The Importance Of Theoretical Gender Frameworks For Organizational Change: Understanding The Divide In The Experiences Reported By Two Women Academics

Stream 19: Gender Perspectives and Management

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Introduction

The Call for Papers for the Gender Perspectives and Management Stream of the Critical Management Studies Conference 3, states unequivocally that “critique has played a central role in exposing the gendered character of organizational arrangements and management theorizing,” but, just as this critique has not translated into the “development of non-discriminatory forms of organizing, to inclusivity,” there is some question about just how deeply the critique has permeated even those organizations closest to it, i.e., academic institutions. This apparent lack of transfer of knowledge across disciplines is exemplary of a similar lack of transference from the academy to the world of everyday organizations.

Over the past few months, contradictory descriptions of their personal experiences written by two women working in the same academic faculty at the same university were published. One of the descriptions is entitled “Engendered Conflict in Organizations: Caught in the Cultural Web” (Acker & Miller, 2002) and is by myself with a co-author in another department at the same university; the second is entitled “Disadvantaged? Not I!” (Lavack, 2002) and it was written by a woman colleague of mine. The divide between the perspectives of these papers is considerable, as the titles alone suggest. The first question I will deal with here then is we how might understand the contradictory interpretations presented in these two papers, particularly in light of sensemaking theory and the importance of a feminist orientation. The second question deals with the lack of theorization presented in either paper and it asks whether this is a significant deficiency and what its implications are. The third question is related to transformation and change and the issues raised by the example of a woman academic arguing that she is not, and has not been, ‘disadvantaged’ in any way in her career, neither inside, nor outside, of academia. The final question relates to knowledge transfer and its importance to social change in organizations.

Contradictory Interpretations

Although the general flavour of the two papers under consideration is fairly clear from the titles, to aid in contextualization, a brief description of some of their highlights follows.

“Engendered Conflict in Organizations: Caught in the Cultural Web.” The argument in this paper is basically that there remains considerable conflict, on an everyday level (Kolb and Putnam, 1992), between men and women, and between masculine and feminine values as reflected in practices, in an academic institution. The personal experiences of the two women authors are used to exemplify some of the conflict which occurs in several arenas. The first author of this paper, Mona Acker, has 25+ years of experience in the Faculty of Social Work, while the second author, Gloria Miller, has 4 years of experience in the Faculty of Administration, at the same mid-sized Western Canadian University.

At the time this paper was being written, a considerable amount of media attention was being paid to a situation at the University of Toronto (Canada) where several retired women scholars with distinguished records were earning exceedingly paltry pensions because of historic underpayment of women academics relative to men. Two of the women professors had instigated what became a class action civil suit against the university. What made the
situation particularly ironic was that the President of the University at the time, Robert Birgeneau, who had previously been Dean of Science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, had earned media acclamation for acknowledging that women scientists at MIT had been discriminated against and for ordering a system of redress on their behalf. At the University of Toronto, he refused to consider settling the class action lawsuit called the Case of the Impoverished Pensioners. In this context, Professor Acker recounts the story of three salary studies having been done over the past 25 years at the University of Regina, all of which documented the existence of gender-based salary differentials. She says that “remedies in the form of salary adjustments were instituted each time, and each time they were inadequate to address the structural inequities existing in differential hiring and promotion opportunities”. How these differential gender-based salaries come into being over time is exemplified by some of the experiences that I had in my short tenure at the same university. During this period, I discovered that a colleague of the same rank and tenure had received a ‘special’ salary increment on the basis of superior contributions in teaching and management consulting service although he had no research publications during the period. During the period under review, my record included exceptional teaching and service to the university, my professional community and my home community, and acceptable research output. No one suggested that I had earned a merit increment or should apply for one. In fact, I was told that one could not be awarded unless it was applied for, which I have since discovered is not accurate. Nevertheless, I did not put my case forward (common for women), however, I suspect that if I had the request would have been denied on the basis that my contribution wasn’t that valuable. My university service included membership on the faculty association’s status of women committee and being a team member on the committee to eliminate sexual harassment on campus. Management development earns dollars; service to women does not. The issue of lack of access to networks of males may also have played a part in this situation, since my colleague was close friends with the Dean. Although the latter example would not result in a large salary differential between my colleague and myself in the short run, in the long run (and with more ‘minor’ happenstances), my colleague’s pension would be considerably larger than my own. In Canada, “the risk of poverty for elderly women remains significant” (Nelson and Robinson, 2002). Ursula Franklin, for example, one of the women who initiated the lawsuit against the University of Toronto, after a lifelong career as a research chemist, had an annual pension of $20,000.00 Canadian.

Professor Acker and I also report experiences our daughters have had in being excluded from networks of males in the oil and gas industry in Calgary. Professor Acker’s daughter, during her tenure as a lawyer in a major oil company, became aware that on occasion many of her male colleagues went to the Petroleum Club for lunch and after work drinks. The lack of invitation to her resulted in her feeling cut off from the informal schmoozing that enabled them to make important career contacts and learn about industry news and gossip. I was surprised to find, in the course of my dissertation research on women in the Alberta oil industry, that the women executives felt pressure to play golf in order to participate in one of the industry networks. Of even greater surprise was to find out recently that my daughter is planning to take golf lessons because as she explains: “I have to. All of my clients play golf.” She is a sales representative in the oil and gas industry. One of the geologists interviewed for my dissertation research said, “it would be really nice to be on the team and be really valued and really contributing, but to be able to go shopping instead of playing golf if that’s what you preferred to do” (Miller, 1998, p. 143).

As the numbers of women in work environments have grown, they have retaliated by creating their own ‘networks.’ Mona Acker, for example, as a response to the men in her faculty
lunching together and excluding her, eventually was able to ‘do lunch’ with three female colleagues. A male colleague drew her aside, whispering that it appeared there was a conspiracy of women. I had a similar experience as a doctoral student invited to a woman faculty member’s home for an all-female social evening. In spite of this kind of backlash, women have continued to create their own networks including a group of business women in Regina, who started the Regina Women’s Network almost 15 years ago when they realized that many centrally placed business groups in the City were exclusively male. They are now a powerful force in the city.

Mona Acker and I continue, in the paper, to document other instances of mundane, everyday conflict based in gender differences in our organization and others arguing that, on a daily basis, we live the experience of being data. For those of us who are female scholars, especially feminist scholars of workplace behaviour and organization theory, there is a sharp, almost painful, edge to applying the cognitive frameworks we have acquired to our own everyday lived experience as we live it. The paper ultimately argues that change must occur on a deep cultural level in order for this type of conflict, which is experienced in a highly emotional way, to be eradicated.

“Disadvantaged? Not I!” 2 Anne Lavack argues in this paper that she has never been treated in a discriminatory manner, not in her experience as an advertising and marketing consultant, or in academia. On the contrary, she argues that being a woman has given her advantages. Although her argument is fairly standard, I will briefly describe it. She suggests first that, in her marketing consulting job, being a woman gave her a special insight into “the typical consumer, and to present these points of view to clients”. She decided, however, to change careers and entered a PhD program. About this, she says, “not many men would want to go back and do a PhD after a ten-year successful business career, nor would they have the financial cushion of a working spouse which would allow them to do so.” She says she received initial funding in the form of an Outreach Doctoral Fellowship which was designated for women, and which left her feeling “inwardly somewhat miffed”. Later, however, she applied for, and was awarded, a SSHRC fellowship which she “felt much more comfortable about” since she “wanted to be accepted on my own merits, not on the basis of my sex, and the SSHRC fellowship was all about merit”. During her job search, which she did while ABD, again being a woman was an advantage because “virtually every business school in North America was keen to hire women for faculty positions.” In her first academic position, at Concordia University, she was “sought after to teach” in their prestigious Executive MBA program where there were “relatively few female professors.” Likewise, because every internal university committee “wants to have at least one woman as a member”, “women get virtually first choice of the committees they want to sit on”. She also reports that she became sought after by the media because “it is often difficult for reporters to find female experts in this area”, however, “when a willing female expert is available, producers and reporters will often choose the female expert over a male expert, if only to balance the scorecard for all the times when a female expert was unavailable” (my italics). And, because the Canadian government has focused on affirmative action, she had an advantage in “gaining consulting contracts” with federal departments. She never had to deal with work/family issues either, since her spouse willingly relocated to Vancouver where she did her PhD, and then to Montreal for three years for her first academic job. Dr. Lavack’s short paper is told as a personal story without any explanatory framework for the experience she describes.

2 all direct quotes in this section, unless otherwise designated, are in Lavack, Anne M. (2002).
To provide a bit more context, “Disadvantaged? Not I!” is in a collection of 45 stories by women in academia entitled, “Women in the Canadian Academic Tundra: Challenging the Chill” (Hannah, Paul, and Vethamany-Globus, 2002), and Lavack’s paper is unique in its interpretation and tone. Although the stories are as varied as would be expected, many of them are much closer in content to the Acker and Miller article. What made Anne Lavack’s story thought provoking to me was that it appeared at approximately the same time as our article, both were mentioned in the same edition of the University of Regina’s internal newsletter, and she and I are in the same faculty.

Neither of these papers included a detailed theoretical framework and, taken at face value, they could be construed as the expression of individual perspectives reflecting to the personalities of the three authors, i.e., analyzed entirely at the level of the individual rather than at the cultural/structural level. Although it is important to understand how it is that the authors have arrived at such contradictory interpretations of their experiences, it is also important to predict the differential outcomes of their arguments. As Stanley and Wise (1983) argued two decades ago, it is critical to understand the personal on a more abstract level to understand just how political these individual experiences are, particularly in the context of transforming organizational cultures.

Understanding the process underlying contradictory interpretations

It is extremely important to understand how it is that women come to have such radically differing views of the same environment since the entire feminist project has been based upon the notion that consciousness raising, i.e., personal awareness of subtle discrimination against women, is a key factor in organizational (and social) change (e.g. Stanley and Wise, 1983; Segal, 1996). Although the construct of multiple perspectives is relatively well developed, one of the more useful theories related specifically to individuals operating in work organizations is Weick’s sensemaking theory (1995). Weick suggests that the process of sensemaking has seven (at least) distinguishing characteristics. It is: grounded in identity construction; retrospective; enactive of sensible environments; social; ongoing; focused on and by extracted cues; and, driven by plausibility rather than accuracy. And, as Jean Helms Mills suggests, it is at the level of analysis of identity construction that we may try “to understand how different meaning is attached to the same experiences and how particular events are more important for some than others” (Mills, 2003, p. 126). Identity construction is an ongoing, interactive, dynamic process. Thus, our ‘sense’ of a particular situation is grounded in the current state of our perception of our own identity which is based on our past experiences. In coming to an explanation of the meaning of an event, or of a situation, Weick, relying upon Erez and Earley’s (1993) cultural self-representation theory, suggests that a person’s “changing sense of self . . . operate(s) in the service of three self-derived needs: . . . self-enhancement; . . . self-efficacy; . . . and, self-consistency” (Weick, 1995, p. 20). Consistently with this theory, Dr. Lavack and I would be driven to understand our experiences in work environments, including our present academic faculty, in a manner which allowed us to maintain our positive views of our selves, our belief in our own competency, and to connect them with our pasts in such a manner that we feel some continuity.

Although there are a multitude of differences between Dr. Lavack’s background and my own, I would suggest that the most significant in terms of the differing sensemaking presented here is her relative lack of exposure to feminist explanatory frameworks and my own in-depth knowledge of them. My dissertation research (Miller, 2002b) consisted of a feminist analysis of women’s experiences in the Alberta oil industry. For me then, interpreting my experiences
in our faculty through a feminist lens is an expansion of my knowledge base which adds to my feelings of competency at using such frames of analysis while maintaining my view of myself as a feminist and advocate on behalf of women in the workplace. And, although speculative and highly partial, I would suggest that Dr. Lavack’s sensemaking is based upon her experience as a relatively privileged, heterosexual woman who believes she has independently earned everything she has achieved. Nothing in her experience has prepared her to understand that many of the ‘advantages’ she describes are the result of risks taken by many courageous, feminist women who pointed out the ‘disadvantages’ of being a woman. In both of these cases, of course, as Mills points out, “people make sense of things by seeing a world on which they have already imposed what they believe” (Mills, 2003, p. 130). If this is an accurate depiction, the logical question is, how does one dislodge the inertia of an ‘identity’ which works to remain positive, competent and consistent? In particular, in the arena of equity for women in work organizations, how might change ever be accomplished?

Adding theory on the effects of women’s differing awareness levels

Although many feminist authors have recorded similarly differing views of women in organizations, one of the more useful for understanding this disparity in terms of impact on organizational change was developed by Judi Marshall (1993) which she based on her research on women managers (1984; 1995). Marshall (1993) suggests that women’s strategies for coping with high-context (in which much meaning is assumed and unspoken), masculine organizational cultures are dependent upon how aware they are of the gendered nature of the cultures they are operating in, and that many of the strategies most commonly adopted by the women in her studies served to reinforce the status quo. Similarly, employing Marshall’s (ibid.) explanatory framework, I argued that the coping strategies adopted by the women in the Alberta oil industry that I studied, although helping them to achieve short-term success on an individual level, reinforced the gendered status quo in the longer run (Miller, 2003/4).

Marshall’s framework included four stages, which she referred to as “broad choices for women managers” (1993: 99), and which reflect the women’s levels of awareness of the masculine nature of the organizational cultures in which they worked. The following table briefly summarizes the patterns she identified:

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<thead>
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<th>Table 1: Patterns of Cultural Awareness*</th>
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<td><strong>A. MUTED</strong> Unaware of contexting</td>
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<td><strong>B. EMBATTLED</strong> Awareness of contexting</td>
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<td><strong>C. REBELLIOUS</strong> Countering gendered definitions</td>
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<td><strong>D. MEANING MAKING</strong></td>
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(co-)creating contexts of meaning

| Has choices of perspective  
| Develops strategies for dialogue  
| Holds own ground  
| Shifts contexting to low-context activity |


The paper by Lavack (2002) clearly falls into the perspective described in the first stage, labelled *muted*, in which the individual “does not see organizational cultures as male-dominated” and where they will typically “argue that being a woman has made no difference to their working life or career progress” (Marshall, 1993: 99). This stage, as Marshall (ibid.) points out, is similar to the silence identified by Goldberger et al. (1987) as one of women’s ways of knowing and it is clearly a situation where the individual inadvertently colludes with the current culture.

The paper by Acker and Miller (2002) is more difficult to place in a single awareness category, at least in part, because it reflects the views of two authors. Thus, at times, it is representative of the *embattled stage* in which the individual feels angry and judges the environment as hostile. In other places, particularly in its call for change, it reflects the *meaning making stage* in which strategies for dialoguing are promoted, and the argument is made that change will only come through surfacing the underlying masculine value system thereby shifting contexting to the low-context end (where assumptions are surfaced) of the spectrum.

The obvious implication of this analysis is that, without theorizing, or explaining, the experiences reported by women in organizations, it becomes empty rhetoric, either classifiable as whining complaint (Acker and Miller, 2002) or Pollyanna-ish praise (Lavack, 2002). It gives little direction for change. Marshall’s (1993) framework provides prescriptive information in terms of enhancing awareness of the culture as masculine and of strategies for leveraging that knowledge without being stereotyped and dismissed.

Implications for transformation and change

A gendered analysis of the culture of organizations as a framework for understanding the experiences of women in those organizations, and a theoretical frame for understanding the differences perceived by women, provides a foundation from which to begin the transformation process. In work organizations, because they are controlled social environments, it is typical to adopt some sort of planned change, or organization development, method to attempt to change attitudes and values. Whether one adopts the action inquiry approach developed by Torbert (1991; 2001), the appreciative inquiry process initiated by Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987; also Ludema, Cooperrider and Barrett, 2001), or some other organization development approach based in a feminist philosophy (Reinharz, 1992) as the basis for attempting deep change, it is quite obvious that unless a theoretical framework is in place to explain, on an abstract level, the everyday experiences of women (and other marginalized groups), the possibility for change is nonexistent.

Marshall (1993) suggests that women who are unaware of the masculine context of organizational environments (stage A) adapt to the cultures as they best can, thereby not challenging the value system underlying the culture. In her second and third developmental stages, individual women are aware they do not ‘fit’ and react with anger and rebelliousness. In return, they are either punished, or suffer considerable emotional stress from trying to cope
in hostile environments which they are highly sensitized to. They spend much time and energy trying to make their points in ways that will not be rejected outright. As she says, “breaking the rules completely is likely to make them marginal and ineffectual as potential agents for change” (p. 104). Weick suggests that “those who get immobilized, defensive, and angry in organizations are those who see the world as a place filled with problems that can be solved once and for all” (1995: 187).

It is in the last stage in her model that Marshall perceives that genuine change may be accomplished through women’s participation in shaping culture using a “continual strategy of inquiring into purposes and assumptions” (ibid., p. 105). She suggests that, because men have a tendency to take organizational values and practices for granted, women’s surfacing of those systems through questioning creates of process of consciousness raising in men. She also argues that a refusal to collude with “processes that affirm men as dominant power-holders” might be instrumental in creating cultural transformation. As an example, she suggests women may change the gendered body language game by refusing to smile as often. I would add a practice that I have used which is to suggest to administrators handing down decisions that they need to consult those affected prior to doing so. In terms of transformational change, Marshall suggests that the muted level of awareness, although a stable life strategy, is built upon shallow foundations and may require considerable energy to maintain. The meaning making stage, because it is built upon flexibility and personal choice, probably offers the most potential for creating longer lasting change.

Knowledge transfer

One of the more uncomfortable conclusions I drew from my dissertation research (see Miller, 2002) into the experiences of professional women in the Alberta oil industry was that, although the women I interviewed were knowledgeable and well-read, they had not been exposed to the metaphor of gendered organizational culture, nor to the notion of gender as a socially constructed, fluid, construct. It is essential that academics alter practice to ensure that such information becomes accessible to those who could benefit from it, either through writing for the popular press market, penetrating organizations through our consulting practices, much as Peters and Waterman did for organizational culture with their In Search of Excellence (1982), or some combination. In particular, enhancing awareness of the masculinity of cultures would lead to strategies for change on a more organized basis in organizations through educating women about the most effective tactics available.

An unintended irony in the data and analysis in this paper is that, as it now stands, if one critiques the present masculine organizational regime, as women in several levels of Marshall’s awareness scale do, one is very unlikely to be included. In fact, it is those who compliment organizations on their tolerance and acceptance who are likely to be included. So, although it is essential to expose the gendered nature of organizations in order to change them, those who do so are likely to be excluded. It becomes extremely important then, to develop methods of heightening awareness which do not threaten people into rejection, i.e. which lead them to true insight and understanding.

Summary and Conclusion

This paper started out asking four questions which were a reaction to the publication of contradictory perceptions of my and one of my colleague’s experiences in an academic department. The questions were: (1) how might we understand the contradictory
interpretations presented in these two papers, particularly in light of sensemaking theory and the importance of a feminist orientation? (2) is the lack of theorization in either paper significant and what are its implications? (3) what are the implications for organizational culture transformation of a woman academic arguing that she is not, and has not been, ‘disadvantaged’ in any way in her career, neither inside, nor outside, of academia? (4) since this paper uses the example of women inside the knowledge production machine, what are the implications for transferring knowledge of gendered organizational culture to the outside workplace?

Weick’s (1995) sensemaking theory, in particular, its characteristic of being grounded in identity construction and the need to interpret in light of the individual’s need for self-enhancement, self-efficacy, and self-consistency sheds some light on how two women in the same faculty could come to such radically different views of their experience there. I also concluded that the little theorization in the papers offers no framework for change; the arguments made in the papers effectively become empirical data. In light of this, I use Marshall’s (1993) theory on the effects of women’s differing awareness levels of the masculine context of the organizational cultures they work in to categorize the two stories and further, to predict their effects on the cultures. The theory also allows us to begin to discuss what strategies women might use most effectively in their attempts to transform gendered organizational cultures. Finally, I suggest that feminist academics must be more innovative at spreading the word about gendered organizational culture, and strategies for changing it, since it is the key to understanding the discomfort many women endure at work.

References


