The Role of Gender Consciousness in Challenging Patriarchy

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Abstract: This action research project explored how women develop gender consciousness and use this knowledge to take "connected action" to address gendered power relations in their life and work.

Today, women populate the U.S. workforce in record numbers. Presence, however, does not equal power. Although they make up over 50 percent of the workforce, women trail men in pay, promotion, benefits and other economic rewards (Bowler, 1999; Elder & Johnson, 1999; Kim, 2000, Knoke & Ishio, 1998). Recently, the *New York Times* reported that not only have women's salaries failed to catch up with men's, but also they have lost ground in several industries (Becker, 2002). The few women who break through the glass ceiling do so by emulating men and reinforcing patriarchal systems that discriminate.

Women's glacially slow movement into positions of power in corporate America is mysterious given their sheer numbers in the workforce. Stanley (2002) reported although women are well represented in many professions, they make up approximately 1(I'm not sure with %'s, but 1-10 in usually spelled out?) percent of CEO's of corporations. Women work and learn in a context that has been largely created, maintained, and controlled by white men where they lack voice, visibility, and power. How do women learn to deal with such marginalization? Although one might assume working in a patriarchal system would galvanize a woman's feminist perspective and desire to change organizational culture, often the opposite is true. Previous research has shown that some women actually exhibit low levels of gender awareness when reflecting on their career experiences (Bierema, 1994, 2001; Caffarella, Clark, &Ingram, 1997) even when reporting experiences of gender based hardship, discrimination, and harassment.

Workplaces are social institutions, and thus, mirror society's power structures and oppressive forces. Hayes and Flannery (2000) suggest that like education, the workplace has hidden curricula that reproduce power structures. Evidence of this assertion is found in many studies suggesting masculine traits help women advance at work (Cejeka &Eagly, 2000; Diekman & Eagly, 2000; Fagenson, 1990; Kolb, 1999; Mainiero, 1994). Women's need or desire to buy into the "old boy" network may be explained by either suppression or unawareness of themselves as gendered beings (Bierema, 2000; Caffarella, Clark &Ingram, 1997). Caffarella & Olson (1993) ask: "How would raising the consciousness of women about the 'glass ceiling' for women in organizations affect their life dreams and what they believe they can achieve?" (p.145). This study explored the effects of women's consciousness of gendered power relations in the work context. The purpose of this research was to study women's gender consciousness development through an action research project with a group of women.

Methodology

An action research project was conducted with a group of eight women including myself. Two were African American, and six were Caucasian. Five work in state agencies concerned with preventing family violence, one is an environmental activist, another a doctoral student, and I am a faculty member. Each woman was invited based on her demonstration of a high level of

gender awareness. I gained privileged access to this group through a consulting project. All participants joined the group voluntarily and were research partners throughout. Dickens and Watkins (2000) identify involvement and improvement as the two vital objectives of action research. Action science approaches engage people in a process of internal critique of their own thought and action (Putnam, 2000). The action research design was ideal as it lends itself to both generating knowledge and producing action (Park, 2000). This group critiqued their thinking and action about gendered power relations. Group meetings began in 2000 and were used to both generate and analyze data. I served as the data recorder and initial analyzer, and the group analyzed and critiqued the preliminary findings during meetings. Our findings were refined based on group feedback and shared usually via electronic mail between meetings. The meetings were held at a quiet bed and breakfast on twenty-seven acres overlooking a brook. All sessions were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data were analyzed according to the constant comparative method and evaluated according to stages of gender consciousness development (Brody, Fuller, Gosetti, Moscato, Nagel, Pace, G., &Schmuck, 2000) and a Gender Consciousness Action and Awareness Matrix (Bierema, 2001). Member checks have been conducted both during group meetings and through electronic mail communications. Limitations include the purposive sample. Findings are not necessarily generalizable to the population at large. I was an active participant and partner in the data collection and analysis. My lenses include experience as a white, middle class, heterosexual researcher and former executive in corporate America. Women's gender consciousness development is impacted by three general processes that will be described in the next section.

Findings

Identity Development through the Hidden Curriculum

First, women's identity development is shaped through life's "hidden curriculum" that teaches girls and women subordination to the dominant patriarchal system of power. Lessons learned from exposure to the "curriculum" include gender roles, a devaluing of women, silence and invisibility, submission to male power, and acceptance of role contradictions. Girls and boys, and women and men learn and reinforce these gendered power relations throughout their lives. The rules and roles accompanying gendered power relations are so ingrained in the culture that they are practically invisible, neither questioned nor challenged by most people.

Gender Consciousness Development Process

Many women and men never experience high levels of gender consciousness, instead functioning in a state of "gender unconsciousness" where they neither question the status quo nor work to change it. The gender unconscious may also be aware of gendered power relations but choose to deny, minimize, or ignore them, because the cost of addressing them is too high. Gender conscious begins with learning. A variety of learning experiences can result in gender awareness, including formal, informal and experiential learning, critical reflection, and connected knowing. Regardless of the type of learning, gender consciousness only happens through a critical assessment of gendered power relations, rejection of socially dictated gender roles, and questioning the legitimacy of the "hidden curriculum." Although women may individually conclude that the status quo should be rejected, the primacy of connected knowing cannot be underestimated in fostering gender consciousness.

Connected learning—where women come together and compare experiences—is pivotal in giving women the data and courage to reject gendered power relations. Through this process,

they reclaim silenced voices and become "gender conscious." They recognize current efforts toward equality are insufficient and that the assumptions underlying them may be faulty. Awareness facilitates the recognition of how different groups are privileged and rewarded in society, generally along gender lines (Brody et al., 2000). This new awareness impacts thinking and action, but does not always result in action. Through the process of gender awareness development, a new identity is created in which gender awareness is in essence a way of being.

Connected knowing served three functions among the women in this research. First, it provided a safe space for women to share and compare experiences. One member explains, "I really think its difficult to learn individually, because whether it is through writing or talking personally with individuals, that's how we hear other perspectives…that's how we get the validation." A second function of connected knowing is naming oppression. Although the participants discussed intuitively knowing that women's treatment was wrong, they agreed, "There are some common things that you need a third party to help you either accept, or understand, or value." Another member shares, "I realize that I didn't have an outlet to not only listen to me go on and on, but also to validate the experience of [being silenced]." Another discusses the realization that women have not made significant progress toward equality and power, "It feels to me like I want to talk about that, I want to name it." The third function of connected knowing is the fostering of courage to move forward to begin acting on their awareness. Connected learning helps the women persevere in both their learning and commitment to women's issues. A participant explains, "I keep thinking, maybe next year I'll get it all figured out, the part that makes me happy is that I'm not alone, that all of us are dealing with what we consider are inequities and working through it."

Awareness of gendered power relations developed through a combination of individual and connected learning. Through this learning, gender consciousness emerged and expanded. The women experienced learning leading to gender consciousness through testing their questions and rejecting the status quo with the support of other women. This type of learning is similar to Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule's (1986) description of connected knowing. New insight, however, does not foster social change without action, and awareness of gendered power relations without action is futile.

From Connected Knowing to Connected Action
The third aspect of gender conscious development is connected action. Connected action emanates from connected knowing and is characterized by both a high level of awareness of gendered power relations and a commitment to taking strategic action to promote change for women. Connected action may be either individual or collective and is powerful because it challenges patriarchy. Connected action has at least four attributes. The participants view their role as educative; work to make the invisible visible; adopt a conscious/unconscious strategy when expedient; and exhibit consistency between their thoughts and actions.

Taking an Educative Role. These women take risks to address gendered power relations and view themselves as teachers helping others learn about oppression. One member describes her role in her work with judges: "My role is to instruct [and] most of them are male." The participants were dedicated to raising the awareness of other people in their system. Action coupled with awareness causes these women to function in a state of critical activism, where they are critical of work and life situations and view them through a lens of gender awareness. One member tries to educate people at her church about sexist language and policies. She admits, "I think all the women at my church, and the men, are in a totally difference place, but they think

I'm the crazy feminist. I always speak my mind…it is very, very important to me." Another admits she has become so comfortable with raising gendered issues that she forgets it is not always comfortable for others.

Making the Invisible Visible. The women told story after story about speaking up and bringing attention to issues that disenfranchise women because, "Taking action in the name of women's oppression involves making the invisibility of women's oppression visible." One member confronted her son's teacher about sexist fairy tales told in his first grade class. One member notes, "Part of what's hard about making the invisible visible, [is] you see it and then you have to decide on how you're gonna deal with it." Bringing visibility to the invisibleness of women's oppression was a priority. One member notes, "I think it should be that gender consciousness is the purpose of saying that 'this is what's happening to women.' It's to bring it to your attention. I think it is important to call people's attention to something." She further explains, "Discrimination and oppression of women has become such a part of our culture we often don't see it." Another notes, "we have all made it [sexism] visible within our lives, but so many others haven't." These women describe their willingness to confront others' sexist behavior. These women are sometimes known as the lone voice bringing visibility to women's issues. This is a difficult position but as one member notes, "it pays off when you get others to think differently."

Adopting a "Conscious/Unconscious" Strategy. As noted in the previous sections, connected action is characterized by an educative role aimed at bringing visibility to gendered issues. The strategies used to accomplish these goals range from stealth to overt tactics. These women constantly calculate the risks on both personal and professional levels. Most of these women are feminist activists, yet they make conscious decisions at times to adopt a "conscious-unconscious" stance as a strategy for dealing with sexism when the cost of taking action is too high personally or professionally. In essence, "you pick and choose what you are going to do, and be comfortable with that." "You do a little bit at a time, and then you slide back, and then oh shit, to do it again, you start over again." The participants agreed, "You can't react to all of them, or you'd be angry and you'd be fighting daily…. So after a lifetime of confronting…. whether it's racism, feminism, or whatever it is, you just learn to let some slide, and some you go after." Sometimes this conscious-unconscious behavior is simply a means of preserving energy or life balance. What distinguishes this behavior from gender unconscious behavior is that there is a deliberate choice made not to act, versus ignorance or denial, and inaction is not a permanent state for these women.

Being Consistent in Thought and Action. What differentiates these women from the gender "unconscious" is not only their consciousness about gendered power relations, but also the constancy between their thinking and action. In other words, there is consistency between their espoused theory versus theory-in-use (Argyris, 1993). Typically, Argyris found many professionals said one thing and did another. The apparent, yet unrealized inconsistency was viewed by Argyris as a flaw in reasoning and resulted in failures or unexpected outcomes. The women in this study generally did not fit Argyris' pattern of "learned incompetence" (saying one thing, doing another) when it came to gender issues. The women consistently viewed themselves as activists for women's issues and shared their beliefs. "To me it's critical that [gender consciousness's] definition is [grounded] in activism." To this member "that's part of becoming aware… activism [is] trying to go against the status quo."

Discussion

This study has illustrated how connected knowing and action dually foster gender consciousness. Developing gender awareness is a transformative learning process that occurs individually and collectively. Daloz, Keen, Keen, and Parks (1996) outline four conditions of transformation: presence of the other, reflective discourse, a mentoring community, and opportunities for committed action. This research describes how connected knowing leads to connected action. Knowledge about gendered power relations is not enough and must be accompanied by action if change is to occur. Gender consciousness was most powerful when it was linked with action. This finding fits with Bierema's (2001) explanation of how varying levels of awareness and action result in different outcomes in gendered power relations in a study of a corporate women's network. Belenky et al. (1987) concluded that connected learning is most effective when members of a group meet over long periods of time and know each other well. They define it as learning that is grounded in relationship, reciprocity, and conversation. It is also a means of identifying common ground among learners. Other scholars have argued that fostering a sense of connection is very important for women's development and that women tend to define themselves through relationships (Caffarella & Olson, 1993; Giesbrecht, 1998; Gilligan, 1979; MacRae,1995; Ruddick,1996). The only other published study addressing gender consciousness development is the Brody et al. (2000) examination of gender consciousness and privilege in K-12 settings. Although the authors describe a hierarchy of gender consciousness, they do not explain how the knowledge is used to promote change.Gherardi's (1994) observation that "doing gender" is easier than explaining it may be a good explanation for why there are so few studies that illuminate *how* women learn about gendered power relations.

This study has illuminated the developmental process of gender consciousness among a group of women who have clearly demonstrated their understanding of gendered power relations and taken actions to create more equality and change for women. Women, organizations, and educators can benefit from reflecting on gendered power relations, creating safe spaces for connected learning, and committing to making changes that support women's advancement. Failure on any of these levels will result in replication and reproduction of present patriarchal systems.Fostering gender consciousness offers promise as women intensify challenges to oppressive patriarchal systems. The words of Robin Morgan capture the promise of gender consciousness and connected action: "If I had to characterize one quality as the genius of feminist thought, culture, and action, it would be the connectivity."

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