

A Context of Organizational Culture on Business Management. The gender aspects of organizations

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Abstract

Organizations are culturally constructed through social as well as political and business processes. As such they are created and changed by the management of meanings, partly by organizational leaders who are given that role by the subordinates.

While the gender aspects of organizations have been studied widely in recent years, many of these studies are based on a critical understanding of individual life patterns and their organizationally bound behavior, biased because the differences between men and women are not taken into account in studies classically conducted by male researchers. Since organizations are products of culture and they produce culture, the managers – male and female – have a significant role in this process as well as in its single gender-biased incidents.

Keywords: organization, organizational culture, organizational analysis, management, business management, globalization

Introduction

This article brings four powerful themes that have developed within the field of organizational analysis over the last two decades:

organizational culture, the gendering of organizations, postmodernism and organizational analysis and critical approaches to management.

We view these themes as intertwined in research on the essence of organizational life with its multiple manifestations. In particular, the article reflects the growing interest in the impact of organizational identity formation and its implications for ‘individuals’ and ‘organisational’ outcomes in terms of gender.

These themes are integrated through a focus on new and varied research designs, methods and methodologies by which the complex interrelationships between gender, identity and the cultures of organizations are submitted to our understanding and can be explored. The variety of methodological and conceptual approaches of these themes, aims:

1) to promote diverse theoretically based, empirical explorations on crossing issues between gender and organizational culture;

2) to apply the understanding in the context of organizations and management;

3) to support critical reflections within organizational research in terms of equality between women and men at the workplace.

Organizational culture

The cultural approach to organizations became popular in the 1980s.

Reasons for the emergence of organizational culture studies are manifold. As suggested, there was a need to seek for new methods to study organizations and to find ‘subjective’ concepts to replace the old ‘objective’ concepts in order to understand organizational essence.

Culture became a theoretical tool to cross over the traditional micro- and macro- level organizational analysis. In general, internationalization gave impulses to study cultural aspects of business communication. By now we can see the many branches stemming from the cultural perspective, its several theoretical and methodological contexts, and any idea of its simplicity, trend like appearance or hegemony over other concepts, meets with a difficulty when facing this diversity.

Among the approaches, the notion of organizations as ‘mini-cultures’ was raised by organizational educators and practitioners seeking more comprehensive ways of understanding organizational

behavior and management. This debate encouraged research that explored the complex factors influencing behavior within organizations.

The relationships between non-rational factors and multiple-level organizational outcomes were explored especially, and the focus was on the symbolism of organizational life, generally.

The first approaches of the organizational culture emphasized its invisibility, whereas nowadays multiple methodologies and methods of analysis and interpretations are accepted. Exploring organizational cultures and their gendered nature means making them visible.

Culture debate as a heuristic for studying organizations is clearly acknowledged, but the impact of culture on gender and identity is largely ignored. By the late 1980s the culture debate subsided in the face of new theories of change, on the one hand, and the growing popularity of post-modernist critique, on the other.

The privileging of an organizational discourse perspective in Business Management

A subject position is what is created in and through conversations as speakers and hearers construct themselves as persons: it creates a location in which social relations and actions are mediated by symbolic forms and modes of being.

As with all perspectives, a focus on the relationship between organizational culture and gendered identities has the effect of silencing other ways of seeing. It may, for example, deflect attention from structural arrangements, the role of the state, or ‘a wide variety of social forces, gender notably among them’ which inform the historical development of organizational arrangements.

Further, where we raise discussion to the level of discourse – encouraging others to join with us in a set of ideas and practices that reinforce a particular view of reality – we contribute to the creation of subject positions, in which some may be disempowered as ‘lay readers’ and others empowered through their location as ‘experts’. That this is ‘true’ of all academic approaches should not blind us to the responsibility to draw attention to the process that we are engaged in.

We do contend that an organizational culture focus provides a useful and problematic framework for uncovering patterns or configurations of discriminatory practices. Nonetheless, it is, in the end, a heuristic not a truth.

The problematic and contested nature of gender, gendered identity and organizational culture is laid bare but in a way, we hope, that will encourage further research and debate into the multifarious ways that discriminatory practices become embedded in the meanings and understandings of organizational realities.

Globalization and otherness

With the advent of globalization, a range of identity questions have become exponentially complicated.

While different nations and cultures may well be brought into closer contact, globalization does not necessarily make these relationships any easier. What globalization does is to transmit difference everywhere, while making it more problematic.

Globalization's impact on the questions of identity is huge. In the late twenties, questions about cultural identity have taken on a vibrant urgency. Questions such as 'who are we?', 'where do we really belong?', 'what do we mean by we?' etc. are repeatedly raised in diverse spheres such as national policy, media entertainment and organizational restructuring.

Global systems and a growing global consciousness are held to be responsible for the demarcation of new identity spaces in which traditional identifications with nation, religion and ethnicity are sometimes called into question, and at other times substantially strengthened. What we are witnessing, is a paradox of compression—diminished physical distance among different cultures – and implosion—an increased consciousness of one's own cultural or national identity.

Organizations of all kinds (i.e. corporations, non-profit ventures, NGOs and national governments) are sites for the transmission of globalization and adjustments to it. In many ways, globalization increases the range of organizational options and permits individuals to identify themselves with multiple social and cultural groupings. Increasingly, therefore, 'globalization is the framework for the amplification and diversification of sources of the self'. In sum, globalization profoundly alters the nexus of identities available to the self, and their enactment in organizational spheres.

While globalization often results in increased contact between different identity groups, it by no means diminishes the hierarchical distances between them. Relationships between older identity

formations (e.g. the First World and the Third World) or between newer ones (e.g. software designers and maquilladora workers) are invariably overshadowed by structures and discourses of domination, though these are frequently resisted in a number of different ways. At the heart of globalization are a set of centre–periphery relationships that mediate the repackaging of older categories of otherness, and the initiation of newer ones.

Understanding otherness in the new globalize landscape therefore involves paying attention to the nexus of shifting identities and alignments that are brought together in the process of constituting the ‘other’, and the current geopolitical realities and global hegemonies that mediate the formation of identity spaces in organizational and institutional locations.

Training programmes in Business Management

A variety of training programmes across many North American and Western European organizations ostensibly intended to make organization members more appreciative of internal and external cultural differences, somewhat ironically turn into sites for the systematic and problematic production of otherness.

These include programmes designed to promote internal organizational sensitivity towards workplace diversity, provide expatriate managers with desirable managerial skills in cross-cultural business encounters and train non-Western managers (in Eastern Europe and South Asia) in Western managerial practices. All these socialization venues become organizational locations for the constitution of otherness through the systematic transmission of images about self and other that markedly echo the legacy of colonialist discourses.

Different ethnic minorities, women and Eastern European managers are regularly constituted as exotic, inadequate or underdeveloped others who need help, tolerance and acceptance from the dominant majority groups. While the intentions of these programmes appear progressive in their objectives, their actual effects can still continue to reproduce older imperial-style relationships between the West and the non-West other.

In her depiction, the Eastern European managers come very close to resembling the ‘natives’ of colonialist discourses, lacking the skills of advanced civilization and needing to be ‘saved’ or ‘rescued’ by

Western managers, who in turn are recast as the missionaries of former centuries.

The problem with this model is that a specific pattern of cultural hierarchies and binaries are once again reproduced, albeit as ‘help’ being offered to the less-developed managers. Like the missionaries who ‘gathered souls’ in their bids for conversion to Christianity, these modern crusaders are also collecting candidates for conversion to Western managerial dogma. Again like the missionaries of colonial times, they also rupture existing cultural identities and sometimes replace them with ones in which the ‘converted’ always remain beholden to and behind their teachers from the West.

For our purposes, the main point to be underlined here is that post colonialism helps us pinpoint discourses of otherness in everyday organizational practices such as training that may well be designed to ‘improve’ workplace conditions and enhance organizational effectiveness.

Methods of study

The purposes that inform a particular approach to organizational culture can have an important impact on creating or addressing gendered outcomes. Schein (1992), for instance, contends that there are two main approaches to the study of organizational culture – clinical and ethnographic. The clinical approach is generated by the interests of organizational ‘stakeholders’ to solve a particular problem. When, for example, Nova Scotia Power Corporation hired a consultant to ‘take a snap-shot’ of its organizational culture the company was interested in discovering the extent to which its culture change programme was working.

The clinical approach favored by Schein (1992), is problematic for feminist research in that it relies on the access requirements and restrictions of organizations under study, and limits study to those companies providing access. Helms Hatfield, for example, gained unlimited access to Nova Scotia Power to ‘assist’ the company to develop a survey on employee attitudes to culture change, but her access was restricted when, at a later date, she attempted an ethnographic study of the impact of re-engineering on employees’ attitudes. At this latter stage the consultants were concerned that Helms Hatfield’s study might say something unfavorable about their re-engineering programme.

There is no knowing how the company would have reacted to the more sensitive issue of discriminatory practices. On the other hand, access is a serious problem for ethnographic studies of organization.

Often ethnographic studies may address broader issues of gender discrimination, which are either of no direct interest or are highly controversial to the specific organization under study. Morgan's (1988) study, for instance, although useful to those interested in change in the Canadian Public Service, was nonetheless a damning indictment of those in charge over the years.

In the recent years, especially with a growing corporate interest in employment equity and diversity management, a number of feminist researchers have managed to achieve a balance between clinical and ethnographic practice – gaining access by offering insights into corporate problems while negotiating space to research and address broader issues of gender discrimination. Current interest in post-modernism and post-feminism has, to some extent, seen a merging of interest between companies and researchers in 'local' practices.

For the companies involved this type of research can provide insights into their own employment practices. For the post-feminist researcher, the research can generate insights into localized sites of gender construction.

Data analysis procedures

In order to address the three broad research questions guiding this study we developed a multi-level data analysis procedure which would detect differences in the values those organizational members perceives to exist in the cultures of their organizations. Each level of data analysis uses different statistical techniques and examines a specific set of differences in individual perceptions, resulting in an empirical depiction of the gendered nature of organizational culture.

The first objective of data analysis was to explore the perceptions of respondents of the current culture of their organizations and the values currently reflected. The second objective was to assess the differences between the reports of the current culture and of the ideal future if women are to be equitably treated. The third objective was to explore the values that respondents perceive they are rewarded for showing in their organizations at the time of data collection.

Conclusion

Finally, perceptual differences in the perceptions of male and female managers were explored to identify the extent to which individuals experience the effects of the organization's culture differently. All of these combine to demonstrate in what specific ways organizational cultures are gendered.

In the first stage of data analysis we examined these data for all respondents together, rather than attempting to make distinctions between any specific demographic groups. To examine the extent to which individuals perceive the cultures of their organizations to be gendered, there should be differences between the values women and men are rewarded for demonstrating in their behaviors as well as between the perceptions of their current organizational culture and some ideal future culture that would more equally treat women and men.

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