DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 474 590 CS 511 843

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TITLE	Gender in Communication: Micropolitics at Work.
PUB DATE	2002-12-00
NOTE	20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Australian Association for Research in Education (Brisbane, Australia, December 1-5, 2002).
AVAILABLE FROM	Full text at: http://www.aare.edu.au/02pap/pet02184.htm.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Communication Research; *Communication Skills; Feminism; Gender Issues; Higher Education; Interpersonal Competence; Literature Reviews; *Organizational Communication; *Organizational Culture; Politics of Education; *Sex Differences
IDENTIFIERS	*Communication Behavior

ABSTRACT

Although interpersonal and relational skills are clearly relevant to successful performance in many jobs and roles, there is evidence that these skills are not valued in the same way as technical skills or the skills of self-promotion and "managing up." The label "women's work" is often linked to interpersonal competence with an accompanying negative impact and devaluing effect. This paper looks at some of the themes emerging from the literature on gender and communication as part of a small project to develop a series of workshops on communication within a university workplace. Difference discourses, conversational and leadership styles, a peak masculinist culture and socialisation patterns are discussed. Traditional values and perceptions of merit are questioned. The search and interpretation of the literature was influenced by insights gained through interviews with 21 women who chose to leave leadership and management positions in a large educational bureaucracy. The stories of their experiences, interpreted from a feminist perspective, revealed the micropolitical processes at work as they disrupted a management hierarchy embedded in tradition and comfortable with "the way we do things around here." Contains 52 references. (Author/RS)

Gender in Communication: Micropolitics at Work

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AARE 2002 INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION RESEARCH CONFERENCE

BRISBANE, 1-5 December, 2002

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Abstract

Although interpersonal and relational skills are clearly relevant to successful performance in many jobs and roles, there is evidence that these skills are not valued in the same way as technical skills (Cleveland, Stockdale & Murphy, 2000) or the skills of self-promotion and 'managing up'. The label 'women's work' is often linked to interpersonal competence with an accompanying negative impact and devaluing effect. In this paper I look at some of the themes emerging from the literature on gender and communication as part of a small project to develop a series of workshops on communication within a university workplace. Difference discourses, conversational and leadership styles, a peak masculinist culture and socialisation patterns are discussed. Traditional values and perceptions of merit are questioned. My search and interpretation of the literature was influenced by the insights I gained through interviews with twenty-one women who chose to leave leadership and management positions in a large educational bureaucracy (PhD research in progress). The stories of their experiences, interpreted from a feminist perspective, revealed the micropolitical processes at work as they disrupted a management hierarchy embedded in tradition and comfortable with 'the way we do things around here'.

Introduction

Discussing 'women's rights' or 'gender equity' is a contentious issue, a disquietening message, because "feminism has had its day", "women are equal now", "women are taking over", "they're all lezzos anyway". In fact, to speak out in the name of gender is currently acceptable only in terms of "what about the boys?" but debilitating to a woman's career prospects if she dares to mention discrimination against women in the workplace. The advent of women entering the workforce in large numbers since the 1970s has fueled the perception that 'women are taking over'; in fact, only small numbers have entered the management ranks (generally less than 10% in senior management). This perception, combined with the new managerialist and economic rationalist discourses that have dominated the workplace in recent years, has meant a huge backlash to feminism and a new conservatism where silence in the face of adversity is the accepted and safe response.

I am currently investigating the experiences of women in leadership and management who chose to leave their positions in the central office of a large state education department in Australia during the 1990's (PhD research, Peters, 2001). In particular, I am seeking to identify why the women left and elements of the organisational culture which may have impacted on their careers. I hope that this study will add to existing knowledge about women in management in Australia and the phenomenon of the 'glass ceiling', which is generally understood to refer to an invisible barrier which prevents women, because they are women, from advancing beyond low to middle levels of organisational management (Morrison, White & Van Velsor, 1987; Davidson & Cooper, 1992; Sinclair, 1994; Ramsay, 1995; Smith & Hutchinson, 1995; Still, 1995). Even the few women who do make it into senior management positions can encounter resistance as a common language and common experience binds the dominant group and excludes those who are different (Kanter, 1977). The sample (21 women) ranges from women leading projects and

special programs to directors, executive directors and chief executives. All, with one exception, encountered barriers and described gendered micropolitical processes at work. The loss of talent is central to the research, which asks what could be done to retain women of high potential, and, indeed, to recognise, nurture and value talented and 'different' individuals who may disrupt the traditional understanding of 'manager' or 'leader'.

The work experiences described by the women in this study revealed some major themes including:

- lost promotional opportunities linked to perceptions of merit in the corporate culture;
- marginalisation, isolation, tokenism, and being treated 'differently' as a woman;
- management styles that were more inclusive and interactive than those of the 'masculinist' tradition;
- the frustrations of bureaucracy and hierarchy including the boys' club, cloning, the emphasis on impression management, factions and tribalism, inflexible and long work hours, constant restructuring and change (often reinventing the wheel) and
- lack of life balance.

The qualitative research approach, which used in-depth open ended interviewing techniques, was influenced by my feminist perspective and my desire to work *with* the interviewees to explore their experiences as women in organisational management. My own connection with the research stems from my experiences as a project leader, working in a central office position within a state education department. I am, in fact, one of the interviewees, so have a participant observer role in the research.

In a profound questioning of the corporate culture the women identified the micropolitical processes at work which blocked career progress for many women. They questioned political game playing, unwritten rules, gate keeping, the exclusiveness of the boys' club and the hierarchical management structure. They recognised that withholding information and keeping people in the dark is a very effective marginalising tool (Kirner and Rayner, 1999). Informal decision-making among members of the boys' club puts women at a disadvantage, particularly when they are outnumbered. Taking the credit and upwardly managing - the strategy of self-promotion more normative for men than for women (Rudman, 1998) - together with a lack of acknowledgement of the achievements of women, highlighted the male advantage. Constant change and restructure can be used as a strategy to keep men in power. The cloning process which arises from an executive culture which "is a masculine domain, not just comprising men, but dominated by values, norms, symbols and ways of operating that are oriented to men" (Sinclair, 1994, p. ix) is not conducive to real change. Playing it safe, promoting only those who fit the dominant culture, creates more of the same. Even mediocre performance is less threatening than doing things differently.

This paper will not expand on the methodology and findings from my PhD research (see Peters, 2001 for a more detailed account of the research project), but will focus on the themes emerging from a section of the literature relevant to the research, namely, 'gender and communication'. I was prompted to expand my search of the literature on leadership, gender and organisational culture to include gender and communication after being invited to contribute to a small project at Murdoch University. The project aimed to update a staff development workshop on *Gender in Communication* (based on the text *Me Jane, You Tarzan* by Sally Zanetic & Chris Jeffrey, 1999)

with the literature that had emerged in the last five years. My contribution was to search and review the literature, attend focus group meetings and to make suggested improvements to the previous workshop format.

A series of three focus group meetings were held, after the workshop facilitator had met with me to discuss my recommendations and the general findings of the literature review in which I summarised the current emerging themes. Comments from women attending the original workshop contributed to a feeling that there was a masculinist style that dominated the workplace (operating within a masculine framework) and that issues of difference generally led to the undervaluing of work carried out by members of subordinate groups, particularly women. The number of participants attending focus group workshops was small, typically eight people inclusive of the facilitator, the manager and me, as researcher. Those invited to participate were both men and women from a cross section of the university i.e. academic staff, administrative staff and a postgraduate student representative. In each group one academic with an understanding of gender and cultural issues was invited to attend, however in both the second and third sessions the academic nominated was unable to attend. The meetings focused on 'communication styles in the university' and at the point of inviting the participants the facilitator raised some general questions (via email) regarding perceived communication styles, diversity of styles and the value placed on those styles. Participants were to link their ideas to the content and delivery of a workshop on communication. Apart from the facilitator, manager and me, none of the participants had attended the original workshop. Gender as an issue was not made explicit, although the manager commented in both pre and post meeting talks (but not in the meetings) that he felt that gender was a central issue. Under the direction of the workshop organisers, I attended each focus group meeting as an invited participant. I was also asked to record the main points emerging from each session. However, there was no acknowledgement at any of the meetings that I was recording ideas or that I had reviewed the literature and made recommendations.

Focus Group Suggestions

A summary of the main points raised during the focus group meetings is as follows:

- the workplace comprises different cultures in different locations across the university;
- recognition of a diversity of styles is necessary for effective communication;
- communication styles and strategies are related to context e.g. formal and informal meetings, performance appraisals, job interviews, selection panels, face-to-face, telephone, fax and email communications;
- 'corridor talk', informal meetings and informal networks influence decision making;
- a 'moaning-groaning' culture can develop behind closed doors;
- use of factional power can disrupt collaborative efforts;
- status and power issues influence participation in university decision making, e.g. the academic and general staff divide;
- having a 'voice' is related to positional status;
- the size and composition of the group can influence effective communication;
- reintroducing small committees may encourage a diversity of voices;
- career management is vital for everyone;
- merit is usually male-defined, influencing male dominance in executive positions;
- promotional processes need to be transparent;

- 360° feedback on performance at all levels could be part of performance management;
- the potential and actual contributions of all workers should be recognised, regardless of status;
- ideas should be encouraged, valued and acknowledged;
- childhood socialisation and life experiences influence adult behaviour;
- differences in male/female communication styles may be attributed to gender or personality;
- financial constraints, loss of job security, dislocation and huge work hours lead to stress;
- a culture of overwork and 'using' the professionalism of workers eventually effects quality;
- a supportive work environment takes time to celebrate successes.

Suggestions for a communication workshop focused mainly on communication skills. Focus group participants recommended that future workshops identify the specific needs of each target group

and include content that covers listening skills, non-verbal communication, how to chair meetings effectively, how to participate effectively in meetings, and how to conduct performance appraisals. Facilitation techniques could include case studies, scenarios, role-play, interactive small group problem solving and setting a take-away task or mini action research project for participants (to be reviewed at a follow-up workshop or series of workshops).

The issues of communication expanded to illuminate current workplace concerns. Illuminating the theme of overwork and overload, one participant used the analogy "too busy sawing through the wood to take time to sharpen the saw", conveying a very real and widespread concern shared by other participants. A picture of a culture of overwork within the 'greedy' institution (Coser cited in Currie, Harris & Thiele, 2000) emerged. My feeling, influenced by my feminist perspective, was that some of the gender and status dynamics that are played out in the workplace were also in operation at the meetings. There seemed to be a reluctance to discuss gendered practices, to criticise any aspect of senior management or to comment on the suggestion (based on academic research) that an élite or peak masculinist culture may be at work in the university. Gender and power differences were submerged in rhetoric of personality differences. Both the manager and the facilitator tended to keep a neutral stance on gender issues, neither raising nor promoting discussion. When gender issues were raised (e.g. What work is valued? Who gets the credit/advantage?), it was either by the academic with relevant expertise (focus group one) or by me.

After each focus group meeting the manager held a brief debriefing and discussion of the main points emerging (with the focus group facilitator and me). Since the last meeting in June I have not received further communication although participants have been thanked and informed that focus group material will be forwarded for comment. The workshop leader (also the manager) and the focus group facilitator have since presented a communication workshop (based on the original workshop material) to staff at another university, in conjunction with a similar workshop by an international speaker on male/female differences in communication style.

I will now address some of the themes emerging from the gender and communication literature, presenting an overview and interpretation (acknowledging my feminist subject position) before finishing with some suggestions for future workshops.

Definitions: Sex and Gender

There is much discussion in the literature on the different uses or understandings of the terms 'sex' and 'gender'. Definitions are reworked and reconstructed as ideologies and theories change over time. The following definition is representative of the current literature: "Whereas *sex* is generally the term used to indicate biological difference, *gender* is the term used to indicate psychological, social and cultural difference" (Claes, 1999, p. 431). Gender is determined by social practice and social practice is historically located. As our understandings develop over time, research findings are interpreted differently depending on current ideologies, attitudes and viewpoints. Gender and sexual identities are constantly in a process of change in response to wider social and familial transformation (David, 2001). Therefore femininity and masculinity should be seen as historically mutable (Claes, 1999). Postmodern authors warn that "to separate the two, regarding sex as reflecting natural anatomical differences and gender as a matter of cultural identity, is ultimately inadequate and overly simplistic" (Flax, cited in Fredrick & Atkinson, 1997, p. 40). The concepts of sex and gender are not fixed and static but always in process (Fredrick & Atkinson, 1997).

The Construction of Gender

The gender patterns that we see enacted in our organisations and institutions are extensions of the patterns we see in society at large, reinforced through the media and popular culture. The social construction of gender is reinforced in the messages on baby congratulation cards, in fashion, in families and at work. Sites of resistance erupt, feminists push the boundaries, other marginalised groups challenge the social order and gradually attitudes and perceptions are modified.

Citing the work of Deborah Tannen, Oakley (2000) highlights the links between social conditioning and the expectations we bring to the workplace. Tannen, building on the work of Carol Gilligan (1982) observes that "in childhood most girls are socialised to believe that sounding too sure of themselves will make them unpopular with their peers. Boys, on the other hand, are expected to emphasise, rather than downplay their status" (Oakley, 2000, pp. 4-5 html document). Where boys learn to use language to enhance their status in the group, to play up their individual ability and knowledge, and to challenge others directly, a group of girls will ostracise another girl who calls attention to herself. By relating to others, girls will find ways to express themselves by balancing their own needs and the needs of the group.

Making a link between childhood conditioning and the world of work, Oakley (2000) explains that:

> In corporate life, women are less likely than men to engage in behaviours that are self-promoting, a pattern that Tannen (1994) traces back to early childhood socialisation ... Tannen observes that men more often than women engage in behaviours that get them recognised with those in power, which gives them an advantage in the art of managing up. Women are less likely to blow their own horn, and therefore are less likely to be recognised. (p. 324)

In addition, a woman is more likely to request rather than issue orders, a sign of respect which can be perceived as a lack of self-confidence or a failure to effectively exercise authority. Therefore, in the almost all-male world of upper management women are forced to change their linguistic style to a more command-oriented form in order to be perceived as strong, decisive and

in control. However, in adopting a male linguistic style female managers run the risk of being perceived as too aggressive. This double bind is what Jamieson (1995) has identified as the femininity/competence bind. "The existence of toughness and femininity in one personality are difficult qualities for our culture to reconcile and digest" (Oakley, 2000, p.324).

Thus, social expectations and images of what makes a successful manager or leader collide. The double bind for women arises from dominant images of the strong heroic male leader. For example, research studies of mixed-sex interactions have shown that men interrupt women more than women interrupt men, and men talk more than women (Spender, 1980). And 'holding the floor' in a meeting is a power strategy used traditionally by men to claim attention, whether or not their input is justified. Yet when women try to "speak, and interrupt at the same rate as men in a mixed group, they are often labelled as 'persistent', tenacious' and 'annoying' by male participants!" (Spender cited in Davidson and Cooper, 1992, p. 50). In another example, the 'art' of managing up or 'impression management', which many women find distasteful (Rudman, 1998; Morley, 1999), is successful largely because it is condoned by those in power - usually men who themselves may have 'made it' through excessive self-promotion and cloned behaviour. Rather than encouraging women to change their linguistic and management style to emulate men, we could question the value of such behaviour.

Masculinities

A comparatively new field of knowledge and politics is the study of men and masculinities. Based on social science research it is distinct from the pop-psychology books about men that promote neo-conservative arguments of "natural difference" and "true masculinity". As Connell (1995) explains, these limited views of masculinity, often promoted by the media, "roll back the rather limited advances against discrimination made by women and gay men in the last two decades" (p.ix). The discourse of masculinity in crisis, often linked to 'blame the feminist' arguments, "taps into both male and female uncertainties about changing gender roles, into job uncertainties and destabilisation of previously secure male career paths" helping to preserve the status quo (Blackmore, 1999, pp. 138-139). Strategic masculinity discourse "is another strand of the discourse of male crisis which derives from the men's movement" (Blackmore, 1999, p. 141). The 'sensitive new age guy' and the 'strategic manager' linked to this discourse have gained credibility because they are seemingly inclusive of a range of 'feminine' behaviours. Yet, as Blackmore points out, "the asymmetrical power relations based on gender have not altered" (p.142).

Much of the social science work on masculinities builds on findings from feminist research and, in keeping with postmodern influences, recognises that "masculine identities are not static but historically and spatially situated and evolving" (Kenway, 1997, p.5). Kenway summarises the main points arising from the more credible literature (moving beyond the men-as-victims scenarios which dominate the men's/boy's movement literature to an understanding of broad structural inequalities between males and females, and a recognition of the complex and dynamic influences of power, society and culture) including the work of Connell, on the construction of masculinities. An understanding of the changing conceptions of masculinity over time "allows Connell to talk about masculinity as a life project involving the making and remaking of identity and meaning" (Kenway, 1997, p. 5). Masculinity is no longer viewed as a singular entity. Instead there are multiple masculinities, which can be understood through a social analysis of gender relations.

The various masculinities "can be clustered on the basis of general social, cultural and institutional patterns of power and meaning and are built in relationship to each other" (Kenway, 1997, p.5). Connell (1995) calls these hegemonic, subordinate, complicitous and marginal. The concept of hegemonic masculinity is now widely used and refers to "those dominant and dominating forms of masculinity which claim the highest status and exercise the greatest influence and authority", legitimating "the broad structure of power known as patriarchy" (Kenway, 1997, p.5). Thus it is through "a complex set of power relations [that] certain types of masculinity are valued over others" (Martino & Mayenn, 2001, p. xi).

However, hegemonic or "dominant macho masculinities" are problematic for many men as well as for many women (Blackmore, 1999, p. 213). "Like women, some men, particularly those who think differently and question the status quo, find themselves excluded from powerful networks" (Peters, 2001, p. 90). The opportunity for women to work with (profeminist) men who themselves may have experienced exclusion from the dominant group is perhaps a way of sharing an informed gender perspective, and a way of moving forward in the gender debate. But we must still bear in mind the pervasive nature of the male advantage. As Connell (1995) points out, although men are increasingly aware of turbulence and change in gender relations, many are ambivalent, and all continue to draw a 'patriarchal dividend': the advantage men in general gain from the overall subordination of women.

Amanda Sinclair (2000) who is Foundation Professor of Management at the Melbourne Business School, University of Melbourne, says that the way forward in the understanding of gender relations in organisations is to turn from a focus on women to a broader focus on men and the construction of masculinities in management. She points out that the short agenda - focusing on equal employment opportunity or palatable arguments for 'diversity' - is not enough. She is convinced that the teaching of gender needs to encompass masculinities, but has found that the task is not easy, particularly for a female teacher to a predominantly male group.

Differences in Conversational Styles

One of the areas to which gender has been widely applied is language. Gender, language and the relation between them are all social constructs or practices, under constant development by a group of individuals united in a common activity, e.g. a family, a sports team, colleagues, etc. (Eckert & McConnel-Ginet cited in Claes, 1999).

It is important to note that although many researchers have highlighted linguistic variations in male and female speech patterns (e.g. Tannen, 1990, 2001; Spender, 1980), differences in speech patterns may be attributable also to status, age, ethnicity, geographic location and education. Both similarities and differences may be found between groups and within groups; the complexity means that overly simplistic gender attributions may be wide of the mark. Davis (cited in Claes, 1999) reminds us that generalising about language use on the basis of socio-cultural constructs such as gender or ethnicity is problematic and can perpetuate a stereotype based on the assumption of group homogeneity. There are multiple interpretations of femininity and masculinity and behaviours can vary across time and context. For example, a woman in senior management may adopt a more masculine management style in order to 'fit in' with the dominant culture, sometimes becoming an 'honorary male' in the process. In addition, this co-option process may have its impact on men who may feel pressured to conform to the dominant image of an existing managerial model. Other women survive using their own communication

styles in more female friendly sections of the organisation, while there are others who continue to 'rock the boat' (Peters, 2001), eventually deciding to leave in search of a more supportive environment.

There are currently two approaches to perceived gender differences in conversation styles: one stresses the *dominance factor;* the other, the *cultural factor*. The former focuses on the unequal distribution of power in society: men have more social power, which enables them to define and control situations. The latter stresses socialisation: men and women learn different communication strategies and develop distinct conversational styles because they belong to different subcultures (Canary, Emmers-Sommer & Faulkner, 1997). As with most debates, the boundaries are blurred, and issues of power and culture intersect.

It is common for male speech to be taken as the norm and female speech assessed in relation to male speech. Female is seen as 'other', male as the accepted one or the normal one. "She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her" (de Beauvoir cited by Cockburn, 1991, p. 208). Female speech has been perceived as less rational, more sensitive, yet more straightforward in vocabulary and structure. At the same time it is seen as more descriptive, with more interjections and tag questions. Female speech is seen as polite and may seem insecure, although hesitation or hedging is often used as a face-saving strategy, to relax the interchange, to encourage others and to avoid the imposition of status. Male language is often perceived as assertive and direct and tends to take dominance in mixed sex groupings. Female interchanges tend to be cooperative while male communication is often competitive. An assertive female is likely to be labelled as aggressive, whereas an assertive male is considered 'good leadership material'.

However, evidence that there are inherent sex differences in language is not convincing (Claes, 1999). Socialisation is a strong factor influencing behaviour and variables such as age and status may be as influential as patterns related to gender. The dualistic or oppositional approach is out of favour. The essentialism inherent in dichotomies such as relational vs. competitive, community vs. individuality, care vs. justice (Gilligan, 1982), emotion vs. reason and masculine vs. feminine can preclude the possibility of radical change. Biological essentialism linked to special skills and abilities can create and perpetuate gender stereotypes that deny more opportunities than they create (Schrage, 1999). By focusing on which is 'better' we may fail to criticise the foundations upon which such dichotomies are based (Fredrick & Atkinson, 1997). Many researchers and writers agree that masculinity and femininity are not opposites, but mutually overlapping constructs with multiple masculinities and multiple femininities. "Men and women do not live on different planets, but are members of cultures in which a large amount of discourse about gender is constantly circulating" (Cameron cited in Jones, 1999, p.151).

Gender, Power and Organisations

When I refer to 'micropolitics at work' in the title of this paper, I refer to subtle and often invisible ways in which power is relayed in everyday work practices (Morley, 1999). As explained by Morley (1999, p.45) "conflicts, tensions, resentments, competing interests and power imbalances influence everyday transactions in institutions" and can render the work of marginalised groups invisible. "[T]he language in which oppressed groups express these phenomena is often [devalued] and rendered irrelevant or illegitimate by dominant discourses" (Morley, 1999, p.6). "The invisibility of the process[es] of exclusion - the problem that has no

name, but referred to variously as 'masculinist cultures' and glass ceilings - account for their durability in the face of anti-discrimination legislation and affirmative action" (Blackmore & Sachs, 2000, p.7) And, as Maud Eduards (cited in Eveline, 1994) points out, "the most effective opposition to change is kept intangible" (p. 134).

In 1994 Joan Eveline argued the need for a critical (d)enunciation of 'men's advantage'. The feminist discourse of women's disadvantage (as opposed to men's advantage) reinforces an assumption that processes advantaging men are 'normal'. Rather than highlighting the inequalities between men and women, the discourse of disadvantage conceals and congeals them into a 'woman's problem'. For a woman to make career progress she must be given 'training' or 'self-esteem'. Eveline suggests that if EEO policies are to succeed "one could make a case that men need[ed], at least, an equal amount of training and retraining" (p. 134).

Gherardi & Poggio (2001) analyse the gender order at work - the rules and the rituals by which gender is created and recreated in organisations. They suggest that viewing gender in the context of organisational culture - "something organisations 'do' and not as a natural attribute of people" - can help those within the organisation, particularly managers, "to be aware of the hegemonic masculinity underlying dominant social practices" (p.245). As Acker (1990) highlighted in her theory of gendered organisations, organisational structures are not gender neutral. The universal image of a worker is actually a man. "Images of men's bodies and masculinity pervade organisational processes, marginalising women and contributing to the maintenance of gender segregation in organisations" (Acker, 1990, p.139).

Relational Work / Connective Leadership

Over 25 years ago Jean Baker Miller (1976) argued that the (socially conditioned) qualities that women possess in abundance such as caring, cooperating and connecting with others have been consistently devalued as characteristics of a subordinate sex, and that women themselves have endorsed this attitude. According to Miller, "There is no question that the dominant society has said, men will do the important work; women will tend to the 'lesser task' of helping other human beings to develop" (p. 42). This dichotomy means that our major social institutions are not founded on the tenet of helping others to develop. She believes that by supporting growth in others women are more attuned to change. Moreover they are confronting society with real change when they recognise that fostering growth in others, without the opportunity and right to growth for themselves, is a form of oppression.

Fletcher (1999) takes Miller's argument further and puts her finger on what remains a largely non-discussable subject in contemporary management: the types of organisations we seek to build are at odds with the long established norms, behaviours and power arrangements within them. Fletcher shows clearly why women cannot realise their full leadership capabilities in today's organistions by highlighting the "disappearing acts" surrounding "relational work".

Relational work is often off-line, backstage or collaborative, is typically occurring in an uncoordinated way throughout organisations and usually carried out by women whose status within the organisation is not high (Fletcher, 1999; Booth & Eveline, 2001). In explaining why relational work is rendered invisible in today's workplace, Fletcher (1999) examines its link to 'women's work'. She says that three separate acts of disappearing are evident in the data. First, misinterpreting the intention: relational practice is seen as motivated by a personal idiosyncrasy

or trait rather than a desire to work more effectively (thus devaluing the practice and the relational skills needed to enact it). Secondly, common language descriptors of relational attributes (nurturing, empathy, caring) are associated with femininity and therefore assumed inappropriate in the workplace. Finally, the social construction of gender means that this way of working gets conflated with images of femininity and motherhood and as such is devalued in workplace settings. At the same time as relational work is devalued we come to expect that it will be done and we expect that it will be done by women. As Peter Senge (back cover, Fletcher, 1999) states in a review of Fletcher's work, "Little is likely to change until enough people i.e. men, are able to see what is so difficult to see: that the very leadership behaviours in work settings we claim to want are invisible to us when they are practiced".

Fletcher (1999) uses relational theory "to differentiate the many aspects of mutuality such as empathy, authenticity, empowerment and fluid expertise" (p. 138). In an environment of mutual empowerment or fluid expertise, "power and expertise shifts from one party to another, not only over time but in the course of one interaction" (p.64). A combined characteristic of relational practice is an ability to empower others as well as the capacity to be empowered, that is, step back from the expert role in order to learn from or be influenced by others.

Fletcher's argument (1999) reinforces the radical tenet of Miller's model of relational growth: "the belief in the power of relational interactions to affect change through mutual engagement and co-influence" (p. 13). This emphasis on growth and change takes the 'female advantage' literature further than merely emphasising the relational traits, characteristics and attributes socially ascribed to women (such as caring, being involved, helping, building webs of connection rather than hierarchies, seeking consensus) which have the potential to further stereotype, universalise or co-opt women.

Organisational sociologist and management consultant Jean Lipman-Blumen (cited in Cleveland, Stockdale & Murphy, 2000, p. 296) talks about the new 'connective era' of leadership - a multifaceted approach embracing two forces: interdependence and diversity. Other authors, for example, Margaret Wheatley and Myron Kellner-Rogers (1996) talk about the need for both individuals and systems to be open to new ways of being and to learn through interdependence with those we previously refused to see. In an era of rapid change, turbulence and globalisation, connective leadership is emerging. Cleveland et al., (2000) explain:

> First, with the rapid growth in technology and the breakdown of geopolitical boundaries, everything is connected to everything else. Second, as the world becomes smaller ... recognition of diversity in cultures, values, preferences, styles, skin colour, abilities [and] gender ... is essential. Leaders in the connective era must draw upon a wealth of styles and abilities, especially those that emphasise mutuality and inclusiveness, to harness the forces of interdependence and diversity. (p.297)

In an era of connective leadership, leaders must draw on a wide range of styles, moving from the 'competitive edge' to the 'connective edge' (Leavitt and Lipman-Blumen cited in Cleveland et al., 2000) with a focus on relational (collaborative) rather than direct (focus on self as sole source of leadership) achieving styles. In particular, Lipman-Bluman (cited in Cleveland et al., 2000) is interested in the multitude of ways that leaders can achieve success in their organisations:

> Leaders in the connective era draw on many talents, skills and styles in a principled, ethical manner to build effective, enduring relationships with followers, constituents and even business competitors in order to successfully harness the forces of interdependence and diversity that shape the modern landscape. (p.297)

Booth and Eveline (2001) talk about the work, commenced by Faye Gale, on changes to UWA's promotion procedures, including a selection committee working in a 'companionate' leadership style. A broader framework for assessment was established with curricula vitae enhanced by teaching portfolios, peer assessments, student feedback and the philosophical perspectives of the applicants. Importantly the members of the committee established a dialogue as they dealt with disagreements in their judgments. They also purposefully increased their discussion of the relational work of the applicant. The committee aimed to reduce the influence of outside gatekeepers, "once the Holy grail for establishing merit" (p.9) Yet Booth and Eveline point to the fragility of the changes made by the committee as "like any committee its practices are vulnerable to an influx of members ignorant of the processes involved ... A committee carrying less responsibility for the accuracy of the outcomes would be attractive to those wanting to maintain established norms advantaging most men" (p.12). In other words, to the frustration of many researchers, equal opportunity gains can be reversed with relative ease (Wienecke cited in Booth and Eveline, 2001).

The process of devaluing work that is associated with the feminine and glorifying work associated with the masculine not only places women at a disadvantage but can produce inefficient work practices as routines and procedures are perpetuated, not because they are particularly effective, but because they are in line with masculine norms of behaving (Fletcher, 1999).

A Peak Masculinist Culture

Much research has questioned whether women can compete in organisations where the dominant culture of the managerial elite is white, middle class and male and whether, when women do make it into positions in senior management, they can survive without becoming honorary males or without realigning their values. Currie, Harris & Theile (2000) interviewed staff in two Australian public universities, establishing a framework based on Coser's concept of the 'greedy institution'. Comparisons were made between male and female staff, and academic and general staff, in the two universities. The overall picture was of staff working long hours in the 'greedy' institutions Coser says are "omnivorous of their loyal workers" (p. 288) with a certain uniformity of response across site, gender and occupational status. The authors suggest that this apparent uniformity is the product of "a peak masculinist discourse used mainly by those in more powerful positions in these institutions, which acts to disenfranchise all those who do not operate within its restricted and restrictive boundaries" (p. 269). The impact of current economist and neo-liberal discourses (the new managerialist and economic rationalist discourses that are pervasive in universities today) operates to normalise high workloads and a prime commitment to the institution. Although both men and women are affected by these market forces, the researchers question whether both women and men are equally able to devote extremely long hours to their paid work, given the cultural and social expectations of women's domestic responsibilities (p. 288). The notion of the '24-hour workday' and the pressure to work faster and smarter leaves those unable to work extended hours with doubts and questions surrounding their ability to perform (Epstein & Kalleberg, 2001).

In 1988 Schaef and Fassel explained how people can become tied to an organisation to the point where they will do anything to please it - the organisation becomes addictive. Communication in addictive organisations is used to establish and maintain power bases, is often crisis driven and can be manipulative and intimidating. Often change is introduced for the sake of change. Schaef

(in Schaef & Fassel, 1988) claims that the white, patriarchal male system is destructive and continues to exist because we all cooperate with it. "[E]ven our thought patterns are in the language of the male system that rewards lies, secrets, and silences on the part of women" (Rich cited in Schaef & Fassel, 1988, p. 45). The silence means that the advantage for men is never openly discussed.

In contrast, healthy organisations seek managers who model effective leadership "by functioning as learners, by sharing their uncertainties and mistakes, by encouraging others to search for new ideas, and by creating an environment in which it is safe for others to be themselves" (Schaef & Fassel, 1988, p. 221). In healthy organisations "the boss is happy to credit her subordinates for their brilliance, in no small part because her job is getting her subordinates to be more brilliant than they might otherwise be" (Schrage, 2000, p. 412). When colleagues recognise and give credit for the contributions of others their efforts are likely to be reciprocated. The organisational benefits of attribution are reflected in the generation of ideas and a positive, healthy working environment for all. However, as Schaef and Fassel point out, "there is little evidence that women are affecting [addictive] systems, and more recent research seems to indicate that women, like men, are being eaten up by them" (p. 44). They note that women are now beginning to leave corporations because they realise that they are not going to make it to the top and they really have not been influential in changing the climate of corporations to make them more humanistic and healthy. Many are leaving to start their own businesses where they can be more influential in determining the climate of the organisation. Recent research confirms that dissatisfaction with masculinist organisational cultures is now frequently identified as the key reason women managers leave their jobs (Marshall, 1995; Peters, 2002, PhD work in progress).

Valuing Difference

Much has been written about the communication, management and leadership skills of women and men. Traditionally feminine qualities have been submerged in organisational contexts where the masculine model, usually hierarchical and built on a command and control management style, dominates. Given that the leadership skills of the future appear to be developing a combination of masculine and feminine traits involving strategic thinking and communication skills, both men and women have something to gain from working together (Powell cited in Claes, 1999). It is not necessary to decide on 'one best model' but it is necessary to recognise the privileging of behaviours associated with the masculine and the devaluing of behaviours associated with the feminine. As Jamieson (1995) explains, oppositional discourses such as womb/brain, sameness/difference and femininity/competence need to be challenged for women in leadership to move "beyond the double bind". Organisations need to create a favourable climate to encourage cultural awareness and value difference. 'Masculine' and 'feminine' models can coexist and operate in synergy (Claes, 1999) and a range of leadership and management styles, including those traditionally associated with the feminine, can be recognised and rewarded.

Images of masculinity and femininity are socially constructed or 'constituted in discourse'. Some actions or attitudes are 'masculine' or 'feminine' regardless of who displays them. Men and women differ among themselves, at different times and in different situations, in matters of gender. So rather than attempting to objectify masculinity (or femininity) we need to "focus on the processes and relationships through which men and women conduct gendered lives" (Connell, 1995, p. 68-71).

Rather than linking behaviours exclusively to either men or women we can view them as language communication strategies, each having merit, and related to time and context. It is the value that we place on the relative behaviors that raises questions of status and power. If more typically masculine discourses are valued over the typically feminine, if we limit our thinking to binary relationships such as man/woman, strong/weak, work/home, rational/emotional, we set up dichotomous relationships in which men are inevitably advantaged. In addition, a "sameness/difference framework places unacceptable boundaries on the possibilities for change" as "there appear to be only two options for women: joining the system on its terms or staying out" (Bacchi cited in Cockburn, 1991, p. 9). As Blackmore (1999) points out, neither position challenges masculinist hegemony "because either we become like men or are complementary to men, in both instances leaving the normative male intact" (p.218).

We need "to move strategically beyond the claims of sameness and difference as being in antithesis" as equality and difference must coexist (Blackmore, 1999, p. 218). As Bem (1993) explains, it is not male-female difference that is responsible for inequality but a social world so organised from a male perspective that the special needs of men are automatically taken care of while the special needs of women are problematised or ignored. If communication, leadership and management styles are viewed in terms of multiple differences (and similarities), we are less likely to set up oppositional categories which privilege established power groups and marginalise those viewed as different or other.

Judy Rosener, author of *America's Competitive Secret* (1995), says that when men with a traditional 'command and control' leadership style encounter women with an 'interactive' leadership style, they may have difficulty in recognising them as leaders at all. Conversely, when they encounter women leaders who have adopted the command-and-control style, they may have difficulty relating to them as women. She says that this creates 'sexual static' for men, because they realise, with the new interest in interactive leadership in organisations today, that their style may not be the only one that works, or, indeed, the most effective. Gheradi and Poggio (2001) also point out the ambiguity that characterises social expectations towards women who enter traditionally male territories. Women, as 'aliens' in a new territory are expected to prove themselves; they are expected to lead and, at the same time, 'act like women'. Counteracting stereotypes can backfire on women, causing them to be censured for deviating from feminine norms, yet labelled as 'soft' if they adopt a more 'feminine' style (Rudman, 1998)

Recommendations for Workshop

The *Gender in Communication* workshop, which led to my search of the communication literature, highlighted differences in the communication styles of women and men, particularly in workplace settings. The workshop was stimulating and the insights humorous and instantly recognisable, giving workshop participants (all women) the opportunity to discuss typical behaviours and communication styles. The participative format encouraged the sharing of ideas in a cooperative atmosphere that provided the opportunity for small group problem solving. Yet, as Epstein (1999) points out (in a review of Young's work) men and women are both from earth, and dwelling on gender difference is generally an unproductive strategy for both sexes. Both women and men become essentialised, neglecting similarities between and differences within. Issues of power, status, class and race are ignored. In a totalising difference discourse women and other marginalised groups are often compelled to hide their 'difference' if they wish to claim a right to equality (Cockburn, 1991).

Images of masculinity and femininity are socially constructed or 'constituted in discourse'. Some actions or attitudes are 'masculine' or 'feminine' regardless of who displays them. Men and women differ among themselves, at different times and in different situations, in matters of gender. So rather than attempting to objectify masculinity or femininity we need to "focus on the processes and relationships through which men and women conduct gendered lives" (Connell, 1995, p. 68-71).

The following suggestions are aimed at changing the focus of the workshop from 'educating women' to questioning and investigating communication at work. Training to raise awareness of gender and communication issues in the workplace must also target men (Lingard & Limerick, 1995). The workshop training exercises seemed to be based on strategies for women to cope in masculinist work environments, providing suggestions for managing typically male behaviours and how to modify typically feminine behaviours. To take one example - the use of hedging and tentative phrasing - women were advised to communicate in a more direct manner. Yet hesitation may be an effective communication strategy. Although at fist glance hedging and tentative phrasing may appear insecure, such language may be used deliberately to relax the interchange and avoid the imposition of status. The opposite tactic, direct assertion - leaving no room for disagreement or alternative viewpoints - can be infuriating, especially when the speaker (usually male) is so confident, even if completely wrong!

Rather than women being 'made to fit' (change the women through skills workshops and mentor programs), an approach which develops an understanding of the culture of the workplace, of what *is* and what *is not* valued in organisations, could be developed. The whole responsibility for change cannot be placed on the shoulders of women. Gendered practices limit growth and change. The format of the workshop is conducive to the recognition of a range of communication styles, valuable for all, regardless of gender. In fact many participants may find that they use different styles of communication in different contexts, and that developing the confidence to recognise and reward connective and interactive performance is essential for change in traditional management environments.

The need for the traditional manager to adapt and modify behaviours through a more flexible approach is linked to performance management. This in turn can be linked to demonstrated learning in the areas of gender, communication, inclusivity (valuing difference) and self-development. Skills workshops and mentor programs for middle and senior (male) management may be the answer! A starting point might be a similar workshop for men, perhaps renamed *Communication for Career Success* or, more inclusively, *Communication for Understanding* in an effort to attract participants who resist 'gender' workshops. The aim would be to highlight differences in communication styles and to develop strategies to promote an understanding of the ways in which power is interwoven into work practices and relationships. The 'bottom line' advantages of recognising and rewarding the creative potential of work generally associated with the feminine might become evident - a competitive advantage as highlighted by Fletcher (1999):

> The issue of gender equity in organisational theory is most often studied through an analysis of the glass ceiling - that is, an analysis of the factors in organisations that are problematic for the professional progress of women. However ... the factors inhibiting women's progress in organisations are not only problematic for women. They are problematic for organisational effectiveness as well. The process of devaluing work associated with the feminine and reifying work associated with the masculine has probably produced many other routine but ineffective work practices - that is, practices that are in place not because they are particularly effective but because they are in line with masculine norms of behaving. (p. 138-139)

Catalyst (cited in Oakley, 2000), a non-profit research group based in New York and known for its research on gender issues in organisations, reminds us that efforts to maximise the value of the workforce by capitalising on the talents of women are likely to be successful only when an organisation takes an inclusive, problem-solving, comprehensive approach. Such an approach necessitates an understanding of gendered practices imbedded in communication styles, the micropolitical power games which are played out in organisations, and the effect of dominant discourses on perceptions and values. The voices of women questioning traditional values and perceptions in the workplace are revealed in the literature and through current research. Issues of power and difference continue to surface and reveal a need for a growth in understanding of the complexity of gender relations and the need to question and disrupt peak masculinist cultures.

Being treated differently as the gendered 'other', rather than being appreciated as competent leaders and managers with a range of different approaches and different communication styles, is a concern for the women in my thesis. It is clear that many of the women want to challenge traditional cultural assumptions and organisational barriers which exclude approximately half of the pool of talented individuals from realising their full potential in the world of work. Their experiences, interpreted from a feminist perspective, reveal the micropolitical processes at work as they disrupted a management hierarchy embedded in tradition and comfortable with 'the way we do things around here'. These women decided to leave in search of a more supportive working environment.

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