Gender and Organizational Culture: A Literature Review of Past Theories

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Abstract

As with many concepts prevalent in business and management literature, career is often written about as if it was gender free. In fact the concept of career was and still is a deeply gendered construction. Many surveys point out that the psychological contract traditionally described was not so mutually beneficial to women. Although the idea of a linear progression is now being jettisoned as the normative path for career, for many women this has never been the case. A few women had careers similar to the traditional male pattern; more had not. Women's careers have been characterized by limited opportunities, low paid part time work, breaks of different lengths for childcare and other domestic responsibilities, and unhelpful assumptions about commitment and capability. This is true both for women in general and women aspiring to be managers. Upward mobility remains, however, one of the conventional measures of organizational and career success, and will be explored in this paper in accordance with past but classical theories of organizational culture.

Key Words: Literature Review, Gender, Organization Culture, Past Theories.

Introduction

Statistical and research evidence of the past years shows that the number of women who work has increased significantly over the last decade. For instance, in both UK and Ireland, women represent more than 45 per cent of the workforce (Ackah *et al.,* 1999). In fact, Britain had one of the highest percentages of working women in Europe (Hughes, 2000). Further studies have shown that the workforces of nations are undergoing change with an increase in the number of female employees (Houten, 1997; Lee and Chon, 2000).

Women and their careers are indeed the current topic for discussion, which is probably due to the growth in diversity and the enhancement of their roles throughout the twentieth century. It is also evident that there has been a slow but encouraging demise of the education and skills gap between men and women. Statistical data from Europe also showed that from 1991 to 1996 there has been a significant growth in the number of women aged 20-34 attaining degrees, in comparison with their male counterparts. For example, in 1996 there were 52,921 women in this age bracket, being awarded degrees or higher, in contrast with 40,359 in 1991. In 1996, 46,700 men of the same age gained degrees compared with 36,323 in 1991 (Central Statistics Office, 2000). This supports the belief that women are just as academically qualified as their male counterparts, and are therefore worthy of equality in the workplace.

The Representation of Women in Management: Evidences from past surveys

Many explanations have been offered as to why, relative to men, so few women managers existed, especially when women form 43 percent of the UK workforce (Hanna, 1991). Estimates of women managers as a percentage of all managers differ between 10 percent (McGwire, 1992), 15 percent (Cowe, 1997), and 20 percent (MacErlean, 1997). However representation at different levels of seniority can vary between 27 percent at lower levels (Hanna, 1991) to merely 4.5 percent at the top (Cowe, 1997). Other figures suggest a more encouraging situation, as Dun and Bradstreet found that overall 29 percent of company directors are women, and are generally younger than men (Cowe, 1997). The discrepancy between these two figures is because of the better prospects for women in smaller companies (Cowe, 1997). The general variations in figures of women managers indicate a problem about the definition of manager and supervisor, and understandings vary between organization, industry, and country. It is therefore perhaps more helpful to see these statistics as taxonomic constructions rather than hard data. Even given these definitional difficulties there are clearly far fewer women than men managers, and horizontal and vertical segregation by gender is predominant in both private and public sectors (Alban-Metcalfe and West, 1991; Ashburner, 1992).

Different writers have categorized the difficulties women face in succeeding as managers in different ways (see for instance Hirsh, 1990). For ease these explanations can be grouped into three categories: deficit, structural, and choice. Deficit theories postulate that women have insufficient of what it takes to be a manager, be that intellect, physical and mental stamina, ambition, or leadership skills. However, the weakness in this argument is belied by the significant overlap of characteristics and behaviour between male and female managers (Marshall, 1984). Structural explanations for women's poor representation focus on the societal, organizational and familial stumbling blocks which women face. They include: disregard of the spirit and letter of the law (Cockburn, 1991); inequality of educational opportunity (Marshall, 1984); the gendering of career choice and training opportunities (Clarke, 1991); bias in selection methods (Alimo-Metcalfe, 1993); different career paths offered to men and women (Ashburner, 1991); and insufficient institutional and personal support (Davidson and Cooper, 1992; Hirsh, 1990). The third set of explanations for under-representation concerns choice by women. This may appear to be blaming women for their non-advancement, without acknowledging structural difficulties. An alternative argument allows that women have ambition and ability, apprehend the structural problems that face them, and hence choose not to pursue a managerial career. Some look at what is expected from them in behavioural terms in higher management, and decide that they do not wish to participate. They do not like the organizational culture to which they are expected to conform (Marshall, 1984).

Cattaneo et al (1992) proposed the concept of women-friendliness as a measure of organizations' receptivity to women. At issue is the extent to which organizations accommodate women and protect their interests and how much such behaviour is interwoven into the corporate culture. Women-friendliness refers to the nature of the organizational policy framework and the degree to which that provides for women the opportunity to integrate personal, work, marital and family roles successfully. Or, to put it from an organizational perspective, women-friendliness refers to how easy it is for women to work and have a career within the organization.

The degree of women-friendliness of organizations varies widely. At one extreme are those organizations that pursue an exclusionary strategy in which occupations and jobs are rigidly sex-typed and reflect traditional assumptions about the roles of men and women. Men will predominate in those positions that require leadership and decision making (managerial and supervisory) and in those, which require physical strength and skill (skilled trades, semi-skilled and manual work). In contrast, women will predominate in positions where female in-role behaviour is viewed as an asset. In such positions, assisting, helping, nurturing, sympathetic and relationship-oriented behaviours are valued. Thus, the greatest proportion of women in this type of organization will be found in clerical and other supporting positions. There may also

be a difference in terms of the distribution of men and women according to line and staff responsibilities. Women are likely to fill a larger proportion of staff positions in as much as these jobs offer assistance to the line functions.

At the other extreme, in the ideal, fully women-friendly organization there is no sex-typing of jobs, and in consequence no occupational segregation. There is no difference neither in the proportions of men and of women occupying line or staff positions, nor in the proportions of men and women in managerial vs. non-managerial positions. While few (if any) organizations could fit this description of an ideal, fully women-friendly organization, all organizations could be placed somewhere on the continuum between the two extremes. In general women in financial institutions are not well represented within the key decision-making positions. Thus we would characterize financial institutions, in general, as low in women-friendliness.

Main Threads of Women Managers

Itzin, C (1995) made a research carried out in a local authority to illustrate the many dimensions of sexism and sex discrimination in organizations and how gender interacts with race to disadvantage women. The results came to support a range of proposals designed to change the culture, structure and practices of the organization. The study identified the many ways "things were done" in the organization, which account for why women fail to achieve their potential, their ambitions and parity with men in senior management positions. These included:

- The long hours expected and required of senior managers, which were incompatible with women's domestic responsibilities
- Lack of encouragement for women from male managers and sometimes positive obstruction (one male manager had withdrawn a woman's application for a new job within the organization without consulting her)
- Women's lack of confidence to go for positions of power
- The ways that the interview process disadvantages women
- The way that women are handicapped by the withholding of information (one confessed to keeping abreast of information crucial to her work by snooping around on her boss's and other senior male managers' desks)
- Women's isolation and lack of support
- The suspicion and hostility towards women in networking
- The prevalence of sexual stereotypes
- The incidence of sexual harassment
- The closed, hostile and indifference male culture at the top of the organization

The influence of gender stereotypes on the opportunities women have to access management positions has been the subject of considerable research since Schein (1973) demonstrated how closely the stereotypic image of the "good" manager is associated with the masculine stereotype. The common perception that "male = manager" works against women aspiring to senior management positions (Schein and Mueller, 1992). Organizations are not genderless (Morgan, 1986; Sheppard, 1989) and many authors have argued that women's presence is tolerated in the workplace as long as they do not seek to move beyond the boundaries defined by gender (Ramsay, 1995).

The prescriptive nature of gender stereotypes provides an important source of resistance to women seeking management positions (Marshall, 1984). As Schein (1994, p. 50) notes, "underlying the resistance, the foot dragging and the excuses is a deeply held attitude "for men only", or "only men are really qualified" to do these jobs". Women seeking such positions are seen to be in opposition to the traditional ideologies of femininity and there appears to be a growing backlash against these women (Faludi, 1991).

Cash (1997) points out that all forms of narrative from epic to cartoon "need the 'other' or hidden story set up in the mind of the listener to have their effect" (p. 160). In line with Sinclair's (1998; 1994) discussions of heroic masculinism, this study uses the Ulysses (Odysseus) ten-year epic quest to represent the 'other' or hidden story to women managers' narratives. Ulysses, a mythical king of Ithaca, sets out on his journey, leaving his faithful wife Penelope at home. He faces many life-threatening disasters, he battles with giants and monsters, and he withstands the temptations of those who would seduce him from his quest, for instance, the Lotus Eaters and the Sirens (Brewster et al, 1994). The Ulysses story forms an archetype for the battles, feats, and triumphs of the career journey of the present day male executive.

In place of Ulysses, this study proposes Xena warrior princess as a "mythical" figure who breaks into the male appropriation of leadership in the following ways. First, the name Xena is the feminine form of the Greek word ***xenos*** meaning a stranger, suggesting a woman who has existed for some time but, like the women executive, is not recognized by the dominant culture as one of them. Second, the Xena warrior princess character is an entirely modern invention of the entertainment industry who is, nevertheless, depicted as a classical leader of an often disparate band of women who rival men in their heroic exploits while providing a quintessential female form and image.

Sinclair (1998) reminds us that archetypes are ongoing social constructions. Such is the power of the media-created character to tap into subconscious images of women as leaders that, despite possible views that the series is a further Hollywood-type exploitation of women's sexuality, Xena has entered the popular consciousness and even achieved a cult following in parts of the USA. However, the appropriateness of the Xena "myth" for women in management lies in the subconscious knowledge it triggers in both men and women, of women as leaders (though they may be often invisible or lacking a profile). Breaking into this archetypal awareness through their stories is a form of breaking the silence for women in management.

Like Ulysses, the Xena warrior princess has embarked on a long-term journey, although with one exception in these stories, they have not left a "Penelope" at home to deal with family and provide an audience to their achievements. The trials Xena women face and subvert in their stories are not to do with proving their abilities through feats of corporate strength, although many mention the hours of training, effort, and achievements of their careers. In parodic inversions of the Ulysses story, the "career-threatening" monsters they face are the attitudes they encounter from some people at various stages in their careers, attitudes that deny or block their leadership qualities.

In the following account, these attitudes are discussed under three inter-related headings:

  I.   Invisibility.
  II. Sexuality.
  III. Flexibility.

A further theme of flexibility briefly draws together some threads of the women managers' responses to unsupportive organizations.

 I.   Invisibility

At all levels of the career journey, women managers speak of having to combat the "monster of invisibility". These stories include tales of male managers being paid more for doing the same job; the "feminization" and consequent undervaluing of organizations with predominantly women management teams; and the restructuring processes in which the reduction in middle management is accompanied by a preference for males over previously senior women for the new team leaders or management positions.

II.   Sexuality

In the Ulysses myth, women feature either as temptresses who would seduce the hero away from his quest, or as loving, faithful women who support him, a classical rendering of the whore/Madonna dichotomy. Sinclair (1998) points out: "However, the moral is that ultimately, he (Ulysses/Odysseus) must not be diverted, even by genuine love" (p. 49). The Xenas of modern management still battle comparable unspoken rules and attitudes that set them aside from looking like "leadership material".

III.   Flexibility

One of the final strands in the women managers' narratives is a theme of flexibility. The modern-day Xena is not prepared to accept marginalisation in the various forms already described. Some directly challenge stereotyped attitudes. Others ignore them in public, while others transform them through laughter in stories shared with other women.

The Barriers to Achieving the Transformation of Women

As has been pointed out in the case of other countries as well, the barriers to women's advancement through the managerial ranks in Greece seem to come to a large extent from the views of corporate leaders about motherhood, traditions and socialization. According to these views all women are grouped in one category and are considered to have priorities and motivations centered only on their traditional role. However, empirical observation and research showed that in modern societies not all women in management have children and are preoccupied with household duties. For example, according to data from the British Institute of Management only 58 per cent of its women members were married and most likely a much smaller percentage of them had children. Moreover, in contemporary societies women with children can have help from various sources (e.g. husbands or companions, older relatives, paid household assistants, crèches, day-care centers, etc.) and can thus work as least as hard and show the same dedication to their careers as men. The evidence from all over the world show that women select the lifestyles that suit them best, are prepared to make trade-offs and can very well balance a career with family responsibilities when there is division of labour within the family and the appropriate social infrastructure (Maddock, 1999).

The barriers to achieving the transformation challenging women had hoped to pursue and achieve. Interestingly, some of these barriers were gender culture related and some very reflective of the nature of public sector organizations. The main barriers included:

- Other women (their lack of support and often highly critical stance of women managers).
- What Maddock has termed as the "Caring conundrum". To be challenging often meant appearing less caring and therefore reinforcing myths of the hard career women.
- Making innovators scapegoats. Challenging management systems made these women vulnerable and often ostracized - some to the point where they were sacked, only to be reinstated as a result of unfair dismissal and then feeling too vulnerable to stay on in their positions.
- The blame culture. Local government (and probably the public sector in general) is heavily dominated by a culture of blame. Perhaps because everything local government is involved in is visible and subject to localized and personalized politics. It is a very sad reflection on the sector because innovation (which always carries risk with it) gets beaten out of the people who work within the sector
- The impact of managerialism and the impact of staff. Women managers hoped that dismantling bureaucracy would bring an acceptance of inclusive management - however, it resulted in a focus on contracts, tight performance management and a high degree of specification. The focus on efficiency made everyone very busy measuring and reporting (and increasing outputs) but it was at

the cost of collaborative relationships between colleagues, staff and agencies. Many women found this alienating and increasingly questioned their ability to influence change.

Maddocks' drawing together of individual experience, management and gender theory and organizational (at least public sector) behaviour, leads to a very clear message for innovative women wishing to change systems - it is more than an uphill struggle. Maddock concludes that change is possible but is most likely to occur when we can talk openly about gender effects and when there is a greater awareness of how male culture permeates organizations, influences decision making and management styles.

Conclusion

The above literature review of past research gave a positive picture of achievement of women in education and their negative picture of their position in labour, meaning that the majority of women held low-level jobs in relation to men. Only a few studies showed the opposite and are more encouraging. The statistics of the UK concerning the representation of women at different levels of position inside the companies was interesting to give us a representative picture of working women in Europe giving possible explanation for the results. Women friendliness was an issue that seems to be important for women feeling equal in the workplace, however literature showed us that even with the achievement of equality throughout the years women are still facing career barriers. The above literature review can offer considerable value to future research. It can be used as a good base, in order authors to investigate whether previous results appear still in the UK and EU in general.

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