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Work in Progress

Relational Theory in the Workplace

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Work in Progress

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Abstract

This paper overviews a study that applied the principles of relational theory to workplace interactions. Based on a study of female design engineers, it describes a way of working—Relational Practice—that springs from a relational belief system and model of growth-in-connection. It details four categories of Relational Practice and identifies the way—and the implications of the process—through which this practice “gets disappeared” from the organizational definition of work.

Introduction

This paper will overview the findings of a research project that used a relational model of growth and development (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, Surrey, 1991) to explore women's experience in the workplace. As Jean Baker Miller noted in *Toward A New Psychology of Women* (1986) work organizations are likely to be hostile environments in which to seek growth-in-connection. This is true because organizations, like most of society's structures, are based on masculine models of growth that are antithetical to connection, models that privilege separation and independence rather than interdependence and collectivity. The study overviewed here started from the premise that if women truly were operating from a different belief system about what leads to growth and effectiveness, this belief system would be evident in the way they worked, even though organizations might not support or encourage this way of working and might even, in their practices and reward systems, actually discourage it. So one goal of the study was to observe women as they worked to see if there was any evidence of work practice that reflected a relational belief system about what leads to growth, organizational effectiveness and success. The intent was not only to describe the behavior, but also to link it to a motivational belief system, a way of *thinking* that might challenge—and offer an alternative to—masculine norms about how organizations need to be structured in order to be successful.

The second goal of the study was to explore the gender/power implications of relational ways of working. That is, rather than simply describe a different way of working, the study sought to explore what effects this way of working might be having on women and their ability to get ahead in

organizations. If, as Jean Baker Miller (1986) suggests, women are expected to shoulder relational work invisibly in personal relationships so that the “myth of independence” remains unchallenged, might this also be happening in organizations? If women were doing “invisible work” in organizations, what effect was this having on them and their career progress? So, the goal of the study was twofold. The first was to make visible, give language to and build theory about relational activity as practice in organizations. The second was to explore the power implications of the findings through understanding what happens to people, particularly women, who work this way.

Method

The research design reflects the exploratory nature of the research questions. Qualitative data were gathered using a method of structured observation, as well as individual and group interviews, to capture the everyday work experience of six female design engineers. Structured observation is a data gathering process characterized by the systematic unselective recording of events in their natural setting (Mintzberg, 1973; Jacques, 1992; Weick, 1968). The advantage of this method over more common self-report diary techniques is that it generates data about how people *actually* work as distinct from how they *talk* about how they work. However, in order to explore issues of gender and power, it was also important to understand how the engineers and others in the work environment talked and thought about their work, the language they used to describe it and the sense they made of it and its effect on their tasks. In order to collect both types of data I devised a protocol in which I shadowed each engineer for a full day, closely observing and recording her behavior and interactions not only with people, but with all aspects of the environment. The day after the shadowing I held a long interview with each engineer; I walked her through the day’s events asking for comments and explanations of what I had observed. I also interviewed other members of the worksite and held a focus group of all the participants, in which I fed back some of my early findings and gathered further input and reactions from them.

Findings

Part one: Relational practice

Analysis of the shadowing data revealed four types of Relational Practice:

Preserving: This is behavior associated with tasks. It includes relational activities intended to preserve the life and well-being of the project.

Mutual Empowering: This is behavior associated with enabling others’ achievement and contribution to the project.

Achieving: This is behavior that uses relational skills to increase one’s own effectiveness and professional growth.

“Creating Team”: This behavior has to do with teamwork. It includes activities intended to create an atmosphere of collegiality, where the positive outcomes of group life—things like collaboration, trust, mutual respect—can occur.

Tables detailing the many specific behaviors associated with each type of Relational Practice, the skills and belief system underlying the practice and its intended effect on the project can be found in the Appendix. To capture the essence of Relational Practice in the engineers’ own words, selected examples of each type are presented below.

Preserving

This practice had to do with preserving the life and well-being of the project. It included things such as taking responsibility for the whole, and doing whatever needed to be done to keep the project connected to the people and resources it needed to survive. People who acted this way had an attitude of “doing whatever it takes” or “if I don’t do it nobody will”. Sometimes preserving meant taking on jobs that were technically beneath them—like soldering a board themselves if a technician were busy—and sometimes it meant going the extra mile by coming in on a weekend to prevent what they considered “substandard” products from going out the door. And sometimes it meant scanning the environment for information that needed to be passed on and then taking the initiative to pass it along. For those who did it, this type of behavior was considered an essential part of the job and they were hard on those who refused to work this way. As one engineer put it: “What’s wrong with picking up a soldering iron?”

Nothing. Your hands aren't going to fall off.", and another:

I just could not *believe* Marketing was going to let those prints go out the door—I mean, I showed them to Tony (the copy quality person) and he just shrugged like 'whatever' and I just said to myself 'no way' . . . so Sara and, I we came in on Saturday and re-did them, because, I mean, it had to be done.

Preserving also included activities that were meant to keep the project connected to people it needed. For example, this engineer describes how she takes the initiative to make sure that people who supply valuable resources to the project, but who have no reporting relationship to their team, feel appreciated and valuable:

. . . its just that because I was more sensitive to it than Ned (the manager). I would—like, someone didn't feel that it was their job and I might have sensed that they were getting to the point that they were going to get hurt or feel that they were being taken advantage of. . . . Then I've put myself in that role and I've just said to Ned, 'Maybe we should send so-and-so a thank you or whatever.'

Another type of Preserving had to do with rescuing, or calling attention to problems. For example, one engineer identified a problem she thought was serious. She convinced her boss and her boss' boss that it was a problem and she arranged for a meeting with another division. At the meeting she took a back seat, deferring to her boss, and letting him explain her data. Later, she describes this taking a back seat as a *conscious decision* she made:

If we've got someone at a higher level like Mike who can communicate to them that it's a problem . . . (pause) . . . I mean if it was just me saying it . . . I mean, otherwise, they might not think it really is . . . (pause) . . . but I could tell. I thought it was a really good meeting because you don't see them that wound up about problems that often, you know? They would rather dust them under the rug and say look, if its just one occurrence. . . .

In summary, the Relational Practice of Preserving is rooted in a belief that being a good worker means taking responsibility for the whole. In many ways, Preserving activities are similar to what Sara Ruddick (1989) calls "preservative love", one of the three practices underlying maternal thinking. Like a mother caring for a child, the engineers accept a responsibility for the life and well-being of the project—anything that threatens its health is deserving of time and attention. However, unlike the exclusivity of the mother/child relationship, the project has many "parents" and it is clear that these engineers expect others to assume this same sense of responsibility. It is apparent in the way they talk about their work that their definition of working effectively means not only attending to specific job duties but also connecting across functions, even if such connecting is beneath you in the hierarchy of job duties. Furthermore, there is an implied belief that good workers will have the skills needed to see things holistically and be able to operate in the context of implications and consequences rather than in an atmosphere of separation and specialization.

Another belief underlying this notion that everyone should put the needs of the project ahead of individual issues such as status, hierarchy or self-promotion is the belief that such action will be seen as a sign of competence and commitment. In other words, the indirectness and apparent "invisibility" of these activities is assumed to be characteristic of their effectiveness, such that doing them invisibly and indirectly does not mean that they won't be recognized but rather, when recognized will be even more highly valued because they were done without calling attention to them. Thus, the engineer who sacrifices an opportunity for self-promotion and defers to her boss in order to give the problem visibility describes her action with pride, as evidence of her competence—because of her action they are now "wound up" about the problem. This belief that indirectness adds value and that being quietly competent will be recognized, is characteristic of relational practice.

The final dimension of the underlying belief system is evidenced by the engineers' willingness to put effort into maintaining relationships they deem critical to the project's health and vitality. Whether it means sending thank you notes to show appreciation, sending a peacemaker to smooth ruffled feathers or protecting the project from the consequences of severed relationships, these activities imply a belief

that keeping relationships in good working order is an important aspect of ensuring the life and well-being of the overall project. This way of working depends on a certain set of skills, including the ability to think contextually, the ability to anticipate consequences and the ability to sense the emotional context of situations so you can recognize and take action when someone “might be feeling like they’re getting taken advantage of” or is being seen as incompetent.

Mutual empowering

The second type of Relational Practice, Mutual Empowering, includes behavior intended to enable others’ achievement and contribution to the project. This practice is characterized by a willingness to put effort into what Cato Wadel (1979) calls “embedded outcomes”. These are outcomes embedded in other people, such as increased competence, increased self-confidence, or increased knowledge. The most common empowering activity I observed was empathic teaching—a way of teaching that took the learner’s intellectual or emotional reality into account and focused on the other (what does s/he need to hear?) rather than on self (what would I like to say?). As one engineer said, when explaining why she talks someone through the whole process while she is fixing a computer file, “Look, the whole point is so they can do it without you next time, right?” Sometimes empathic teaching meant simplifying the information intellectually, like giving an everyday example of a statistical concept, and sometimes it meant modifying the emotional context of a teaching interaction. As one engineer put it:

Well, the way I work with Frank is a little different. You have to be careful not to intimidate men. I wanted Frank to feel comfortable so that’s why I sat down next to him and worked through stuff with him. . . . Its just a style thing.

Making people feel comfortable about asking for help was a major part of empathic teaching. Over and over I observed engineers prefacing some information or instruction with comments like, “Well, this may be a silly way of doing this but what I like to do is” . . . or “There may be lots of ways to get around this but what works for me is. . . .” They seemed to use these somewhat self-deprecating comments not only to minimize status difference but also to communicate

an openness to learning and to indicate that they, as teachers, were open to additional input in the interaction.

Another way of enabling others was by keeping them connected to people, either acting as a go-between to smooth difficulties or stepping in to handle difficult people for them. For example, one engineer took on part of her boss’ job by offering to take the responsibility for dealing with a woman on the West Coast who was difficult. As she said, “Carl was getting really frustrated dealing with her, so I just said, ‘Look, I’ll do it’”.

In summary, Mutual Empowering activities are those that enable others to produce, achieve and accomplish work-related goals and objectives. Unlike the previous theme of Preserving, which in many ways is analogous to traditional, dependency relationships based on a mother/child model, this theme of empowering draws on a model of relational interaction characterized by *interdependence* and more fluid power relations. It is behavior rooted in the belief not only that outcomes embedded in others are worth working for, but that everyone needs and should be able to expect this kind of help. As one engineer describes:

But everyone should feel like that. Because if everyone knew everything we all wouldn’t be here, you know? We all know something other people don’t know, so it shouldn’t be a big deal . . . people should realize that . . . but some people don’t though.

So Mutual Empowering is motivated by a different expectation about enabling, one based on a concept of power and expertise that is fluid and rooted in a belief that we are *all* dependent on others. Implicit in all of this is the expectation that parties operating in this more fluid environment, where power and/or expertise shift from one party to the other, will have two sets of skills. One is skill in empowering others (sharing—in some instances even customizing—one’s own reality, skill, knowledge, etc. in ways that make it accessible to others) and the other is skill in *being* empowered (willingness to step away from the expert role and/or minimize status differences in order to learn from or be influenced by the other). In other words, it implies a belief that each party is dependent on the other to achieve a desired outcome and both parties will be motivated to engage in the interaction. This notion of mutuality

differentiated this type of enabling from other, more traditional forms of helping. It was clear from the way engineers spoke about it that they weren't engaging in this kind of enabling out of some sense of altruism or selflessness. Rather, they got a positive sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy out of enabling others. In fact, it was part of what it means to be good at your job:

I know I'm doing a good job when people think of me when they have a problem. I've succeeded when people think of me as someone who is 1) competent and 2) someone who will help. Most people around here only care about the first thing—competence—they don't care if they are seen as approachable. I do.

Achieving

The third type of Relational Practice, Achieving, uses relational skills to enhance one's own professional growth and achievement. It is a way of working rooted in the belief that I will be most effective as a worker if I am connected to others. So, much of the behavior had to do with maintaining connection and with creating good, solid working relationships with people. This included things such as following up with someone they'd disagreed with in a meeting, or going out of their way to track someone down whose feelings they had hurt. What was striking about these activities was the distress and sense of urgency to "make things right" that accompanied many of these re-connections. Theories of growth-in-connection suggest that this urgency to re-connect stems from a belief in the long term potential of relationships that are in good working order. Thus, as this engineer indicates, the urgency and desire to maintain connection is not so much a fear of separation as it is an avoidance of conditions that might preclude future growth:

I get my point across, sometimes indirectly . . . the more it bothers me the more indirect I get. If I feel that confronting the issue may end the relationship I won't confront it.

Her desire to maintain the connection is evident in the way she enacts a conscious, intentional strategy to speak more and more indirectly to minimize the negative impact of direct confrontation until finally, after making an assessment that the relationship is in

jeopardy, she gives up. In effect, she decides not to pursue growth in the *current* connection but preserves the possibility of future growth by not severing ties completely.

At times the practice of Achieving entailed paying attention to the emotional overlay of situations in order to understand what the most effective response would be. For example, one day we were sitting in the lab and another engineer came in and demanded, in an angry voice, to know what was going on. The engineer I was shadowing gave him some information about the problem she was working on and he turned and left. The next day when I asked her about it, she explained it this way:

Well, I told him about the problem because I think he feels a little territorial about it. He thinks of the lab as his area. Also, the meeting I have with him later is to get information from him that (our boss) wants me to document because she wants it documented in my style. Technically, this is his job so I don't think he feels real comfortable with that, so he may be a little threatened and that may have something to do with his coming in here now and wanting to know.

Her ability to understand how he might be feeling prevents her from using the information as power or lording it over him. This not only keeps her relationship with him in good working order in the short term, it appears to be an intentional strategy to enhance her own effectiveness by increasing the chance that the meeting they have later on in the day will go smoothly.

This ability to use emotional data seemed to come so easily to these engineers that they were amazed when others didn't do it. One said:

These are smart people, they're engineers . . . and yet some of them don't seem to realize that they are never going to get that person to say what they need him to say because two hours earlier they made him look stupid in a meeting. They can't seem to figure out that the way to get someone to support you is not to call them stupid!

Another type of Achieving had to do with something I called Relational Asking, or asking for help in a way that made it likely you'd get the help you needed. That is, in a way that called forth responsiveness in others. One engineer described it this way:

A lot of people around here will say something like: 'Katie, I'm in a position of leadership over you and you have to do this for me. Make these files.' And I tend to like to say, 'Katie, can you show me how to do one of these?'

But it wasn't just the way of asking for help that was important, it was the kind of help sought. As another said, "I know people don't mind helping me, because they know I'll share it with others in my group, so its not like everyone will be coming to them." They contrasted this sort of "empowering helping" with people who asked for help in an exploitive way. As one says, "I'll show you what you don't know, but come on, everyone can make a file . . . I'm not going to do your *job* for you!"

In summary, the Relational Practice of Achieving is based on a belief that not just personal, but *professional* growth is rooted in connection. It's a practice that depends on an acceptance of interdependence, where asking for help isn't a sign of weakness, but an invitation to empower. Achieving behavior required an ability to use emotional data to understand a situation and strategize a response. It helped the engineers chose their battles and avoid unintentionally creating obstacles to their own effectiveness.

"Creating team"

The Relational Practice of "Creating Team" had to do with working to create the background conditions in which group life can flourish. Working to create an environment in which the positive outcomes of relational interactions can be achieved—outcomes like cooperation, collaboration, trust, respect, and collective achievement—included two types of activities: creating conditions *within* the individual and creating conditions *between* individuals.

Creating conditions within individuals entailed all kinds of verbal and non-verbal interactions that acknowledged people and seemed to be intended to communicate a sense of "I hear you" or "I see you." It included things like nodding and smiling when

others were talking, maintaining eye contact with speakers in meetings and chuckling at their jokes, or making encouraging comments like "right", "good point" or even just "uh-huh." It also included listening and responding to others feelings, preferences or unique circumstances. As one engineer says:

The other thing is, because men joke around so much with each other, when a man does have something he wants to talk about he won't go to another man . . . they'll go to a woman. I've had men who I know don't even like me, use me to vent about really personal things. Like this one guy I know doesn't like me and I don't like him much, started to talk about the fertility problems he and his wife were having. I mean that's heavy stuff. And I've talked to several women who say that men come in and sit down and talk to them. You don't really have to say anything, just listen. They just want someone who will listen and not joke around about it. I feel bad when others are feeling bad or having a hard time and I know its not going to kill me to spend some time with them. And also, who else are they going to go to? It doesn't cost me anything, really, just to listen. But sometimes it just feels like a big responsibility because even if you are not really in the mood, you have to do it. I mean if they are coming to you it must be pretty bad and where else can they go?

One of the interesting things about this quote is how she responds empathically even though she is fully aware that "he doesn't like me and I don't like him much." So the response is not based in affection but is a conscious decision. Like the nodding and smiling, it seems to be rooted in a belief that people deserve to be acknowledged and to have their experience validated in some way and that they, as co-workers, have a responsibility to do this type of acknowledging for others. But it didn't seem to be just a personal responsibility as a human being. Rather, their actions appeared to be motivated by a

desire to create a certain kind of environment in the workplace. As this engineer says:

What I think is—the more team spirited people are more effective in what they're doing. And I equate being conscious of other people's feelings with working in a team spirit. I think people are much more effective this way.

Creating conditions *between* people had to do with creating an environment that would foster collaboration and cooperation. Sometimes this meant something as simple as creating the reality of interdependence by using collaborative rather than confrontational language in expressing ideas in a meeting. For example, saying things like, "What I like about Dave's idea is . . ." and then going on to add to it. As one engineer notes:

I like to talk about things, explain why I think something, hear about what the other person thinks about something. But I know there are some people who like to operate in a state of conflict . . . with voices raised, like, that's not a good idea, instead of 'Why do you think that's a good idea?'

In summary, Creating Team appears to be characterized by a certain set of beliefs and assumptions about group life. First, is the belief that individuals have a right to be "noticed" and that part of what it means to be a good co-worker is to do the noticing. Second, is a belief that team spirit and achievement depend on paying attention to others' feelings and preferences and that the intangible outcomes that result from these efforts—outcomes embedded in other people and in social relations—are things worth working for. Third, it is a practice rooted in the assumption that a collective understanding of problems or situations, where other's ideas are fully explored and built upon, will enhance organizational effectiveness and lead to better decisions.

Summary

These four types of Relational Practice encompass a way of working that springs from a relational belief system, one characterized by a generalized responsibility for the whole and based on notions of connection, interdependence, mutuality and reciprocity. It is a way of working that depends on

the use of relational skills—things such as being sensitive to emotional contexts and others' emotional realities and the ability to think and *act* contextually. But the most important feature of Relational Practice, the feature that tied it most clearly to a relational model of growth and development was that *its use was strategic*. The engineers in this study made a conscious decision to work this way because they believed that operating in a context of connection was more effective, better for the project, better for getting the job done.

This belief system—in which relational interactions are assumed to be sites of growth, achievement and professional effectiveness—stands in sharp contrast to organizational norms and beliefs about competence, effectiveness and organizational success. This brings us to part two of the analysis. What happens to this relationally motivated behavior, and to the people who do it, when it is practiced in an environment that is hostile to its basic assumptions?

Part two: Gender, power and "getting disappeared"

As noted earlier, this project was part of a larger research project on gender equity. As part of that larger effort our team had done a cultural diagnosis of the work environment at this site. We found it to be a work environment similar to other environments in which design engineering is highly valued (McIlwee & Robinson, 1992). That is, we found that it is a workplace characterized by autonomy, self-promotion and individual heroics, where time is a surrogate for commitment and competence is measured by short term results. It is a workplace in which technical competence is highly valued and is seen as the route to organizational power and where self-promotion is essential to being seen as competent. Real work is defined as "solving problems" and engineers who moved on to supervisory positions even spoke of "no longer having a job" because all they did now was help other people do their work. It is a culture in which the definition of outcome is clear. Outcomes are tangible measurable and concrete. In fact, in this environment, if you can't quantify or measure something it is assumed to not exist.

So, what happens to Relational Practice when it is done in this work culture? Well, it's not just that it is invisible or behind-the-scenes, although it is that. What happens when Relational Practice is lifted from its own belief system and brought into the

organizational discourse on work is that the system acts on this behavior. It is not just invisible; it “gets disappeared.” This happens because behavior based on a model of growth-in-connection violates many of the assumptions underlying this culture, assumptions that reflect a different model of growth, development and achievement, one rooted not in connection but in independence and individuation. By observing and listening closely to how others responded to Relational Practice, how the engineers themselves talked about their behavior and even how I as an observer sometimes misinterpreted their actions, I began to get a sense of the ways in which Relational Practice “gets disappeared” in this setting.

Disappearing preserving

The practice of Preserving is rooted in a belief system that privileges context and connection. However, in this engineering culture based on individualism, hierarchy and specialization, operating in a context of connection is literally non-sense. It is behavior that lies outside the job description and it tends to mystify the people who observe it. So, for example, an engineer who attempts to pass information across divisions by telling her manager that marketing will be sending out substandard prints, is met by a shrug—that’s not her job, don’t worry about it. Other attempts to call attention to things that could cause future problems were met with the same type of response. After all, in a culture where you get ahead by solving high visibility problems, it is a waste of time to put effort into the routine, maintenance things. It tends to be seen as nit-picking or as an excessive devotion to detail. In fact, it can prevent problems and be of great value to an organization.

And being quietly competent or sacrificing an opportunity for self-promotion tends to be seen as not being competent at all. In fact, I found that even I sometimes “disappeared” this relational competence and misinterpreted what I observed. For example, when I observed the event described earlier of an engineer who took a back seat in a meeting and let her boss talk about her data, I at first coded this as evidence of her fear of power and success. I was making sense of her behavior as some sort of personal aberration, assuming that she was uncomfortable with self-promotion or with being seen as an expert. It wasn’t until later, as she spoke of the incident with pride and explained to me that it was an intentional

strategy on her part to give the problem increased visibility and make sure it was taken seriously, that I began to realize that her behavior at that meeting could be understood differently.

Others might see some aspects of Preserving behavior, like sending thank you notes, as “wives’ work” (Huff, 1990) and attribute it to women’s desire to humanize the workplace. The real point, however, is that these explanations are fundamentally different from viewing the behavior as work—intentional action meant to enhance effectiveness.

Disappearing mutual empowering

In a culture of self-promotion—where independence is prized, and competition means beating the other guy out so you finish on top—helping others achieve doesn’t make sense. In this culture, where secretaries and other support staff who get paid to help others are low in the hierarchy and have little opportunity for advancement, it makes sense that those who *voluntarily* enable others are considered either inherently nice or incredibly naive. They either don’t know any better, or they don’t understand the rules of the game. As one engineer says:

If you try to nurture around here, they just don’t get it. They don’t understand that is what you are doing. They see it as a weakness and they use it against you. They don’t see that you are doing it consciously . . . they think you have missed something or that they’ve gotten something over on you. So if you try to be nice, you end up doing other people’s work.

What her experience makes clear is that here, in a work culture governed by “metrics”, where all outcomes are tangible and measurable, it doesn’t make sense to put effort into achieving outcomes embedded in others. In fact, there really is no organizationally acceptable language to describe the practice of embedding outcomes in others. The words she herself ends up using—nurturing, helping, being nice—tend to gender and de-skill the practice, making it seem more like a personal attribute than strategic action.

In this work setting, support activity in any form is routinely “disappeared” from the final product, reinforcing the myth of independence and individual heroics. This engineer is well aware of how this myth

disappears enabling activity and wonders why they can't operate in an environment in which both enabling and *being* enabled were valued:

If we rewarded someone who said, 'You know that action item I got yesterday? I found this great source of information (within the company). So and so's team did all this work and here is some of the output.' And if (the boss) could say, 'That was good of you to not re-invent the wheel' and you could actually get recognized for the way you got the job done rather than just getting it done. But just getting it done is what is important here . . . so you alone . . . you're the one who got it done . . . so you alone get the credit.

Disappearing achieving

The Relational Practice of Achieving gets disappeared in a similar fashion. Within organizational discourse, the world is divided into those with achievement needs and those with affiliation needs. In this framework, relational interactions are assumed to be motivated by strong affect and the desire, indeed the *need* to have those feelings reciprocated. The possibility of having achievement needs met through relational interactions isn't representable in this sensemaking schema—it is non-sense. Thus, individuals who seek relational interactions as sites of growth and achievement in the workplace are destined to be understood as seeking something else, such as affect, and operating out of a "need to be liked." And in this engineering environment, a need to be liked is considered such a sign of personal deficiency that merely suggesting that certain people are motivated by this need is enough to taint them and their behavior as worthless, inappropriate, and a sign of incompetence. Again, as members of the system, engineers themselves are able to give voice to how any evidence of behavior motivated by a desire for growth-in-connection gets disappeared:

So if I do get into a situation that is confrontational, not angry necessarily but even if we're just being very direct with each other and this person wants to do it one way and I want to do it another way, I'd be

concentrating more on (pause, then little laugh) *winning* than on how they felt about it. I gave up a long time ago caring about how they felt about it, other than if how they feel about it is going to get in the way of getting it done. But if I don't perceive that their feelings are going to get in the way, then I kind of don't notice anymore (laugh). So that's the only reason why I'm paying attention to their feelings. It isn't that I care that much about their feelings. It's because if they feel threatened enough, I won't make any progress and not because . . . (pause). If I thought I'd win in spite of that, it wouldn't bother me at all. So it isn't that I'm terribly worried about whether the guys that I work with like me. I worry a lot about whether they respect me. *I don't really care if they like me or not.* (emphasis added) (laugh) . . . (pause) . . . I happen to think that usually those kind of end up going together, though. If you respect someone, you usually end up liking them, too . . . at the end of it all.

The contradictions and inconsistencies in this quote give a good sense of the disappearing dynamic that occurs when Relational Practice is brought into the organizational discourse on work. The language she has available to represent her experience is limited and she is careful to distance herself from attributions of inappropriate behavior—she would be more concerned about winning, she wants me to know, than she would about someone's feelings. But then she gets all tangled up as she tries to describe her experience that these two things are not dichotomous. If feelings are going to get in the way of success, then of course she is concerned about them. If feelings weren't real, that is if she accepted the conventional wisdom that feelings are irrelevant to organizational phenomenon, she wouldn't care about them at all because they wouldn't stand in the way of winning. But she wants to make it clear that the *reason* she is concerned about feelings isn't because she wants to be liked. She understands that this would be the "normal" attribution and she wants to make sure I don't make it regarding her. So she falls back again

into the dichotomy—she doesn't care if they like her as long as they respect her. Any language available to her to describe worrying about the effect of confrontation on the relationship, or to describe the possibility that behavior that gets you liked might make you more effective, would risk the attribution of "needing to be liked", an attribution that would taint her as incompetent. Not having the organizational language to describe such a possibility and still be considered competent, she chooses competence and unwittingly reinforces the dichotomy between the two. But after giving me the party line, she recognizes the inadequacy of what she has said in trying to capture her experience so, after a slight pause and a little laugh, she undermines this dichotomous thinking: she happens to believe these two things go together, that being liked and being respected are not mutually exclusive.

Disappearing "creating team"

Many of these same dynamics operate to disappear the relational practice of Creating Team. In an environment where a relational model of growth and development is non-sense, it is difficult to articulate or understand a motivation to engage in activity to create a feeling of "team". So, if you operate from a relational belief system and, for example, use language that invites collaborative discussion, rather than being seen as effective, you are not seen at all. You and your ideas disappear. In the focus group, one engineer describes this disappearing so vividly that the group laughs in recognition:

Sometimes you're in a meeting, and somebody states an idea. If I stand up and I say, 'That's totally inappropriate, that's just plain stupid, this is what we should do' or if I stand up and say, 'Well, that's a really good idea but how about if we look at it this way?' The person who stood up and was abusive about it is the person that people are going to remember as having come up with that idea later, when it's time to evaluate people. Because even though it's a bad impression, you've made an impression. The other person, in being polite and a little self-effacing, has sort of melted into the background (pause). Sometimes,

if you're nice you'll say something like, 'Well, that's a really good idea, but I looked at it this way and this is what I came up with.' And then (after you give your idea) they'll say, 'Well, anyways . . .' (general laughter). And because you haven't like stomped on them, *you're not even in the room.*

What she recognizes is that if there is only one right way, and discovering it makes you the winner, then building on others' ideas is considered inappropriate or a sign that you have nothing new to add. Again, the language available—nice, self-effacing—tends to devalue the approach she is trying to describe, making it more a sign of weakness than strength. So this collaborative approach, like other things that create team—the affirming, the acknowledging, the listening, the smoothing—is not seen as competency but as a personal attribute or a natural expression of gender (women are naturally nicer, more polite and self-effacing). As a result, team spirit is assumed to be something that "just happens."

Summary of "getting disappeared"

This discussion suggests that there are three separate but synergistic mechanisms operating on Relational Practice to disappear it as work and construct it as something *other* than strategic action. The first mechanism is the attribution of "inappropriate." This occurs when Relational Practice is interpreted as a symptom of some sort of personal aberration, not appropriate to the workplace. This includes some positive attributions, such as being called "nice" or "thoughtful" as well as some more negative labels such as "naive" or being seen as someone who "doesn't know the rules of the game" or who has an emotional dependency or a strong "need to be liked."

The second mechanism through which Relational Practice gets disappeared is through the lack of language to describe it as work. The words the engineers have available to describe this kind of behavior (helping, nurturing, nice, polite) tend to associate it with the private sphere, with mothering and home. They are not organizationally strong. At the same time, words that *could* describe it, words like "outcome" and "competence" are defined organizationally in ways that implicitly exclude the kind of behavior they are trying to describe. Like the engineer who said:

... I've succeeded when people think of me as someone who is 1) competent and 2) someone who will help. Most people around here only care about the first thing—competence—they don't care if they are seen as approachable. I do.

It's clear here that what she is trying to do is describe an expanded definition of competence, one that includes a willingness and an ability to share and empower others. But there is no good language available to her to describe this kind of outcome—an outcome that would be embedded in another person—as evidence of competence. So she uses “approachability” and “help,” words that are not nearly as organizationally strong and leave the definition of competence unchallenged. In fact, ironically, her struggle actually ends up *reinforcing* the notion that enabling others is not part of competence but that it is something separate.

The third way in which Relational Practice gets disappeared has to do with the social construction of gender. It is different from the first two ways of getting disappeared because it has to do with how this way of working gets conflated with images of femininity and motherhood. Thus, the first two mechanisms of disappearing—being labeled inappropriate and not having the language to describe these things as work—would operate on *all* who worked this way, regardless of gender. But when women enact Relational Practice, something else happens. Because of gender roles, women are *expected* to act relationally, to be soft, feminine, helpful, good listeners. In fact they don't believe they have the option of acting any other way. As one engineer said, “I try swearing but I feel so stupid!” Or another, describing what happens when she tries using confrontation to make a point:

People notice that you said it and it definitely gets the point on the table. But it certainly isn't good for your long term relationships with that person. Especially, I think, if it comes from a woman to a man. I think that another man could do that, could say the exact same words, the exact same tone, and after the meeting it would just be over ... (pause) ... I don't think it would be over if one of those players was a woman, even if it was

over for the woman. I don't think it would be over for the man.

These gender expectations end up confusing the issue. It is difficult to articulate a relational way of working as an intentional choice when you sense that you don't *have* a choice. So the engineers get confused as they talk about this and they end up talking about it in contradictory ways, trying to capture the experience that they simultaneously resent being forced to use relational strategies *and* they believe it is actually more effective to work this way.

But even more problematic for women is that because they inhabit a female body, when they try to enact Relational Practice (work from a base of connection, mutuality, interdependence and reciprocity), they often get misinterpreted as enacting mothering (selfless giving). That is, they get responded to as *women*, not as *workers*. So, if they try to limit helping (as one engineer said, “I'll help, but I'm not going to do your job for you),” or if they refuse to use collaborative language when their ideas are getting stepped on, they are labeled (jokingly) “Queen Bee” or “Tarantula Lady.” Interestingly, these are names that label them not unhelpful but *unfeminine, poisonous, arrogant*. Getting called names for not being willing to help limitlessly, or for expecting reciprocity, overwhelms their belief in this as an alternative way of working. Because they recognize the career implications of being exploited or seen as naive, they end up cautioning themselves and others not to do too much relational work. As one said, “Although it might be good for the project, if you do it, you'll end up being a gopher your whole life.”

The disappearing dynamic

These three mechanisms operate in concert, creating a self-sealing loop I call the “Disappearing Dynamic,” pictured in Figure 1 in the Appendix. The easiest way to read the loop is to start in the upper right of the circle. The loop gets engaged when women enact any one of the four types of Relational Practice. This practice gets disappeared as something new (an alternative way of working in the public sphere) and gets constructed as something familiar (private sphere activity, inappropriately applied to the public sphere). Two things happen at this point. First, the model of growth-in-connection and the intentionality motivating the behavior gets thrown out of the loop, truncating any possibility of analyzing this behavior as an alternative to

organizational norms. And second, the people who work this way are seen as acting inappropriately. A *patriarchal understanding* of the motivation underlying their behavior gets engaged and, at least for females, rather than being seen as good workers, they are seen as good women or good mothers. This tends to construct Relational Practice as an expression of woman's essential nature—not only does she like doing these things, she is *supposed* to do them. Again, this leads to two possible outcomes, both with negative career consequences. Either women get punished for being too feminine (she doesn't know how to play with the big boys, she's not aggressive enough) or she gets taken advantage of because she is seen as naive or exploitable. So, not wanting to be exploited, she tries to change her behavior and act more appropriately—Act Male—but that doesn't work either, because now she gets punished for being *unfeminine*. But also, her heart isn't in it because she really does not believe it is the most effective way of working. In addition, she has the relational skills to work in a way she does believe is more effective. So, for all these reasons—because she is expected to, because she has the skills to and because she believes in it—she tries again. And the loop gets engaged once again. There are several important conclusions to be drawn from the loop and the way in which Relational Practice “gets disappeared” from organizational definitions of work.

Conclusion

The first implication of the loop is that Relational Practice gets absorbed by the system but challenges to ways of working—and ways of organizing that would support this way of working—“gets disappeared.” So the main power implication is that the patriarchal nature of the status quo in organizations is not challenged. In fact, organizational norms of hierarchy, individualism, autonomy and independence end up getting reinforced.

The second implication is that Relational Practice is undertheorized in the organizational literature. It is not theorized because, within the loop, it does not “exist” as an alternative strategy for organizational effectiveness. The result is that organizational understandings of the nature of work are both limited and one-sided. For example, the understanding in the business literature about what it means to enable, what it means to collaborate or what it means to work as a team is quite narrow, relying for the most part on

private sphere models of relational interactions—like the mother-child relationship or the wife-husband relationship—rather than developing a new language or new models. Ironically, Relational Practice is exactly the kind of behavior “re-engineered” organizations say they need: holistic, team oriented, flatter, less hierarchical (Hammer & Champy, 1993; Senge, 1990). But, because of its association with the private sphere, when this type of behavior actually is enacted in organizations not only is it not rewarded, it is turned into a career liability.

The third implication is for women's mental health. Behaving in ways they believe exhibit competence, skill and power but being branded naive, inadequate or incompetent must be taking its toll on women's self esteem. Certainly all the engineers I shadowed spent a lot of time reflecting on these issues. In fact, in my analysis I had a separate category labeled “Am I crazy?” to reflect the ambiguity and self-doubt they often expressed. The problem is, the loop constructs all these issues in terms of personal aberration. What gets lost is the fact that women's experience is being *systematically distorted* in order to protect the status quo from challenge. So it is natural that women start to think of these issues as their problem and believe they have to solve it individually. And it is no wonder that lots of women—even those who have made it to the top—are leaving organizations to start their own small companies or are refusing promotions or refusing to compete for top positions. Again, conventional wisdom holds that these women are leaving because they can't hack it. Either career and work aren't important enough to them or they can't take the pressure. But interestingly, follow up interviews with women who have left high level jobs indicate that they *can* do these jobs, they've just decided they don't *want* to. Years of trying to change the system has taken its toll.

And for all the women who don't have the option of leaving, what does it mean for them? Well, it may mean they are ending up in a lot of psychologist's offices, feeling dispirited, lethargic or incompetent and not really understanding why. If they are doing double duty at work—scrambling to be seen as competent in the current system and yet doing invisible relational work on the side in order to change the system or at least do their own job differently—it is easy to understand why they might be feeling dispirited.

We seem to be locked in a battle. Women need to change organizations, and organizations seem to be doing their best to change women. The real question is, what can be the next steps? Can we find the ways to convince organizations to recognize models of growth-in-connection?

Discussion Summary

After each colloquium presentation a discussion is held. Selected portions are summarized here. At this session, Maureen Harvey, Jean Baker Miller, Sung Lim Shin, Irene Stiver, Janet Surrey and Maureen Walker joined Joyce Fletcher in leading the discussion.

Question: In looking for evidence of Relational Practice, did you shadow any men?

Fletcher: I did not include men in my data analysis. However, as I mentioned, this project was part of a larger study and as part of that study we did shadow a number of men. We did see in them some evidence of Relational Practice, particularly the helping and enabling type of behavior. Interestingly, the men who did do some of these things tended to be men of color who came from another culture, not the USA. But I also want to add that the reason I did not analyze men had to do with the goal of the study. I was really trying to further our understanding of relational practice, not just as a way of working but as a way of *thinking*, one that is rooted in a belief that relational interactions are sites of growth, development and professional achievement. So to further the thinking required studying people who were likely to be operating from this model of growth and that meant studying women.

Question: For the men that were shadowed, did the same thing happen to them? Did they get disappeared?

Fletcher: Well, to a certain extent they did. That is, they weren't rewarded for their behavior and they often were seen as just being helpful or nice people. But they did not have the gender dynamic operating on them. In other words, they didn't get labeled as mothers and they didn't get punished or called names for not helping or listening or whatever. So it was a different experience for them.

Question: Did you observe women mentoring each other? I have not seen a lot of mentoring of women by women. Instead there seems to be a lot of backstabbing.

Harvey: Well, I think that what you are seeing is that women get caught in the system. They get caught between what they have to do to succeed in this very masculine environment and the demands from other women for help. I've seen this played out in lots of senior women. There is sort of a love-hate relationship with the skills they have. They know they have the skills to enable others but on the other hand they know if they do it they won't get rewarded for doing it and it might even hurt them because they won't be seen as tough enough or aggressive enough to do the job. It's really this whole disappearing dynamic. So they are in a real bind and it's a real problem for them.

Stiver: Another thing is that often women are very isolated in these senior positions. They are disconnected from relationships with others and it is in these instances of isolation that I think you see the kind of negative behavior—the backstabbing and so forth—that you alluded to. It seems to me that just the fact of being shadowed, of having someone listen to them must have been an empowering experience for these women and maybe made them feel more able to claim this behavior. I guess that is really a question. If we really want to empower women to work the way they want to work, maybe it means we have to listen to them and be some sort of support, to provide that connection so they are not so isolated.

Fletcher: I want to say one more thing about mentoring and that is that I think the notion of mentoring we have is a very masculine notion, very hierarchical and one-directional. What I observed was a more generalized, more informal kind of mentoring. These engineers wanted *everyone* to succeed and their everyday, ordinary interactions with people were geared to enable whomever they were with. It's different from formal mentoring where you are training and protecting a specific person. I also want to add to what Maureen said. I think we as women put extraordinary demands on women at higher levels, expecting them to be all things feminine and *also* to demonstrate all the masculine competencies that will advance them in the organizations. It's a lot.

Surrey: I also think that mentoring for men is somewhat different. What I've seen is that when men mentor, it's sometimes a narcissistic interaction. It's not so much a focus on the needs of the other as it is

just feeling good about being in a superior position where you can pass on your knowledge and wisdom. So it's a different definition of what it means to enable someone else—you are doing it because you are getting credit for doing it.

Walker: One of the things your question brings up is the need to acknowledge that being part of a socially devalued group does create a “dearth mentality.” There is this feeling that there isn't enough to go around and if I have internalized what I need to get in order to succeed then I am going to do whatever it is I need to do in order to get it. So, for example, one of the things we see is that people in a socially devalued group go out of their way not to give special treatment to people who are like them and in many ways treat people who are *not* like them better. So that is one of the sticky questions we are going to have to deal with in all of this, the very human element of wanting to get ahead and doing whatever it takes to do it.

Shin: I want to add that I think we can't ignore the issue of cultural differences. I think that in this culture it is not only women that have difficulty, it is people from different cultures as well. I am struck by the fact that some of the men who worked relationally came from other cultures. So I am struck by how *Western* male this focus on individualism and autonomy is. It is not just gender.

Question: I love these findings. I've worked for years in organizations and I would like to just scream for joy because some of these things are being named! I've worked where women, after a number of years did turn the culture around from very hierarchical to more team focused where people can work together. And to answer where we go from here, we do need to start naming some of these things. Name it as a *non-household* function to create the vision of what we are doing. Once we have the language the real question is are we really ready to move toward a new model? I mean, is capitalism just inherently too competitive and are we really talking about a revolution here?

Fletcher: Actually, I do think we are talking about revolution. And I think this challenge to hierarchy and competition is what makes this work “feminist.”

Harvey: I want to say something about naming. In the Stone Center Project at DEC we were trying to name women's relational skills. It was the most difficult part of the project and there were always things that stood in the way, that made it hard to

really challenge the system. In some ways, we never seemed to get it right. The thing is, it's the most challenging part because it's the most threatening to the system.

Question: I wanted to address the issue of organizational change. What I have noticed in years of working in organizations is that many men espouse the values of organizational change and talk as if they understand the intricacies of the process but they don't *actually* value these things. I am a consultant and I have actually been forced to reduce my billable hours because the organization didn't believe that what I was doing was “real” work. So I am intrigued by the notion of language—that we need a language to talk about these things to get them valued. And what is frustrating me is that some of the language is out there . . . so much so that it has almost become a cliché to talk about teams and team building. But even though the language is there, there isn't a real understanding of what this type of work means and what it takes to really do it well.

Walker: Well, I think naming is a very radical act. There is a huge investment in *not* naming or in using language to obscure reality. But if we start naming what it is that women do and naming it in strong language, that is radical because it is a direct challenge to the status quo. If we name these things as necessary what we are doing is pointing to neediness in that segment of the population that doesn't have these skills. And there is nothing more shameful in this masculine hierarchical structure than to have a need!

Miller: Just to add a little ray of hope. The Stone Center Project at DEC that Maureen Harvey mentioned *did* achieve some success in this regard. People did begin to name these things and make recommendations for how they could be valued and some real changes were made. So it is possible to do this. And even though with downsizing, all the changes didn't last forever, they had a real impact on the people there.

Question: I really would like some concrete suggestions. For years I have been consulting to a group of women and when I try to name some of these things and talk about team building and process, I often get accused of being too touchy-feely.

Stiver: One of the things your comment points out is how hard it is to *own* this type of behavior. If we start to think of these things as strengths, that puts us in a very different relationship with the rest of

society and in some sense it threatens the relationships we have. And so sometimes we as women tend to back away. So it really points out how we need to support each other and help each other because it really is very scary to challenge society in this way.

Miller: In terms of a specific suggestion, I think one important contribution this work makes is that we can name these strengths not just as process, as we in psychotherapy do, but as *practice*. And that is a big difference.

Comment: I want to make one comment about the way women are expected to listen to people's troubles at work, like the woman who had to listen to that man's fertility problems. It just strikes me that if men are in these really competitive positions, they absolutely need someone who will listen and relieve some of the pressure. But before they can go to someone they have to be absolutely certain that person will never be their boss or be in a position to compete with them. So they have to have some marginalized group they can dump this stuff on. But then the thing is, they have a tremendous motivation to make sure the marginalized group *stays* that way and is never in a position to use that information against them. So there is a way in which doing this kind of relational work really contributes to keeping

¹This project was part of a larger study on gender equity that was funded by the Ford Foundation through Grant #910-1036. Before I began this independent part of the study, I had been on site for nearly two years as a member of a larger research team that included Lotte Bailyn, Deborah Kolb, Susan Eaton, Maureen Harvey, Robin Johnson, Leslie Perlow and the consultant to the consultant to the project, Rhona Rapoport.

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