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WOMEN AND POWER

New Perspectives on Old Challenges

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A few years ago I conducted a training program for high-potential managers on leadership and power at a Fortune 500 company. A workshop activity involved a panel of top-level executives of the corporation providing their perspectives on this theme. One of the invited vice presidents started her presentation by acknowledging that she had never thought about power until this occasion. “Is she serious?” I asked myself then. Today, she is one of the few women of color who have held the title of CEO at a major U.S. company. How can it be that a CEO of a corporation has never thought about power?

In this chapter I explore the complexity of the phrase “women, power, and leadership” by drawing from different feminist traditions with their embedded definitions of power. As an organizational consultant interested in the application of any theory to the practice of organizational change, I translate the complexity of these feminists’ theories into ways of intervening that are useful for women in organizations. Although I still don’t think it is possible that the CEO from my story has never thought about power, I believe that she, like many organizational women, may be confused and torn about how to talk about it.¹

The Problem of Power: Current Debates

In mainstream theories, the debate over the meaning of power is ongoing. Is power an individual or a collective property? A relation, a process, or a possession? Is it intrinsically good or bad? Does its

effectiveness reside more in its capacity to make things happen (produce), or in preventing things from happening (coerce)? Is there a difference between legitimate and illegitimate power? And the questions go on.²

Traditional definitions of power, such as “the ability to impose one’s will on others, or control others, including against their will,”³ have been particularly problematic for women, as these definitions are associated with male power and domination as opposed to a gentler type of power more congruent with women’s role in society. For women, the question of power is very much tied to the question of leadership, since exercising leadership inevitably requires some exercise of power. And there is a long tradition of redefining the relationship between power, leadership, and women, as Jill Ker Conway reminds us when she asks women to “work steadily and deliberately to forge images of female power that can inform notions of leadership.”⁴

The meaning of power for women has not proven any easier to resolve than are the mainstream debates on power. For example, while gender-role congruency would have us believe in a kind of female power that is indirect and personal as opposed to a male type of power that is direct, authoritative, and status-derived, studies have found that when the effects of gender and power are disentangled, the differences between men’s and women’s power disappear. It is the amount of power that an individual has, not gender, that makes for the different power behaviors and motivations attributed to women and men.⁵

More recently, the controversy over women’s power and leadership has surfaced in the form of the opt-out revolution discussion, where the trend of women’s leaving positions of power and leadership is explained by their supposed rejection of power and leadership. Yet a recent study by the Center for Gender in Organizations at the Simmons School of Management argues that the opt-out phenomenon is overplayed. Instead, the authors highlight three findings: first, women want leadership and power; second, women are redefining leadership and power in collaborative and inclusive

ways and toward positive ends for society, and third, women are still not satisfied with their opportunities to exercise power and leadership in organizations.⁶ So the debate continues.

In their review of the literature on women and power, Patricia Darlington and Becky Mulvaney summarize four types of power: traditional power, meaning power over; empowerment, meaning mutual empowerment focused on giving power to others or enhancing others' power; personal authority, the power to be self-determining and make independent choices based on knowledge, and reciprocal empowerment, a combination of personal authority and empowerment.⁷ The authors conclude that women associate traditional power with masculine constructs, which they see as undesirable, and struggle to conceptualize power in new ways that embody their values. In addition, women of various racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds already practice a combination of personal authority and empowerment, which suggests a new model of reciprocal empowerment for women. Nevertheless, their findings are also contradictory in that the women they studied identified with traditional definitions of power, although they preferred reciprocal empowerment when it was presented as an alternative. In addition, they faced the challenge of recognizing and applying different forms of power, especially in public life. So it seems that we are back to the paradox and ambiguity of the power of women.⁸

The Problem of Power: Different Feminists' Contributions

Thanks to feminism we have come a long way in understanding the many dimensions of power that influence women's lives, because power is central to feminists' analyses of the relations between the sexes.⁹ Most feminists agree that women's and men's situations differ because of women's lack of power, and they seek to change this situation in order to improve women's lives. On the other hand, feminists disagree on the extent, causes, and impact of these differences and on the means and strategies for changing and improving

the situation of women. The difficulties we experience in understanding the relationship between women's power and leadership is a result of the various ways in which feminists have conceptualized gender, gender differences, the roots of gender oppression, and the goals of feminist change since the first feminist wave in the nineteenth century. Consequently, I explore a multi-lens approach to power and women's leadership that takes into account these different perspectives.

In this section, I review various strands of feminism, not as a way of categorizing women scholars into particular ways of thinking about gender but as a heuristic to bring to the fore the many ways in which we can look at women, power, and leadership. Implicit in each of these feminist frameworks is a different definition of power. It is essential to clarify how these definitions differ in order to strengthen our conceptual clarity and to increase our range of interventions when working with women, particularly in organizational settings. My intention is not to advocate for one particular perspective but to go beyond the traditional women-and-power debates by engaging in more nuanced explorations of the meaning of power from these different feminist traditions. I briefly review the following five feminist frameworks: liberal, cultural, socialist, post-structuralist, and transnational feminism.¹⁰

Liberal Feminism

Liberal feminism understands gender as a characteristic derived from the biological and socialized sexual differences between women and men. Drawing from the Enlightenment's belief in abstract individualism, rationality, and mind-body dualism, liberal feminism focuses on achieving the same individual rights for women as those of (white) men. The liberal perspective aims to guarantee a level playing field where women have the same access and opportunities as men and their differences do not matter. Its focus is on personal power and the ability of individual women to be self-determining—to get what they need and want in organiza-

tions, their families, communities, and life in general; in other words, the pursuit of individual happiness.

Two perspectives on women and power derive from this framework. First, the focus is on overcoming barriers to advancement for individual women and addressing issues of family work-life balance that hinder individual women's access to positions of leadership and power. A favorite measure of progress is the number of women in management positions, in political office, and in top leadership positions—CEOs and board members of Fortune 500 corporations.¹¹ The second focus is on helping women “act powerfully,” which has usually meant to act like white men, from dressing for success to being appropriately authoritative.¹²

In organizations, the liberal framework translates into training programs and individual coaching of women to become self-empowered, which in turn promotes their access to leadership and gender equality. A how-to, individualistic approach frames this perspective. For example, I was recently interviewed as an expert on the topic of discrimination. One of the questions asked was, “How does a woman know she is been discriminated against and what can she do about it?” Even though I believe that discrimination is a structurally determined phenomenon, to my surprise, I found myself using the liberal feminist framework to offer concrete suggestions for individual women on how to address discriminatory behavior and perceived organizational inequalities.

The liberal framework, with its focus on individual responsibility and access to opportunities, is one of the most popular approaches to women's power and leadership in today's organizations.

Cultural Feminism

Cultural feminism also sees gender as derived from the sexual differences between men and women, but here male dominance and patriarchy, the rule of the father, is the source of women's oppression. However, proponents of this approach do not advocate the elimination of differences between women and men; on the contrary, they

seek to enhance and celebrate those differences. The differences are deemed to be positive, making women more effective than men and more enlightened, better fitting them for contemporary leadership. For example, the experience of motherhood provides them with a heightened sense of morality that contributes to using power and authority more responsibly.¹³

The application of this framework in organizations has explored women's "relational practice"—their apparent preference for focusing on relationships rather than tasks and on collaboration rather than competition. This view results in definitions of leadership as being "at the center of things" rather than "on top."¹⁴ Scholars in this tradition suggest that there is a difference between traditionally masculine power, which is defined as "power-over," and feminine power, which is defined as "power-with" or "power-to." Thus this framework focuses on shared power, relational power, collaboration, feminist collectives, and the mutual empowerment of women. For example, Darlington and Mulvaney define mutual empowerment as "a discursive and behavioral style of interaction grounded in reciprocity initiated by people who feel a sense of personal authority."¹⁵ Power in this context is circular, with women at the center, as opposed to hierarchical, with women at the top.

The contributions of scholars of the Stone Center at Wellesley Centers for Women are particularly important within this framework, especially their Relational-Cultural Theory, with its focus on "power in connection."¹⁶ Power is defined as "the capacity to produce change." It is experienced as a kind of energy that flows from the skills of empathic attunement, authenticity, and accountability, and the application of those skills in everyday living.¹⁷ In her study of relational power in the workplace, Joyce Fletcher highlights mutual empowerment as one of its key practices. Mutual empowerment is intended to enable others to achieve more by contributing to work-related goals with activities such as empathic teaching and keeping people connected. The concept of power is thus expanded to include a type of expertise that is fluid and based on interdependence, very contrary to dominant images of leadership and power.

Yet Fletcher goes on to discuss how these relational practices “are disappeared” in workplace environments that are driven by competition, heroic leadership, individualism, hierarchy, and technical outcomes and expertise. Instead, relational practices are reinterpreted as expressions of essential femaleness and thus devalued, confirming prevalent stereotypes of women.¹⁸

In spite of the difficulties of shifting the dominant discourse to one of mutual empowerment and relational power, a cultural feminist perspective on power remains popular and attractive, especially for women looking for alternatives to power that value and exalt the feminine.

Socialist Feminism

Socialist feminism pays attention to the material dimensions of women’s oppression under capitalism. In particular, it focuses on the structures and relations of power that sustain oppression and the ideologies that produce and replicate it. The sexual division of labor characteristic of capitalist society, which excludes women from wage labor and relegates them to the private and domestic sphere, is seen as a fundamental pillar of women’s subordination. This gender structure of the labor market positions men and women in different jobs and different industries, with different salaries.¹⁹ Also, gender is understood to be a historically determined difference that should not be studied in isolation from other social processes such as race, ethnicity, and class.

A socialist feminist framework pays attention to structural and societal power inequalities and seeks to eliminate them for all people, not just women. In this tradition, then, power has to do with access to and control of valuable and needed resources, a definition that brings us closer to more traditional definitions of power, such as “the capacity to produce a desired result,” “act upon others,” or “make things happen.”²⁰ For example, in their feminist framing of women and empowerment, Bookman and Morgen define power as “a social relationship between groups that determines access to, use of, and

control over the basic material and ideological resources in society.”²¹ Empowerment is the process and the variety of political activities that try to change the nature and distribution of power in a particular cultural context. Ultimately, this idea means challenging and changing power relations in a society. Thus the focus of women’s power in this framework is collective, societal, and material.

In organizations, this structure of power is revealed by analyzing advancement opportunities, salaries, mentoring, job segregation, the particular positions women hold, job descriptions, and performance appraisal systems, and by examining other organizational processes that produce particular outcomes and disadvantages for women. In addition, one looks at how these organizational arrangements reflect and in a way reaffirm the structures and processes of inequality in the larger society. For example, socialist feminism helps us look at the structure of power through the lens of race and ethnicity to study the differences between the considerable gains made by white women in organizations compared to those made by women of color.²²

Because of its emphasis on the interlocking structures of power and difference in organizations and society, the socialist feminist perspective has proven more difficult than other frameworks to consistently integrate into analyses and interventions for women in organizations. More recently though, Joan Acker has proposed a model for looking at “regimes of inequality . . . the particular, historically specific configurations of class, race, and gender patterns within specific organizations” through case studies on the differential impact that class and race have on men and women. She enumerates various forms in which these patterns can be made visible through detailed descriptions of the characteristics of the inequality regimes in an organization. She asks, for example: What constitutes the dimensions of inequality that form the basis of the regime? How are the patterns of inequality visible or not, and to whom? What is the legitimacy of these forms of inequality, and how is this legitimacy accomplished? And what are the practices and the organizational structures by which inequality is sustained, including

methods of control and compliance?²³ It is my experience that it is possible to engage organizational members in this kind of analysis if the appropriate conditions for inquiry are created.

Poststructuralist Feminism

Poststructuralist feminism uses theories of language, subjectivity, and the history of institutions and social practices to understand and question existing power relations, especially as they are constructed through differences, knowledge, discourse, and the symbolic. For example, societal discourses typically constitute men and women as different. These discourses are in a binary and oppositional relation, but one side, the masculine, is privileged. One of the goals of this approach is to unpack and deconstruct those assumptions, images, and practices that are taken for granted. Once these dichotomies are identified, we can destabilize the knowledge claims that sustain these ways of framing and constructing the world, which are a form of power.

In organizations, poststructuralist feminism helps us pay attention to the discursive dimension of power—the ways in which meaning is created in organizations, yielding particular effects and identities of power.²⁴ For example, images of women's femininity and their proper place are continually changing and are also different for white women, Latinas, African American women, and Asian women. White women's femininity seems to fit images of the new international midlevel manager, while Latinas seem to fit the image of the good factory worker with their docile bodies and nimble fingers.²⁵

Poststructuralist feminism also helps us pay attention to the discourses, rules, and practices that produce and reproduce unequal power relations in organizations. How do these practices come to be accepted and become legitimate? How do these practices and identities originate? How are practices and identities sustained by knowledge-producing mechanisms such as the academy and the media? What other informal structures support these practices and

to what effect?²⁶ For example, when theories of leadership are produced and disseminated as scientific truth, and when these theories equate leadership with a certain kind of rugged masculine individualism, the leadership of women and people of color remains understudied and is treated as a kind of organizational oxymoron.²⁷

With its questioning of all categories and knowledge claims, including gender, poststructuralist feminism has been critiqued as not being able to support a feminist agenda of change on behalf of women's power and women's agency. Still, the attention this perspective brings to the subjects of discourse and the symbolic in organizations is an important contribution, suggesting that women's power is not just a matter of access to resources, it is embedded in the very language of power itself.

Transnational and Third-World Feminism

Transnational and third-world feminism combines insights of the various feminists' frameworks mentioned thus far to explicate gender differences in relation to other social differences such as class, race, sexuality, ethnicity, and nationality. These differences reflect complex social processes and discursive constructions, which are historical. Today, more than ever, this historical context is global. The processes and structures of globalization bring to the fore an analysis of both the macro- and the micro-political economics of power, including the role of the state in circumscribing the daily lives and survival struggles of women. Thus it is important to analyze the role of the state, which is implicated in a complex nexus of power and domination that is gendered, patriarchal, racialized, and (hetero)sexualized.²⁸

For example, in an analysis of child care and its impact on women in organizations, transnational feminists analyze the global chain of care—"a series of personal links between people across the globe based on the paid or unpaid work of caring."²⁹ This chain is a complex outcome of global capitalism and the unequal relations between rich and poor countries; the first with market demands for

care and the latter with a surplus of migrant women to meet the care needs of career women. The ultimate beneficiaries of this chain may be the multinational companies, as both working mothers and their families in the North and domestic workers and their families of the South are the losers in this global arrangement.³⁰

Transnational feminism helps us analyze power from a variety of positions and directions that flow in complex ways. Therefore we must consider not just the powerful but also the agency of those who are less powerful and who by a variety of means challenge, disrupt, or invert prevailing discourses and power relations in everyday practices.

Because of the analytical and subjective complexity this perspective demands, including its critique of Western discourses, the application of transnational feminism to organizations has been done mostly by women scholars of color working at the intersection of first- and third-world theory and practice.³¹ The challenge posed by transnational feminism to incorporate more inclusive and global analyses of power of women (and men) in organizations remains to be expanded.

Feminisms, Power, and Women's Leadership: Applications in Organizations

Once the idea of power has been complicated by applying the feminist theories we have explored, how do we translate this complexity into useful concepts and concrete interventions to increase and support women's leadership in organizations? From a practical standpoint, women are unlikely to be interested in theoretical complexity unless it comes with specific strategies for addressing the issues of power and leadership they face in everyday organizational life. I will use an example from my consulting practice with a woman manager at a major corporation in Puerto Rico to illustrate how the feminist frameworks discussed earlier can provide such concrete guidance.

I have been consulting to Ana, here given a fictitious name, in the last year and a half to support her leadership as a division director

of a successful corporation with a good reputation in the island. What started as individual coaching has grown into a series of organizational consulting interventions that can be directly linked to the liberal, socialist, poststructuralist, and transnational feminist frameworks. While there might be advantages to applying the cultural framework in this organization, we have not yet found the occasion to do so.

To work with Ana, though, I have translated the feminist frameworks into familiar management and organizational terms, which she is more likely to embrace. Thus, four levels of analysis and intervention have guided the work with Ana: personal and individual power, personal and organizational authority, organizational culture and discourse, and the national sociocultural context. I use these levels of analysis as lenses to diagnose and make recommendations about the issue at hand for the organizational system and find myself shifting my gaze from lens to lens as I work with Ana.

Analyses at the level of personal and individual power derive from the liberal feminist framework. Focusing at this level meant providing Ana tools so that she felt able to act on her own behalf, express her needs and goals, and take the calculated risks necessary to achieve what she believes is most important. For example, much of the initial coaching with Ana centered on helping her become more assertive in her dealings with others, especially her supervisors and subordinates. Her goals included getting clear on her vision of the division, practicing communicating this vision to others with clarity, and engaging in discussions about her expectations. We also worked on increasing Ana's confidence in her own vision, competencies, and goals, helping her feel and act more empowered as a woman manager in her organization.

Second, Ana and I worked on the issue of her personal and organizational authority. This perspective derives from the socialist framework with its focus on formal structures and material processes and outcomes in an organization. Using this framework, Ana and I were able to concentrate on her organizational role, in addition to her personal power, and the interface of that formal role with the

rest of the organization. For example, one question is: What is her role as division manager, and how does being a woman impact Ana's capacity to exercise formal and informal power in that role?

I define authority as "the capacity or right to perform work (utilize resources and make decisions) in the service of an organizational task."³² Thus, besides focusing on personal or individual power, with this lens we were able to focus on the issue of organizational authority, that is, Ana's capacity to take up her formal and informal roles in the organization and use them to advance her task of managing her division.³³ I find that the concept of authority can be more productive than that of power when working in organizational settings, partly because of the negative implications of the concept of power. Ryan Smith argues that job authority has proven to be a useful lens by which to observe the contours of inequality, especially for women and racial minorities.³⁴

The organizational authority lens helped focus the consultation on Ana's role as unit director and the ways in which her ability to accomplish her managerial role and tasks are supported, or not, by her position and formal role in the organizational structure and by the authority and influence her peers, boss, and subordinates give to that role. Working on these two elements led to a long-term team-building intervention to clarify roles and interdependencies among her unit's leadership group. The objective was to clarify the boundaries of authority and decision making among the team and Ana, to align the unit's task with Ana's vision of the task, to gain commitment from her team for that vision, and to restructure the unit so that Ana's vision could be reinforced by the unit's formal structure and the roles of her immediate team members.

I also worked with Ana to understand the power dynamics in the context of the organizational hierarchy and the positions women hold as a group in that hierarchy. For example, this business is well-established, family-founded, and male-dominated. Although it is one of the largest employers in the country, it still has no woman in a business-line position as a member of the chairman's team and no woman as a member of the CEO's team. It has no

processes and structures in place to support affirmative action initiatives, and gender and race differences or inequalities are not discussed. Informal conversations and observations suggest a strong dynamic of benevolent sexism at work. Women themselves, the majority in Ana's unit, collude with men by their silence on gender inequities and gendered norms throughout the system.³⁵

This dynamic brings us to the use of the organizational culture and discourse as a lens, which is tied to the feminist poststructuralist framework. For example, in an effort to address the informal, symbolic, linguistic, and discursive elements of power in this organization, I have encouraged Ana and her leadership team to identify and discuss more than thirty organizational norms—ways of talking, doing, and being in this organization—that hinder the ability of the team and its leader to act, and be perceived as acting, with authority. It has been much slower, though, to encourage and find the mechanisms and the will to enact and reinforce alternative norms that support women's roles and authority. Cultural norms likely to hinder women's authority and leadership are common in this organization, including not starting and ending meetings on time, valuing notions like "face time" and "putting out fires" rather than job outcomes, and rewarding individualistic and heroic accomplishments as opposed to team, collaborative, and support-giving behaviors, all of which are tasks women are more likely to perform.³⁶

A poststructuralist feminist framework also helps us pay attention to the images of women in the organization and try to identify sources of organizational influence and power that go beyond those expected and sanctioned by the culture for its women leaders. For example, I was recently struck by a picture in an internal company brochure dedicated to leadership that portrayed the highest-ranking woman in Ana's organization with her arms extended, a happy smile, and serving a platter of lasagna. The image of a nurturing mother and dutiful housewife seemed to overshadow that of the woman executive. These are some of the discursive elements that we must pay attention to from a poststructuralist feminist perspective.

Finally, transnational feminism helps us pay attention to the national sociocultural context in which Ana lives, works, and exercises leadership and power beyond the confines of her particular organization. It helps us analyze how her situation is affected by larger processes such as the impact of globalization on the Puerto Rican economy and the ongoing issue of Puerto Rico's colonial status and relationship with the United States. For example, Ana is under increasing economic pressure to secure her position and income in the corporation, as she has become the sole breadwinner in her family after her husband lost his job and her two children started college on the mainland. The loss of jobs in the island is increasingly evident and the per capita income is about half that of the poorest U.S. state. The perceived need of the middle classes to send their children to the mainland for higher education and job opportunities is another outcome of a precarious socioeconomic context of high unemployment, increasing income disparities, and rampant consumerism.³⁷ Thus Ana's options for exercising power and leadership as division manager, which I analyze as very much related to her ability to rock the organizational boat, are embedded in the larger national context in which jobs are hard to find and economic security is considered a luxury of sorts.

While gendered, patriarchal, racialized, and (hetero)sexualized norms dominate, the pressure to change from inside is also strong, so that organizational actors, and especially women, find themselves needing to create new paths at the same time they try to honor past ones. For example, Ana is trying to maneuver between the sexist and patriarchal norms and expectations of her culture and organization at the same time that her material reality demands that she take on responsibilities previously reserved for her husband, and thus needing to challenge her own internalized sexism in a way that is manageable and acceptable to her, her family, and the organization. It is a constant challenge for me as a U.S.-based Latina consultant, now well trained in the Western discourse of leadership and management, to assess whether Ana's strategies, which others might consider disempowering, are actually

subverting or creating alternatives for her—and thus whether they need changing or reinforcing.

Expanding Our Notions of Women's Power and Leadership.

The perspectives on power and leadership I have discussed take account of the considerable contributions that feminist scholars have made to these topics throughout the past fifty years. By working through a case study where these feminist frameworks were applied, I suggest specific ways in which we can explore and help women in organizations enhance their exercise of power and leadership without pitting diverse perspectives on power one against the other, using them instead to complement and expand each other. Doing so also increases women's options for understanding, seeking, and enacting power in institutions at the same time that it honors the feminist traditions that continue to support women's equality in organizations today.

On many occasions I have observed how women discuss power and leadership as if one type of power was the most important or the one women should try to secure first. This dynamic does not serve us well. Instead, I suggest we embrace two principles of organizational change: start where the energy for change is, and "light many fires."³⁸ I believe applying the feminist frameworks I have reviewed allow us to do just that: to start where the energy of the individual woman and her organization is and to use all the ways we have of looking at power to attempt to make real change happen. I also propose that we add the concept of authority to our discussions and that we continue to seek ways of connecting the theory and practice of leadership to women in organizations.

Endnotes

1. Recent media articles have brought to the public's attention the apparent ambivalence of women toward power and to

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