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**Encountering Resistance To Gender Equity Policy in Educational Organization**

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**Coming To the Research**

I became interested in researching the phenomenon of resistance to employment policy that attempted to increase gender equity in educational organizations because it came up over and over...at social gatherings, a cash register in a store while I was Christmas shopping, in my graduate courses, and in my work at the Faculty of Education at The University of Western Ontario with both colleagues and students. I found that students in the Social Foundations course that I teach could generally see the fairness of gender equity in the classroom--at least in terms of calling on girls more often, assessing their work fairly, ensuring that they developed an interest in highly valued courses such as Math and Science, meeting the learning needs of boys in language and so on. However, when we talked about gender equity employment policy, the men were often openly hostile and the women resistant to what they perceived as "needless" efforts on their behalf. I found that rational argumentation and statistical evidence, which strongly demonstrated sex-based discrimination in educational organizations, while compelling in some ways, was simply not enough to persuade students or colleagues that there was a need for policy to rework the gendered distribution of labour in educational organizations.

During my doctoral studies, I began to research the history of employment equity policy in Ontario's educational organizations. One compelling argument offered in support of employment equity policy was that schooling cannot demonstrate equity in pedagogical practices if it does not also do so in its patterns of governance. That is, educators cannot tell students to "do as I say" if the roles students see replicated in schools simply mirror the inequities of the larger social context. Therefore, advocates, such as the Federation of Women Teachers' Association, argued that, since Ontario, like many other Canadian provinces, has taken up gender fairness in classroom practices in its official educational policy for over thirty years, its employment policy must reflect the Ministry of Education's pedagogical goals. However, as various iterations of policy were put in place--each more prescriptive than the last--there was clear evidence that gender equity in employment practices in educational organizations was resisted at an organizational level.

As I developed my research proposal, I realized that it was the phenomenon of resistance to gender equity that I wanted to understand more clearly. When I told a colleague of mine what I was thinking about doing, she responded with guarded optimism and then added: "I just read an article by someone who tried to research resistance and she came to the conclusion that it was impossible." There have been many times when I was tempted to come to the same conclusion during this long process...particularly as the policy context I was researching kept slipping away from me. I suppose one could say that I was experiencing the phenomenon I was researching.

**Doing the Research**

I decided that I would situate my research within the policy context in which it was being enacted rather than with the workers it was seeking to benefit. That is, I was not so much interested in barriers to women in administration, as I was in the location and expression of resistance to equity policy that was attempting to break down those barriers. I turned to the lived experience of three women equity workers whose discursive location in their board was one of resisting resistance to the implementation of gender equity policy. I proposed a fairly straightforward process for qualitative research but my plan was considerably disrupted by the aftermath of the passage of Bill 8--the Harris government's plan to restore "merit-based" employment policy in Ontario.

The bill received assent in December of 1994 (on my birthday, interestingly enough) just after I had received ethical clearance from the boards involved and just before I planned to begin my interviews. By the time the interviews began, two of the three women, had been reassigned and their network of colleagues had virtually disappeared. In the end, while these events were deeply troubling in many respects, they did point to much deeper issues that I think might have been too naive to pay close attention to in the optimistic haze of P/PM 111,which specifically addressed gender inequities in the employment patterns of educational organizations in Ontario  and The Employment Equity Act, which extended employment equity policy to more diverse equity concerns in both public and private employment settings.

**Research Context**

Marg, Sue, and Linda , the principal participants in my study, were full-time gender equity workers in three separate, and very different, boards of education in Ontario. Marg's board, Board A, is a very large urban board that has enjoyed a significant tax base for funding a wide variety of educational programs to meet the complex social needs of a political constituency of great cultural and class diversity. Since amalgamation, however, the tax base is divided among less tax-rich constituencies, significantly altering Board A's ability to meet the diverse educational needs of its population. Kate's board, Board B, serves a largely rural population that is racially homogeneous except for the children of Native Canadians who are bussed off their reserve in grades 7 and 8. In addition, intermittent waves of immigrant children whose parents have temporarily settled in rural communities provide sporadic racial diversity. Board B has been amalgamated with three other boards, two of which have similar demographics, while the third is more urban with greater class and race diversity. Linda's board, Board C, is the only one of the three that has escaped amalgamation. It already provides educational services for a very large geographic area that encompasses rural communities, heavily industrialized areas, and suburban neighbourhoods that serve as "bedroom communities" for urban commuters.

Three cumulative interviews based on open-ended questions were conducted with each equity worker and they were transcribed and made available to each participant prior to the following interview for correction and follow-up discussion. In addition, elite interviews were conducted with senior board officials who were identified as key policy players in implementing employment policy and the transcriptions were made available to them for correction and further discussion if desired. Thorough document searches at each board were also conducted in which statistics, committee and board meeting minutes, and official publications were reviewed. Once all of the interviews were completed, documented information collected, and potential themes identified, a focus group for the three principal participants was convened.

**Conceptual Framework**

Analysis of the various data revealed three major themes of resistance to gender equity employment policy: ideological, structural, and personal resistance. These three themes were then considered within the three levels of consciousness in the conceptual framework, which represent theoretical positions outlined by Gadamer (1992) in Truth and Method.

**A Critical Hermeneutic  Conceptual Framework**

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **Consciousness Level Between I/Thou** | **The Polis:Contested Discursive Space** | **Policy Response** |
| A. Normative Consciousness | Conservation | Coercive Policy Response |
| * "Other" is seen as a means for achieving one's goals, an object in one's field of experience. * "Other" is understood in terms of universals. * Understanding is thought to be achieved through "methods" and "objectivity". * Subjective historical experience of "Other" is seen as separate from and unaffected by "us". | * Dominant narrative:Social regularities related to gender roles in organizations are  naturalized as unproblematic reflections of culturally inscribed norms. * Counter-narrative: Individual and scattered resistance by questioning validity of gendered norms on a "case by case" basis (i.e., individual rights). | Compensatory programs are initiated which are intended to encourage conformity with dominant norms and values by removing perceived deficits and dysfunction in "Other". |
| B.Prescriptive Consciousness | Conciliation | Remediation Response |
| * "I" knows "Other's" otherness and pastness only through reflection, not in relatedness to the universal, but rather in its particularity. * "I" objectifies "Other's" history--that is sees it as "out there" and therefore destroys its real claim to meaningfulness. * "I" is really claiming to be master | * Dominant narrative: Difference from unproblematized norm leads to differences in opportunities in public domain. Thus "other" needs to be taught strategies which enable conformity to the universal male norm * Counter narrative: Systemic hegemony directed at differentiated markers of "difference" enable discriminatory barriers. Therefore, systems must be held accountable for bias against women and changed | "Other's" perceived deficit and dysfunction are seen as the consequence of difference from a dominant norm. Policy attempts to provide remediation (a form of benign coercion) in order to enhance "Other's" self-esteem and eliminate stereotypes in the popular media and their effects in organizational practices |
| C. Historically Effected Consciousness | Conversation | Transformative Response |
| "I" knows "Other" through authentic openness which "lets something be said," wills to hear rather than to master, and is willing to be modified by the other. Gadamer refers to this as "dialectical ethics" (1991, p. 15). | Dominant Narrative: There are inequities. I seem to benefit because of characteristics which are different from yours. I can't change those characteristics but I can change my attitudes and actions. I need to listen and learn from your experience so that social benefits can be shared more equally.  Counter-narrative: You may be willing to listen but you may not like everything you hear. I'm willing to work on some strategies for change together if you are truly willing to listen, learn, and act upon new understandings that emerge from our conversation. | It is at this stage that policy is provided which assumes that both the minority and the majority have equal rights in societyand a forum needs to be created in which both voices speak and are heard. There is a recognition that policy support may be required in order for the minority to achieve social justice. |
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*Fig. 1--The synthesis of information in the conceptual framework above has been drawn from the following sources -- Column 1: Gadamer, 1960/1997; Palmer, 1969 and Column 3: Paquette, 1989; Corson, 1993.*

In the context of my study, then, as dominant and counter-discourses are negotiated in each educational organization, patterns of social regularities evolve, which over time are embodied and acted upon by social actors in the organization. Kate, Linda, and Marg represent a counter discourse that resists social regularities and attempts to weave new discursive patterns in the public sphere. What emerged from my research was a "tapestry of discourses"(Kenway, Willis, Blackmore & Rennie, 1994) woven by Kate's, Linda's, and Marg's lived experience as advocates for gender equity.

**Ideological resistance**

Employment equity policy is premised on an ideological position that recognizes and works to eliminate historical patterns of inequality by bringing to consciousness prejudgements of which we may or may not be aware. The dominant narratives (the prejudgements) of liberal capitalist democracies are most often situated in ideologies that value competitive individualism, the concentration of power in the hands of owners of capital, and scientific rationality in which "truth" is a value-free commodity based on objective empirical evidence. These dominant narratives (or metanarratives, to use Lyotard's phrase) converge in a deeply entrenched belief in a liberal version of meritocracy in which social benefits are perceived to have been ascribed based on individual merit rather than one's social affiliations.

**Political Ideologies**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Socialist Liberalism** | **Liberal Humanism** | **Classic Liberalism** | **Liberal Conservatism** | **Traditional Conservatism** |
| **Distribution of Social Benefits** | systemic inequality | meritocracy / rights | meritocracy | "natural" inequality | "natural" inequality |
| **Role of State** | state should be employed on behalf of exploited and disadvantaged/  protection from privileged classes | acceptance of an activist (welfare) state in order to ensure equality of individual opportunity | *laissez faire* --  interference only to the extent of ensuring individual's right to pursue personal well-being | welfare state tolerated as liberal status quo but conservative beliefs about human nature, order, stability, change, and "natural" inequality remain | favour a strong (to maintain social order) but relatively inactive state (because social order will ideally be dealt with by community/  social norms |
| **View of Good Society/Good Person** | all humans are equal and have an essentially social or communal nature | shift from emphasizing need for freedom from state to need for greater equality in enjoyment of liberty | "natural" state of individuals is to be free and equal but need to relinquish some freedom in interests of "civil" state | *noblesse oblige*requires tolerance of need for social relief in order to maintain social order | idealized hierarchical society in which differing individual capacities are essential for community survival |
| **Distribution of Power** | democratic and reformist; supportive of collective action | extension of franchise to  increasingly broad constituency; expansion of rights claims of individuals | not totally comfortable with democracy; some limits, checks and balances on participation | "limited" democracy | traditional authority and power sources (e.g., God monarchy); less state  power with  democratic/  representative  government |
| **Role of Market** | capitalist market economy is source of class inequities, therefore state should assume control and apportion social benefits of capitalism  equitably | abandonment of *laissez faire*economic policies | no regulation of private economic transactions of individuals | reform of market economy in order to enhance individual opportunities ad to improve collective (but unequal) good of society | markets serve the good of the community (premised on "natural" inequality |
| **Key Philosophical Position** | collectivism | rationalism | rationalism | rationalism/  traditionalism | traditionalism |
| **Characteristics of Social Relationships** | accept legitimacy of opposition and inevitability  of pluralism | pluralism | limited tolerance of religious and moral difference | traditional social, moral, and religious beliefs are ascendent; some pluralism tolerated | little tolerance; traditional moral, social, and religious beliefs entrenched |

         (1)   Egalitarian /Inclusive <--------------Individualism-------------->Inegalitarian/Exclusive   
         Communitarianism                                                                    Communitarianism   
(2)  Positive Liberty<------------------------------------------------------------->Negative Liberty

(3)  Historically Effected<-------------Prescriptive Consciousness---------------->Normative   
                 Consciousness                                                                                      Consciousness

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Figure 2: Based on Johnston, L. (1997). Politics: An introduction to the modern democratic state. Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press.   
    
    
Gender equity employment policy is premised on communitarian values of shared responsibility for those who have inequitable access to social benefits based on their group affiliation. That is, proponents of gender equity take up the particularities of social experience embedded in historical patterns of social interaction. They argue that these patterns privilege some more than others around markers of identity such as race, gender, sexual orientation and so on and that social policy needs to provide for more equitable access to social benefits for those whose subjective experience is not represented in dominant discourses of privilege.

My analysis of gender equity employment policy in the last twenty years revealed that political ideologies in Ontario have pivoted from a fulcrum point situated in individualistic liberalism and have swung between the inclusive communitarianism of social democrats to the exclusive communitarianism of conservative politics. Equity policy, as it was interpreted by the neo-liberal Liberal government of David Peterson, the social democratic NDP government of Bob Rae, and the neo-conservative Conservative government of Mike Harris, reveals ideological tensions around the role of the state in the marketplace, the distribution of social benefits generated by capitalism, etc. The data, which was analyzed at the macro and micro-political level, revealed that political ideologies shape the formal expression of employment equity policy and, in the process, alter the discursive space in which equity workers and supporters en/counter resistance.

For example, debates over the language of equity policy were animated around the language of "targets or quotas," particularly when the policy addressed women only. Each participant's own ideological position, the ideological position of her board, and the ideological position of each iteration of policy created some complex discursive patterns around this issue. Both Marg and Kate could be positioned ideologically at the socialist liberalism end of the spectrum which was congruent with Marg's board but definitely not Kate's. Linda's ideological position, on the other hand was liberal humanism while her board's position was traditional liberalism. As one might imagine, these tensions at the micro-level were eased or exacerbated by the degree of congruence, or lack thereof, of provincial policy. For example . . .

Linda:  I was very uncomfortable explaining to people the difference between goals and quotas. People had trouble buying in that this was a goal and that the goals were reasonable, and attainable, and established within the organization. I had discomfort getting that across...So I mouthed the words, I talked the walk or whatever...but I had a problem within myself.

Although humanistic liberalism does open the polis to wider discussion and recognition of an individual's rights to protection from discriminatory actions by the state, it does not often move beyond a prescriptive consciousness informing policy and practices. Most policy simply sought to ameliorate women's rights to access to social benefits in educational systems organized around the male as normative without disrupting the prejudgements upon which fraternal-patriarchal relations of power, to use Pateman's (1988) phrase, are premised .

**Structural Resistance**

Perrow argues that, "Organizations generate power; . . . organizations are tools for shaping the world as one wishes it to be shaped" (1986, p. 11). Critical and feminist theorists point out that Perrow's universal "one" is, in fact, a particular "one"--most often a white middle-class male--whose wishes will be realized through organizational power. It follows, then, that if an organization's practices are shaped by prejudgements based on male norms, that organization will be resistant to gender equity initiatives despite official policies.

For example, Marg's educational organization, which has a long history of supporting gender equity policy at every level of the organization, including the trustees, was highly successful in increasing the number of women in administration both in schools and senior board positions. However, Kate's organization, described by her Director of Education as "probably a little more conservative group, traditional, in certain respects" at all levels of the organization, particularly the trustees, while moderately successful in changing levels of female representation in school administration, was never successful in shifting its senior administration which remained entirely male right up until amalgamation with three other boards.

Although the board had an action plan to encourage greater female participation at all levels of the organization in compliance with the provincial policy that Kate had been hired to implement, she adds,

There was never really the big thrust. I didn't have the Director or my immediate supervisor who would come right out and say, are we making any progress here? It was more or less, well we got two hired into VPships this year and isn't that good and now we're that much closer to meeting our objectives.

Carol Agócs (1997) describes Kate's observation as institutionalized resistance, which "occurs through the exercise of power of organizational decision makers to bring about the consequences they desire," (p. 4) or, as Perrow says, "shapes the world as they wish it to be."  Agócs (1997), drawing on Pfeffer and Gamson, adds that the power of decision makers is embedded in and legitimated by the signifying systems of hierarchical bureaucracies "through which social control and compliance with that control are institutionalized within the organization (Pfeffer, 1981, pp. 5-6; Gamson, 1968)" (p. 5). A post-structural reading of Pfeffer and Gamson, however, would suggest that, while hierarchical practices are held in place by a normative discourse, they can also be dislodged by resistant discourses. Yet, as Kate's experience demonstrates, institutionalized resistance to organizational change with regard to gender equity follows a "pattern of organizational behaviour that decision makers in organizations employ to actively deny, reject, refuse to implement, repress, or even dismantle change proposals and initiatives" (Agócs, 1997, p. 2).

Even when government policy has brought a prescriptive consciousness of gender equity to its policymaking, the patterns of privilege that are protected by fraternal-patriarchal  organizational practices frequently resist remediation. Instead, the normative consciousness that often continues to inform the behaviour of decision-makers as they attempt to conserve the status quo has proven to be remarkably resistant to disruption. While policy initiatives may attempt to rework the levels of representation of males and females in organizational hierarchies and bureaucracies, unless the discourses which hold fraternal-patriarchal structures in place are reworked as well, educational organizations will only change symbolically and temporarily, not substantively over time.

As the discursive space is shaped and reshaped by changing political ideologies and institutional structures, the ability of Kate, Linda, and Marg to reconstruct the narratives that hold gendered relations of power in place is enhanced or limited. At the present time, their place is either extremely limited or non-existent in the formal structures of their boards, but they have each continued to ally themselves with equity networks outside their organizations and any advocates within in order to claim some space for continuing to counter institutionalized resistance to gender equity employment policies. Positioning oneself at the nexus of competing discourses around gender equity is, however, a personally exhausting place to be and the experience of personal resistance to which I will now turn is potentially the greatest challenge of all for gender equity workers.

**Personal resistance**

The personal is a category of analysis that calls into question the arbitrary oppositions of the Enlightenment--mind/body, public/private, rational/non-rational, individual/community, and so on. These binaries work together to construct normative sexual identities and maintain male privilege in administrative theory and practice. Of particular interest to me were the ways in which personal resistance was en/countered by equity advocates whose gendered subjectivities make these false bifurcations visible. Kate, Linda and Marg were hired to implement policy that revealed the emotional investments of those who had previously benefited from inequitable access to social benefits. Such access, however, is often determined through unspoken social norms that are shaped by the privileged component of each oppositional pair and those who benefit most from their position within these discursive intersections are likely to be emotionally invested in maintaining the status quo. Therefore, attempting to implement policy that questions the discourse around inequitable employment practices is often met with non-rational, emotional, and very personal resistance despite the fiction of rationality maintained by most organizational theory.

Data revealed, for example, that the presence of gender equity workers within the organizational structure was perceived to be a challenge to the ways in which discourses of normative sexuality and sexual desire shape social interactions. Each woman reported being subjected to constant scrutiny of the morality of her actions, while being constructed as "the spoiler" of other people's "fun". In fact, of all three themes of resistance, personal resistance to gender equity employment policy emerged as the most powerful en/countered by Kate, Linda, and Marg and yet it was also the most ephemeral. Their stories revealed strong emotions spilling around rationalized bureaucratic technologies, forming obstacles for change at unpredictable discursive locations, and vibrating invisibly just beneath the surface of prescriptive policies that attempted to change gendered organizational practices. Marg, for example, reports on a conversation she had with a retiring principal at a staff workshop on sexual harassment...

Marg: He (a retiring principal) says to me that he's looking forward to his retirement and then he says, "And when I'm in the drugstore or the variety store selecting my magazines, I won't have to care whether you come in and look over my shoulder at what I'm reading." I thought to myself...he seems like a nice guy to work with...and these workshops were on sexual harassment. There had been very few incidents at the school with the students but nothing that the school hadn't handled well. I was really upset by what he said. When I think of people--men--as allies, I know a lot of them aren't really...I mean, they're supporting some of the stuff we do but it's for ulterior motives and basically they don't really agree and don't like me for it.

The emotional labour of doing equity work was also a powerful tactic in motivating change, particularly around gendered practices that are embedded in one's sense of identity. Blackmore (1999b), in fact, suggests that gender equity reform is tactically dependent on an expanded rationality that encompasses the non-rational. She writes, "[G]ender equity reform needs to focus more upon why people change. Change is often cast as an intellectual exercise, reinforcing the emotionality/rationality binary of administrative theory"(pp. 213, 214). A transformative consciousness breaks down this binary because, expanding on  Boler's (1999) discussion of emotion, consciousness is inherently emotional and embedded in the personal.

Kate: The emotional labour, it was intense...it was intense but it was balanced by the fact that you were doing work that needed to be done...that at times you could assist someone who really needed help, that on occasion you would see real change in a school administrator. You know, someone that at first you could hardly believe that this kind of person still existed -- a real dinosaur -- and actually see that person change over the course of two years or three years, primarily through, in the case I'm thinking about, his interaction with me and then became involved in things that were going on.

Each woman had similar stories of success in changing individual and systemic practices and took great pleasure in those victories, but every statement was tinged with battle fatigue.

Marg: You may get your victories. I mean, I look at our new standard procedure [for handling sexual harassment cases] and I think of all the energy and the work that went into it. But it's done and it's printed and it's out there. We've done training on it, you know, and you get this feeling of satisfaction, but a lot of stress...

Therefore, while the personal and emotional can be deeply disquieting, they can also be a positive impetus for change. As Putnam and Mumby assert, "Emotions ignite creativity and form the foundation for moral and spiritual development"(1993, p. 40). Gadamer describes this process with the following words:

To participate with the other and to be a part of the other is the most and the best that we can strive for and accomplish...We may perhaps survive as humanity if we would be able to learn that we may not simply exploit our means of power and effective possibilities, but we must stop and respect the other, whether it is nature or the grown cultures of people and nations. (Misgeld & Nicholson, 1992, p. 235)

There is a profound hopefulness in Gadamer's words that elicits an emotional response with the potential to ignite or quench transformative possibilities for more humane and equitable social practices in educational organizations. My research indicates that once consciousness finds material expression in the public domain, ideologies, structures, and emotional investments are open to debate, disruption, and deconstruction at any of the discursive intersections within the educational organizations where Kate, Marg, and Linda worked. Therefore, even though they no longer hold their formal equity positions and equity has virtually disappeared as an official discourse in Ontario's educational organizations, multiple discursive intersections have been created that offer social actors what Arendt described as "that public space between themselves where freedom could appear"(1961, p. 4 cited in Greene, 1988, p. 86).

Finding such a conversational space in educational organizations requires a politics of discomfort and ambiguity inherent to resistance without relinquishing a hopeful grasp on the "not yet" of equitable educational organizations. It requires the voices of both men and women, while recognizing the complex positions of power those voices occupy. It is not easy but like Gadamer, I believe it truly is the best that we can strive for--for both men and women--and, hopefully, one day accomplish.

**Understandings from Research:**

* First, it offers insights into the ways in which all three layers of resistance are tied to individual and collective investments in personal interests and identities.
* Second, it provides a way for deconstructing the ideological, structural, and personal resistances that are interwoven at various discursive locations in educational organizations.
* Third, it demonstrates that an understanding that power and resistance circulate at those locations offers the possibility of disrupting gendered social regularities that are embedded in organizational structures, processes, and values.
* Fourth, my research points to the ineffectiveness of relying on rational arguments for dislodging the non-rational elements of change. All three equity workers in the study, in particular Kate and Linda, seemed to believe that they could effect change by depending on the unproblematic acceptance of rational arguments and constructed their work around that presumption. In fact, as the research demonstrates, this was one of the ways in which gender equity was resisted.  By drawing explicit links in the conceptual framework between individual and collective consciousness of pre-judgements (which may include both the rational and the non-rational), the research offers a way for equity workers to attend to the discourses of prejudice--the non-rational--that permeate policies and practices in organizations.
* In doing so, I believe that my research provides a direction for strategizing for change by providing for a more complex understanding of the discursive space in which the distribution of social benefits is negotiated between men and women (neither of which is a coherent and monolithic category of analysis). To do so effectively, however, will require further research in several areas.

**Now what? ...**

* It is strategically ineffective to depend on a liberal, democratic, capitalist state, an inherently ambiguous discursive space, to enable the "not yet" of gender equitable employment practices. . . although it may be (and I believe has proven itself to be) a location for change at particular historical moments. Instead, change will occur when multiple strategies at multiple locations are pursued by knowledgeable (in the sense of possessing organizational and theoretical knowledge as well as a clear political agenda for change) change agents who understand the interwoven layers of resistant discourses they must en/counter.
* Although this research does not deal extensively with the intersection of masculinities and organizations, it is an essential and complex arena of inquiry that this research points to for further inquiry.  Clearly, male resistance to change around gender equity issues shapes the possibilities for mobilizing support for implementing both short and long agenda reform around gender equity issues. However, how do we negotiate differing investments in identities (subjectivities) and the ways in which they are played out in the power relations and values positions of men and women in organizations. This is an area that I am beginning to investigate more thoroughly in the literature as well as attempting to identify locations where transformative conversations might occur between women and men that are cognizant of the differing social benefits that are available to men--even seemingly powerless men--because they are men in organizational contexts.

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