research (suggesting that the student did not have ultimate authority in the setting). The students also had to obtain consent from the respondents. The informed consent form clearly stated that participation in the survey was voluntary and all the respondents gave consent before entering into the research.

Results

In total, data from 1,740 employees and 145 managers, working for 29 different companies, was captured. There were 871 male and 869 female employees. No enquiries were made about the gender of the managers as their anonymity would have been compromised, given that only five managers per company were targeted. The respondents were mostly from financial service providers (seven organisations), the government (seven organisations) and the mining sector (four organisations). Other sectors included the hospitality industry, the manufacturing industry and agriculture.

The results pertaining to Question 1, on the type of discrimination to which employees were exposed, and which managers witnessed at their respective companies, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Sources of Unfair Treatment at Work

Question 1 In the last two years with "this organisation" have you been treated unfairly (employees) / have you witnessed someone being treated unfairly (managers) because of any of the following?	Number of endorsements, percentage, and ranking: Managers (N=145)			Number of endorsements, percentage, and ranking: Employees (N=1 740)		
	Count	%	Rank	Count	%	Rank
My age	12	8.3	8	162	9.3	4
My gender	28	19.3	1	210	12.1	1
My nationality	16	11	4	86	4.9	10
My religion	5	3.4	16.5	56	3.2	14
My race or ethnic group	22	15.2	2.5	188	10.8	2
My sexual orientation	6	4.1	14.5	39	2.2	18
My disability	9	2.6	10	27	1.6	19
My long-term illness	14	9.7	6	40	2.3	17
My marital status	7	4.8	13	80	4.6	11.5
My political beliefs	10	6.9	9	52	3.0	15
My skin colour	22	15.2	2.5	171	9.8	3
My physical appearance	6	4.1	14.5	76	4.4	13
The way I dress	5	3.4	16.5	111	6.4	5
Being pregnant	13	9.0	7	48	2.8	16
Union membership	15	10.3	5	88	5.1	9
Accent or the way I speak	8	5.5	11.5	94	5.4	7
Address or where I live	3	2.1	18.5	80	4.6	11.5
My social class	3	2.1	18.5	89	5.1	8
My family responsibilities	8	5.5	11.5	102	5.9	6

The Spearman rank-order correlation was calculated to determine whether the groups entertained similar thoughts on the sources of unfair treatment in the workplace. The Spearman rank-order correlation value was .339, which was not significant at the .01 level. The rankings were therefore

not similar, suggesting that managers and employees reported differently on their testimony and experience of unfair treatment in the workplace. However, this result should be interpreted with caution, as the type of discrimination most frequently witnessed by managers and experienced by employees was gender-based. For both groups, gender was associated also with race or ethnic group and skin colour. Thus, despite the lists not being statistically similar, a definite overlap occurs at the top. Here, gender, the topic of this paper, is placed first by both groups.

As the main focus of this research is on gender-based discrimination, the significance of the difference in gender-based discrimination was considered in greater detail. Table 2 provides information on the count data in a two-by-two table reflecting position (management / employee) and reported gender discrimination (yes / no).

Table 2: Perceived unfair treatment: gender by organisational position

Question	Position	
	Employees	Managers
No: No gender discrimination	1529 (87.9%)	117 (80.7%)
Yes: Gender discrimination	210 (12.1%)	28 (19.3%)
Total	1739 (100.0%)	145 (100.0%)

Like Table 1, Table 2 shows that 12.1% of the employees reported falling victim to gender-based discrimination, while 19.3% of managers reported witnessing gender-based discrimination. The Pearson chi-square value was 6.347 (degrees of freedom = 1) and the asymptotic significance (2-sided) was equal to .012, and (just) more than .01, which indicated that the rows and columns of the contingency were not dependent. The Cramer's V value, suggestive of effect size, was .058 (p = .012), which indicates a lesser effect. Employees and managers therefore did not differ in the degree to which they reported on gender-based discrimination. This result should also be treated with caution, as the significance level is close to the fixed critical level of .01, which "became entrenched in minds of leading journal editors" (Rosenthal, Rosnow & Rubin, 2009: 5). The value should be used as a guide, rather than as a reason for sanctification (Rosenthal et al., 2009). In Table 3 below the consequences of discrimination per position are presented.

Table 3: Consequences of Unfair Treatment

Question 2: To what did the unfair treatment you personally experienced (employees) or witnessed (managers) relate?	Number of endorsements, percentage, and rankings: Managers (N=145)			Number of endorsements, percentage, and rankings: Employees (N=1740)		
	Count	%	Rank	Count	%	Rank
The pay you receive	18	12.4	7.5	388	22.3	1
Your pension	5	3.4	18	103	5.9	14
Other benefits, perks and bonuses, besides pay	21	14.5	4	343	19.7	2
Your working hours	18	12.4	7.5	200	11.5	7
Taking holidays	8	5.5	15	194	11.1	8
Applying for a job (horizontal movement)	24	16.6	2.5	222	12.8	6
Being promoted (vertical movement)	34	23.4	1	331	19.0	3
Receiving training	24	16.6	2.5	238	13.7	5
Disciplinary action	15	10.3	10	94	5.4	15
Redundancy	7	4.8	17	55	3.2	17
Early retirement	8	5.5	15	27	1.6	18
Being allowed to work flexibly (changing hours of work)	11	7.6	11.5	131	7.5	12
Being ignored	17	11.7	9	259	14.9	4
Being excluded from social activities	9	6.2	13	123	7.1	13
Not being part of social group	8	5.5	15	92	5.3	16
Type of work given	19	13.1	5.5	189	10.9	9
Bullying/ harassment	19	13.1	5.5	135	7.8	11
Falsely accused of something	11	7.6	11.5	141	8.1	10

The Spearman rank-order correlation, calculated to analyse the correla-

tion between the lists, was .753, which was significant at the .001 level. The rankings were therefore similar, suggesting that the workplace consequences of discrimination observed by managers and experienced by employees are comparable. Managers primarily perceived the consequences of discrimination as relating to promotions, job applications and receiving training, while employees viewed the effects of discrimination as relating to pay received, benefits besides pay and promotion.

The results pertaining to data gathered by means of the Gender-Based Discrimination Questionnaire are presented in the following tables. It is important to note that exactly the same questions were posed to the managers and the employees. Regarding the question on the fairness of the appointment process, approximately 61% of the respondents agreed that no gender-based discrimination occurred during this process.

Table 4: Perceived discrimination during appointments by position

Question	Position	
	Employees	Managers
It is easier for a woman to get appointed at … than it is for a man.	386 (22.3%)	25 (17.2%)
It is equally difficult for a man or a woman to get appointed at ...	1062 (61.3%)	89 (61.4%)
It is easier for a man to get appointed at …than it is for a woman.	285 (16.4%)	31 (21.4%)
Total	1733 (100%)	145 (100%)

Differences in scores between managers' and employees' perceptions were calculated, with the Pearson chi-square value of 3.484 (degrees of freedom = 2). The asymptotic significance (2-sided) was .175, and more than .01, indicating that the rows and columns of the contingency were not dependent. Table 4 shows that pro-female discrimination was reported more often by employees than by managers (22.3% versus 17.2%) and that pro-male discrimination was reported more often by managers than by employees (21.4% versus 16.4%).

Apropos of the promotion process, approximately 62% of all respondents selecting the middle option reported no difference in the way males and females were treated.

Table 5: Perceived discrimination regarding promotions by position

Question	Position	
	Employees	Managers
It is easier for a woman to get promoted at … than it is for a man.	359 (20.7%)	26 (17.9%)
It is equally difficult for a man or a woman to get promoted at ...	1074 (62.0%)	90 (62.1%)
It is easier for a man to get promoted at … than it is for a woman.	299 (17.3%)	29 (20.0%)
Total	1732 (100%)	145 (100%)

Differences between perceptions by managers and employees were calculated, with the Pearson chi-square value being 1.084 (degrees of freedom = 2) and the asymptotic significance (2-sided) equal to .582, and more than .01. This indicates that the rows and columns of the contingency were independent. Although the differences are not significant, it is interesting to note that employees reported more pro-female discrimination (20.7% versus 19.9%) whereas managers reported more incidents of pro-male discrimination (20.0% versus 17.3%).

Regarding access to training and development, most respondents, almost 76%, reported that males and females were treated equally.

Differences between perceptions by managers and employees were calculated, with the Pearson chi-square value being .408 (degrees of freedom = 2) and the asymptotic significance (2-sided) equal to .816, and more than .01. This indicates that the rows and columns of the contingency were independent. As for appointments and promotions, employees reported more pro-female discrimination (13.1% and 11.7%), whereas managers reported more pro-male discrimination (12.4% versus 11.1%).

Table 6: Perceived discrimination regarding access to training and development by position

Question	Position	
	Employees	Managers
It is easier for a woman to get access to training and development at ... than it is for a man.	227 (13.1%)	17 (11.7%)

It is equally difficult for a man or a woman to get access to training and development at ...	1310 (75.8%)	110 (75.9%)
It is easier for a man to get access to training and development at ... than it is for a woman.	192 (11.1%)	18 (12.4%)
Total	1729 (100%)	145 (100%)

When it came to equal pay for equal work, fewer employees (76.5%) than managers (81.4%) reported that no discrimination occurred.

Table 7: Perceived discrimination regarding equal-pay for equal work by position

Question	Position	
	Employees	Managers
Generally women get paid more than what would equate to their inputs, compared to men	133 (7.7%)	2 (1.4%)
The rule of equal pay for equal work is enforced at ...	1321 (76.5%)	118 (81.4%)
Generally men get paid more than what would equate to their inputs, compared to women	273 (15.8%)	25 (17.2%)
Total	1727 (100%)	145 (100%)

The differences between male and female perceptions were calculated, with the Pearson chi-square value being 8.002 (degrees of freedom = 2) and the asymptotic significance (2-sided) equal to .018, and (just) more than .01. This indicates that the rows and columns of the contingency were independent. The Cramer's V value, which is suggestive of effect size, was .068 (p = .018), which indicates a small effect. As in the case of the previous processes, employees reported more pro-female discrimination (7.7% versus 1.4%) and managers more pro-male discrimination (17.2% versus 15.8%).

Discussion

In this article the perceptions of gender-based discrimination by managers and employees are contrasted. Should managers and employees differ in the way they perceive discrimination in the workplace, tension may arise that could lead to disputes. However, knowledge of such differences may bring awareness, which could minimise the likelihood of conflict.

The responses reported in this article are those of male and female employees, almost exactly 50 per cent of each. The managers' gender was not asked for, but, given recent reports (see South African Institute of Race Relations, 2012), it may be assumed that the manager group was dominated by males.

Table 1 shows that both managers and employees perceived gender to be the primary reason for unfair treatment in the workplace. This finding coincides with the reports by Stangor, Lynch, Duan and Glass (1992), who stated that people are more attuned to gender than to any other characteristic, including race, when considering interpersonal differences.

Employees were asked about their own experiences of discrimination, while managers were asked about witnessing such acts. When comparing the percentage of incidents in which managers had witnessed gender-based discrimination with the percentage of incidents in which employees had experienced discrimination, one may expect the percentage of managers who had witnessed discrimination to be higher than the percentage of employees experiencing the same. One reason for expecting this difference was that employees were limited to reporting on themselves, while managers could report on many other details. The difference could also be anticipated, given the person/group discrimination discrepancy (Dixon, Durrheim, Tredoux, Tropp, Clack & Eaton, 2010; Taylor, Wright, Moghaddam & Lalonde, 1990), which suggests that individuals (say male managers) rate the discrimination suffered by their group (e.g. gender-based discrimination) as more severe than that suffered personally (say as male managers). As can be read from Table 2, this difference was not significant and the percentage of managers witnessing gender-based discrimination did not differ significantly from the percentage of employees experiencing discrimination. This result was not expected and it could be argued that managers are not sensitive enough to the discrimination experienced by employees.

The consequences or outcomes of discrimination in the workplace are perceived similarly by managers and employees (ρ = 753; p < .001). It is interesting to note that Table 3 shows managers referring primarily to human resources processes (namely promotions, job applications and receiving training), while employees refer to more concrete and direct outcomes (pay received, benefits other than pay and promotion) when they report on these consequences. This result suggests that, although managers may present the outcomes of discrimination in a more abstract manner, managers and employees largely concur on the outcomes of discrimination.

 When using the Gender-Based Discrimination Questionnaire, managers and employees were shown to have similar perceptions of discrimination, as reflected in the non-significant results found with the chi-square tests performed. Tables 4-7 show that managers and employees agree to a similar extent that gender discrimination is not present in the workplace. With reference to the appointment process, 61.4% of managers and 61.3% of employees reported no discrimination. For the promotion process, these figures were 62.1% and 62.0% and for access to training and development they were 75.9% and 75.8%. In the case of fairness in remuneration, the difference was greater, with 81.4% of managers reporting no discrimination, compared with 76.5% of employees. Even this greater difference was not statistically significant. Other than this, managers and employees held similar perceptions of non-discrimination in different human resources management processes.

Considering the Gender-Based Discrimination Questionnaire, it is interesting to note that managers reported less pro-female discrimination and more pro-male discrimination (see Tables 4 - 7). With reference to fair remuneration, for example, in Table 4, employees reported pro-female discrimination more often than managers did (22.3% versus 17.2%), whereas pro-male discrimination was reported more often by managers (21.4% versus 16.4%). However, these differences were not significant and may constitute a topic for investigation at a later stage.

A further important point pertaining to the Gender-Based Discrimination Questionnaire is the agreement between managers and employees on the stages at which most incidents of discrimination occur, in other words, where non-discrimination is at the lowest levels. Tables 4 and 5 show that the level of non-discrimination the appointment level was about 61/62%, and

that both managers and employees judged it to be at that level. Approximately the same result was found when it came to promotions. More non-discrimination occurs at access to training and development (around 76 %) and even more at the remuneration level (see Tables 6 and 7). This suggests that most episodes of discrimination occur at the appointment and promotion levels and that the least of these incidents occur at the access to training and development and remuneration levels. Managers and employees agree about this.

Conclusion

This research focused on the differences between managers and employees on their experiences of workplace discrimination, specifically gender-based discrimination. The results show that both managers and employees deem gender-based discrimination to be the most important source of discrimination in the workplace. Interventions into the elimination of discrimination should therefore focus on this type of discrimination rather than on the issue of race, which seems paramount in most initiatives in South Africa. The proliferation of programmes such as Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (RSA, 2003) echoes the emphasis currently placed on race. No gender-based equivalence of such a program is available.

Although managers perceived discrimination to be the most pertinent source of discrimination in the workplace, it was expected that they would proportionately witness more discrimination than that experienced by employees. It may thus be hypothesised that managers are not sufficiently alert in detecting discrimination in the workplace. It could be suggested that managers receive sensitivity training to become more aware of the manifestations of discrimination in the workplace. Frame-of-reference training seems effective in this regard (Bernardin & Buckley, 1981), while rater-error-training seems to have some positive short-term effects (Fay & Latham, 1982).

Managers and employees are in consensus that most discrimination occurs at the appointment and promotion levels and that the least discrimination occurs at the access to training and development and remuneration levels. This consensus opens up the opportunity for human resources practitioners to focus on the first two practices when they develop programmes, as this seems to be important to both managers and employees.

The level of consensus at the human resources practice level could also be used to leverage co-operation between managers and their employees. Human resources managers or individuals involved in organisational change interventions should note this consensus.

The research had some limitations. The first relates to the difference between the questions posed to the managers and employees. Although the response repertoires were identical, Questions 1 and 2 (posed to both managers and employees) differed slightly. This limited the possibility of comparing the responses. A further limitation was that the respondents were asked about the effects of discrimination in general in the workplace. The question thus did not direct their attention specifically to gender-based discrimination. The results reported may thus be ambiguous, but it should also be noted that gender-based discrimination was mentioned most often by both managers and employees.

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