SOCIALIZATION: PSYCHOLOGICAL AFFECT ON GENDER CONFLICT WITHIN THE AMERICAN WORKPLACE

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History has been a powerful tool in measuring and explaining the socialization of defined gender roles. With the advent and results of the United States women’s equal rights movement, there was a dramatic transformation to the once well-defined roles of genders. The purpose of this study is to explore whether socialization has had a direct affect upon the psychological traits that cause gender conflict within American workplace environments. Examples of power struggles (control and dominance versus equality and acceptance), alpha tendencies (assertiveness and power versus nurturing caretakers), and gender preferences (masculinity versus femininity) are used to illustrate how socialization can create organizational conflict between genders.

Keywords: Gender socialization, Gender conflict, Power struggle, Alpha tendencies, Gender preferences.

Introduction

Gender conflict within American based organizations can have many variables. For instance, gender conflict can be associated with management styles, job seniorities, and personality differences. Gender conflict may also be contributed to gender dominated industries. According to Toegel (2011), women outnumber men in several different industries, which include finance, event management, and education. In addition, female participation in engineering and consultancy fields continue to rise and have altered the face of male dominated business infrastructures. However, despite these plausible causations of conflict, socialization has often been ignored as the inherent root of why genders differentiate. For instance, men and women within organizations have been known to differ in the way they lead, manage their power, deal with emotions, as well as handle conflict resolution. As a result, perceptions have been made toward gender capabilities in leadership roles. This has caused issues of interpersonal tension and annoyance among members of the opposite sex. It is without bias to suggest that some sort of environmental learning has had an affect upon these gender variances. Thus, the purpose of this study is to connect whether socialization has had a direct affect upon the psychological traits that cause gender conflict within American workplace environments.

Gender Socialization

Socialization is defined as “a continuing process whereby an individual acquires a personal identity and learns the norms, values, behavior, and social skills appropriate to his or her social
Throughout world history, female roles were often defined as subordinate to those of men. In many ancient cultures, woman’s primary role was to bear children and to be caretakers. For instance, one way women of ancient Greece were silenced in society was by being wed through arranged marriages (Freeman, 1996). Moreover, while they were considered citizens of the Republic, they had no vote and could not participate in politics. The psychological result of this type of imposed and controlled socialization caused women to define their sense of self through the abandonment of personal goals in favor of the benefits of others (Gilligan, 1982). This was quite different in comparison to men who were taught to live a life of independence, while exemplifying dominance, control, and assertiveness (Eagly & Karau, 1991). Shockingly, in most parts of the world, it took several hundred years until gender roles were truly challenged and enacted as equal law within societies.

Twentieth-century America is one such society where advances in women’s rights allowed women to begin to break free from their defined roles. No longer did women always remain at home and serve as the primary caretakers. Instead, they went to school and began joining the workforce. Unfortunately, the lack of equal rights to education and pay, and occupational segregation created a plateau in the progress of women’s liberation (Strom, 2003). After decades of protest, in 1972, Congress passed the Equal Amendments to Civil Rights Act mandating sex equality in education (Title IX), the Equal Employment Opportunity Act, as well as extended Title VII (Civil Rights Act of 1964) to women in professional, administrative, and executive positions (Strom, 2003). The Civil Rights Act under Title VII, 42 U.S.C.S. § 2000e-2 (2012), stated unlawful employment practices prohibited:

“(a)(1) To fail or refuse to hire or to discharge any individual, or otherwise to discriminate against any individual with respect to his compensation, terms, conditions, or privileges of employment” as well as “(a)(2) to limit, segregate, or classify his employees or applicants for employment in any way which would deprive or tend to deprive any individual of employment opportunities or otherwise adversely affect his status as an employee, because of such individual’s race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.”

These Acts created a whole new world of opportunity for women in education and the workforce. However, while these changes resulted in a dramatic transformation to the once well-defined roles of genders, they also introduced gender conflicts to environments that had never seen them before. Furthermore, this led to the beginning of a difficult period of assimilation for men and women in the workplace after years of females being prohibited from joining. This is especially evident in the modern workplace where biases can form based on gender differences. In response, it is not surprising that some men and women gravitate to members of the same sex in establishing unity and favoritism against the opposite sex. In other words, the basis for “gender social identity is concerned with the successes and failures of those with the same sex” (Randel & Jaussi, 2008, p. 472). This is usually in direct response to negative perceptions formed by both men and women in captivating views and interpretations upon group dynamics.

**Power Struggle**

One plausible explanation why gender conflict exists within organizations is the difference in the meaning of empowerment (Henzi & Turner, 1987). For men, empowerment generally means control and dominance, while women seek equality and acceptance. For example, gender conflict will occur from the perceptions of interpersonal differences that are accompanied with
aggression and frustration (Yang & Mossholder, 2004). That means men who prefer same sex cohesion within an organization will tend to experience a loss of power when partnered within a group of women (Tsui, Egan, & O’Reilly, 1992). According to Jehn (1997), being threatened stimulates a negative arousal, which in turn generates perceptions of personal conflict. Although there are a variety of contributing factors to the interests of power, it is evident that the emergence of women in the workplace has altered the bureaucratic perceptions of the working individual. In other words, as men and women compete for organizational power, the one gender who possesses the authority will more often confront its counterparts resistance (Hodson, 2001).

The definition of power within an organization is best described as an individual who possesses control over resources and people (Wolf & Fligstein, 1979). Many men tend to utilize these characteristics in their work environments. For instance, male power in gender relationships may be utilized to intimidate and differentiate sex differences (Falbo & Peplau, 1980). The same cannot be said for women who are more likely to place value on interpersonal relationships and gender differences (Ludeman & Erlandson, 2004). Interestingly, evidence indicates that both men and women prefer to work under a female supervisor rather than a male (Liden, 1985). This could be linked to women possessing a higher emotional intelligence than men (Brackett, Rivers, Shiffman, Lerner, & Salovey, 2006). In addition, further research has shown male supervisors experience more organizational conflict (Renwick, 1977). It is important to note, however, that conflicts were addressed via the same sex and female conflicts with the opposite sex, leaving an open-ended gap in the amount of research on female supervisors and employee conflict.

Moreover, when dealing with power struggles amongst genders, cases of incivility can arise. Incivility is defined as “demeaning, abusive, derogatory, threatening, and violent interactions, but also more passive ostracizing exclusions that create emotional injuries and a sense of injustice” (Roscigno, Hodson, & Lopez, 2009, p. 748). Interestingly, when workplaces exhibit potential changes, particularly to new social or hierarchical arrangements, new forms of incivilities can occur (Burawoy & Wright, 1990). For instance, according to Roscigno, Hodson, and Lopez (2009), female workers are more susceptible to sexual harassment from interpersonal issues pertaining to job seniority and male grievances. Female leaders also “experience a unique set of stressors, when women are the minority in the workplace” (Gardiner & Tiggemann, 1999, p. 303). In fact, Gardiner and Tiggemann (1999) found that there is an increase to the female level of stress when they face “increased visibility, exaggeration of differences, and stereotyping” (p. 303). The cases of stereotyping are “documented as having a wide range of negative consequences on women in work settings” because the discrimination and prejudice they face is based on sex rather than an evaluation based on job performance (Gardiner & Tiggemann, 1999, p. 303). These results demonstrate how incivility and negative behaviors damage not only work morale, but have the risk of either severely crippling or permanently devastating the work environment.

**Alpha Tendencies**

Could it be possible that years of socialized lessons of power and authority have brought new threats to the male psyche? It can be theorized that some men have a predisposition to alpha characteristics based on their gender socialization. However, it could also be speculated that the reason for fewer reports on gender differences is due to the fact that women are adopting masculine characteristics in the workplace (Brenner, Tomkiewicz, & Schein, 1989). This may explain why men feel threatened in the workplace and why women are still attempting to break
stereotypes of inferiority. In a past study, women were shown to have lower levels of self-confidence in their ability to adopt business characteristics relative to men. Researchers explained that women were not true to their natural characteristics in influencing subordinates through more coercive strategies (Instone, Major, & Bunker, 1983). Yet due to a lack of studies, little can be confirmed as to whether the dimensions of influence are directly linked to female self-esteem.

The comparisons between alpha males and females are fairly similar. They are said to be highly intelligent, confident, successful, natural leaders, seeking to be dominant, and representing approximately 70% of all senior management employees (Ludeman & Erlandson, 2004). Interestingly, the two significant differentials between the genders are that women tend to be less comfortable with conflict and excel at collaboration. This correlation refers back to gender-linked stereotypes in which women have a higher frequency of emotions and a lower capacity for emotional control (Fabes & Martin, 1991; Shields, 2000). For alpha males and females, socialization has separated the means in which each gender conducts their emotions. For men, it is socially acceptable that anger is a direct emotion from their learned behavior of assertiveness and power; whereas women are socialized to discourage anger due to their traditional roles of nurturing caretakers (Kring, 2000; Cupach & Canary, 1995). This encompasses why alpha males thrive on conflict, while alpha females can be less willing to force such conflict in favor of finding win-win solutions (Ludeman & Erlandson, 2004).

Another alpha characteristic that may be causing tension between genders is age. According to Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin (1999), “the theory contends that gender and age emerge as key diffuse status characteristics, especially in the workplace, because individuals with advantaged diffuse characteristics are deemed to be more legitimately in the possession of greater authority in hierarchical settings” (as cited in Schieman & Reid, 2008, p. 300). In relation to socialization, men are known for having a longer lineage of holding domineering and competitive behavior. When directed to the workplace, younger men tend toward faster ascendancy through pay motivation and promotion, while middle-aged to older men seek to clutch onto their hierarchical status (Theodore & Llody, 2000). Generally men are associated with environments that have higher levels of competition. Conversely, tension emerges with alpha females because men expect their leadership styles to involve magnified and heightened task-related attributes. The pressure of high performance and competition goes against the stereotype of women professionals who are more associated with nurturing and cooperative traits that are considered by men incompatible with leadership (Acker, 1991).

Gender Preferences

Another generalization that may contribute to gender conflict within organizations is the preference of an ideal worker. Although these are not concrete or distinctive allegations, some organizations prefer specific masculinities in management to certain traits of femininities (Tienari, Quack, & Theobald, 2002). In a study conducted by Martins and Parsons (2007), men and women were surveyed to measure whether gender diversity had any effect upon perceived organizational environments. Men who scored a high identification of gender differentiations were more likely to have negative opinions towards women in top management positions (Martins & Parson, 2007). In contrast, women who scored a high identification of gender differentiations reacted favorably to women in top management positions. With these all too pervasive assumptions that men are more equipped to take on certain managerial roles, women have slowly been breaking through these stereotypes that refer to the gender order in which a
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The historical constructed pattern has divided labor and power relations (Connell, 1987). Alternatively, the challenges for gender preferences in organizational settings convey the emphasis in how socialization may be manipulating their attitudes and beliefs towards each other.

In early adolescence, genders are shaped by cultural pressures that may cause psychological damage in reaching traditional masculine and feminine ideals. According to Cohn and Zeichner (2006), masculine identity is heavily associated with gender role expectations and a socially driven appearance of being domineering and controlling upon others. This coincides with Blazina’s theory (2001) that male socialization attempts to avoid femininity through psychological development dictated by cultural environments, mirroring role models, and relatable kinships. The long-term effects have been proven to cause psychological damage to men attempting to fulfill unachievable and unreasonable goals based on their learned socialization. Transferred into the modern workplace, this puts the male ego into a fragile state, thwarting significant opportunities in better relating their emotional capabilities to their female counterparts.

This heavily challenges the female perspective of gender preferences in the workplace, which often promotes factors of selflessness and sacrificing for interpersonal relationships. According to McGowen and Hart (1990), socialization has hurt women in the workplace based on their preference for cohesive and interpersonal relationships. For instance, females have been known to abandon their desires for monetary or promotional rewards in favor of their colleagues’ ambitions (McGowen & Hart, 1990). Gilligan (1982) substantiated the same sentiments in that women will consider more decisions on behalf of others even if the result is not in the best interest of the individual. The emphasis for women to enact moral responsibility and caretaking habits could be linked to their inability in making more difficult decisions when needed. In observations conducted by Lerner (1980) and Miller (1986), women have been known to avoid managing conflict and anger in support of workplace serenity (as cited in McGowen & Hart, 1990). This could be counter-productive to how women administer strenuous decisions that must benefit the organizations they represent. Otherwise, stereotypes may possibly continue to anchor female leadership abilities in the realm of male pressures for dominance and competitive achievements.

Limitations & Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to connect socialization to psychological factors of gender conflict in the American workplace. Examples of power struggle, alpha tendencies, and gender preferences were used to explain how socialization can create conflict between genders. However, it must be noted that no concrete evidence was found in proving this theory. On the other hand, the abundance of various research has assisted in bridging the gap between gender psychology and socialization. Therefore, the objective for this study is to test whether or not socialization has tarnished gender cohesion in organizations. For example, socialization practices in the workplace focus on getting employees to identify with one another, while building meaningfulness amongst its community (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003).

Oddly, gender conflict goes beyond the bond of unity in favor of individualism. The socialization of defined roles could be the root cause for why genders refuse to collectively work together. This begins with how men and women differ with conflict management resolution, and reviews whether management processes are mediated by psychological type. For example, research has revealed that the strongest differences of psychological traits between men and
women are thinking and feeling (Sorenson, Hawkins, & Sorenson, 1995). Women scored significantly higher on feeling, while men scored greater on thinking. For instance, women have been socialized throughout history as caretakers, which can be related to feeling. Conversely, male characteristics of power and control could be associated with thinking. Further evidence suggests that women tend to be more cooperative or accommodative, as well as achievement-oriented, differentiating from men who are more likely to enforce power and authority in resolving conflict disputes (Todd-Mancillas & Rossi, 1985; Offerman & Bell, 1992). As a result, generalized gender differences have engulfed the workplace in tailoring psychological traits and behavior patterns.

Within organizations, roles become new, but perceptions die-hard. In relation to the male psyche, some men have issues to surrendering their hierarchal status. Gender conflict becomes a result of men and women disrespecting one another once one crosses into defined role territory. In this case, some men have trouble relinquishing their power in favor of a woman. That is why gender conflict resolution is a process of being able to let go of perceived responsibility, expectation, and model. Otherwise, it becomes apparent that gender conflict not only hurts each individual, but also the organizations in which they work. The mission becomes lost and what is left is an unlawful environment of incivility.

In conclusion, evidence has suggested that leadership has overtly turned into ‘functions of a seductive game’ and is overtly sexual biased (Calas & Smircich, 1991, p. 567). For example, women are rarely utilized as great examples within general management literature. More studies address direct challenges toward the male psyche and have ignored monumental strides of female growth within business practices. This is unfortunate as research has revealed the strong attributes of women in proving their social and emotional skills in wake of interpersonal quarrels (Randel & Jaussi, 2008). Yet that lack of respect has hurt the amount of research on female effectiveness within organizations and their affect upon resolving gender conflict. Thus, it is with recommendation that future studies focus on environmental upbringings of both male and female leaders within organizations. Research could help link how cultural upbringings shape, as well as define, female leadership and their ability to better resolve gender conflict within the American workplace.

References


