



Shadow and Light: A Study of Patterns of Relationship
Among Women in the Workplace

A Synopsis of Dissertation Research
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Personal Prologue

As a consultant, coach, and trainer for 30 years, I often hear women complain about feeling betrayed by other women at work. While I also see many supportive relationships, I see competent and capable women who, after being promoted, are undermined and/or driven out by their female colleagues. I hear complaints about female bosses being tougher on women subordinates than on men, and about hurt feelings and resentments between women colleagues that create barriers to their work relationships years after the offending incident. These negative dynamics can exact a significant cost for women's careers.

As a feminist, I am concerned about the frequency of reports by women that they prefer working for men (Herrick-Phelps, 2006), and the reluctance of women in organizations to work together for change. Women also seem to have different expectations of other women than they have of men. I often hear women clients say things like, "how could she do this to me? I feel so betrayed! I would expect something like this from a man, but not a woman!"

Where are these expectations coming from? There is a great deal of popular literature recently out about "mean girls" and "backstabbing women" that implies that girls and women are intrinsically catty, mean, and untrustworthy. On the other side of this picture, there is also a large body of feminist literature that describes only positive aspects of women's relationships, and barely mentions a "shadow side" to our behavior. The truth of the matter is that there are both positive and negative patterns of relationship between women, both inside and outside of the work place.

Focus of the Study

My interest is in describing a full range of patterns, positive and negative, in the context of the workplace because of the potential impact of these patterns on our careers. I ask how the workplace context might be contributing to our experiences with each other as women? What is it about our gender socialization that contributes to our patterns of relationship? What will help us make conscious choices about how we are in relationship in the workplace so that we can change our work environments, support each other to reach our career goals, and improve our lives?

Using a methodology that involved role-plays, group discussions, and in-depth interviews, I studied the work experiences of a diverse group of 96 women in a wide range of work environments (technology, nursing, government, academia, non-profit,

etc.). I found a continuum of patterns of behavior between women, from positive to negative, in the context of organizational cultures that value and reward masculine behaviors. My analysis reveals a clash between friendship expectations that women carry into the workplace, and the masculine norms that dominate most work place cultures. My analysis also provides a more accurate and positive understanding of the origins of some patterns of relationship stereotypically seen as negative, such as conflict avoidance, gossip, and indirect communication. I also uncover some positive elements of women's behavior in the work place previously only seen as negative and add new language, "transknitting", to name a pattern of behavior that could be leveraged as an asset both for women and the organizations in which they live and work. By deepening our understanding of the origins of our dysfunctional patterns, and describing previously overlooked positive patterns, my analysis sheds light on ways that women can gain awareness and skills that will help us change our work environments and improve our lives.

Summary of Findings

"It's A Man's World"

This first set of patterns describes the gendered organization as the context for women's relationships in the workplace. In the gendered workplace, masculine norms of behavior are privileged or rewarded, while feminine norms are devalued or discouraged. It is into this hierarchical context where masculine task-focused norms are privileged that women unconsciously carry their friendship needs and expectations for loyalty, affirmation, equality, self-disclosure, sympathy – and the taboo included in women's friendship rules against discussing friendship expectations.

The participants in this study describe different ways that having stable gender filters (assumptions that women are all the same) creates confusion and disappointment between women colleagues. One example is that many women in the study described having different expectations for behavior from female and male bosses, expecting more relational behavior from female bosses. These expectations create problems for women who do not have a feminine leadership style and who are subsequently evaluated as "difficult to work with".

The study participants describe experiencing double binds when utilizing both feminine and masculine work styles in the gendered workplace, such as being seen as "bitches" by male colleagues if they persist in getting their ideas heard. Scholars (Meyer, 2007; Buzzanell, 1995) note that women are never really allowed to adopt a masculine style in the same way that men are allowed to adopt a feminine style. The participants also describe being discouraged from supporting other women because, as one participant said, "you're playing a game with men because there are no women at the top – so you can't get too buddy-buddy with women because that takes away from your ability to climb the corporate ladder". Participants describe being expected to check their feelings at the door in order to be deemed acceptable, and also describe seeing each other as competition, more so than other men, for limited spaces at the top. In summary, this first set of patterns establishes the critical structural lens of the gendered workplace that will help give meaning to subsequent patterns.

Recommendations:

In **all-woman retreats or workshops**, I recommend that women **develop critical consciousness**, or standpoint, about how the structural inequality of the gendered workplace (as well as on a societal level), along with our gender socialization, impacts our relationships as women. Most of the women in this study did not have this perspective, and explained their experiences with other women as strictly about interpersonal or personality issues. It is important to be able to see the larger forces at play in order to be able to resist being affected by those forces and strengthen our ability to support each other.

“Let’s Be Women Together” and “One Ball of Wax”

The next patterns describe different aspects of the boundary confusion women can experience as a result of the clashing discourses described above, compounded by the taboo against discussing friendship expectations. Scholars (Bem, 1994; Coates, 1997; Ely, 1994) have documented that both feminine friendship and speech rules are founded on equality. One of the participants had this to say about the confusion caused by the clash of discourses when feminine friendship and speech rules, founded on equality, collide with the realities of the dominant masculine discourse that values and structures organizations as hierarchical:

Women superiors invite us to all share our feelings about things without any recognition that there’s a hierarchy present in the room. And you leave the room and then all that’s held against you. So it’s almost like, “OK, let’s be women. OK, now we’re in business keeping score.” (study participant)

This same participant goes on to explain the difficulties she is having now that she is the boss because of expectations that male bosses do not face:

My women staff will come to me and say, “How’s your boyfriend?” They feel like a relationship with me should be all access, and I don’t want to set up a situation where like I’m becoming this kind of friend with them. Not just a friend, but an intimate friend. We tell all. Then all of a sudden I’ve got to be the person who says, “get that done. Get it done tonight.” Then that’s a betrayal of womanhood to assert that authority where it’s going to cost them something. (study participant)

Not all of the women in the study had difficulty managing personal and professional boundaries with women at work. Many women did describe fluid boundaries between their personal and professional relationships with other women (mixing into “one ball of wax”) that provided support, validation, mentoring, empowerment – which studies have shown to be essential to women’s mental and emotional health in male-dominated work environments (Miller and Shriver, 1997). Fluid boundaries also created confusion and feelings of betrayal when friendship expectations were not met, and not discussed.

Recommendation:

I suggest that many women need to **develop skills** to negotiate and strengthen our relationships in the workplace. In all-woman workshops we can learn **to name and negotiate our friendship expectations**. The participants in this study confirmed what scholars have found about women's friendship expectations -- that while the social contract for women's friendships is ambiguous, there is a general consensus about the rules and expectations of friendship (Eichenbaum & Orbach, 1987; Gouldner & Strong, 1987; O'Connor, 1992; Rubin, 1985). These expectations include unswerving loyalty, trustworthiness, and the ability to keep confidences, good listening and entertaining companionship. Friends share gossip [and transknitting] and air problems, offer self-disclosure, unconditional acceptance, affirmation, sympathy and healing. Friends practice equality and acceptance of each other's perspectives, while seldom expressing disapproval – and do not discuss or negotiate their expectations.

It is not that every woman shares the exact same friendship expectations as every other woman. While there is a general consensus, the taboo against discussion means that our assumptions can be wrong and we won't find out until damage has been done to the relationship. In addition, we must be able to negotiate our friendship expectations in the context of the hierarchical workplace. We need to develop skill and comfort with making our friendship rules explicit, and being able to negotiate them so that our relationships can survive the need to compete and differentiate as we advance in our careers.

In addition, we need to **develop skills to negotiate our organizational role boundaries**. I recommend that women learn from what Houston and Scott (2006) describe as African American women's speech practices that utilize "code switching" or "style switching" to cross boundaries of different speech systems. This skill would enable us to be explicit about whether we are wearing the hat of "friend", "teammate", "boss", and etc. in any given interaction where expectations from each other may need to vary. For example, as teammates, we may need to disagree during team meetings, and not react to disagreement as a violation of friendship rules. We could consciously agree that in team meetings we will be free to disagree and not feel abandoned, while at the same time expecting support from each other to be heard if our ideas are not acknowledged by other colleagues. In other situations, we can clarify when we are stepping out of a "colleague" role and into a "friend" role where we need empathy, instead of challenge, on a professional level. In summary, we can learn to discuss and agree about what we expect from each other in different roles, keep our relationships strong, and avoid feeling disappointed and betrayed.

“Under Our Breath”

During the course of the study I found the women in the study -- during group discussion, individual interviews, and role plays -- were struggling to express something about a common pattern between women identified as “gossip”. I found that positive interchange among women designed to help another woman (not in the room) was labeled as gossip and not distinguished from interchange designed to disparage or complain about another woman not in the room. As I listened to participants I also came to realize that sometimes sharing information about others, with supportive intention, is a bonding ritual between two friends that enhances their connection to each other. But there is no language for this type of positive talk. Consequently, I name this positive talk *transknitting*, or the transfer of information (trans) for the purpose of looping in (knitting) information about others to form or maintain a sense of community.

Maintaining community is also what underlies women’s peacemaking discourse (Kolb, 1992), an important discourse made invisible by the conflicting dominant discourse that says women are unable to form stable and reliable relationships. The peacemaking discourse explains that the purpose of behind-the-scenes conflict reduction measures such as triangulated, or indirect communication, conflict avoidance, and gossip -- all identified as common patterns of behavior by the study participants -- is to maintain community, or keep the peace. It is here that, once again, the term *gossip* to describe benevolent talk about others is problematic and the expanded language, *transknitting*, gives us a way to rename and feel good about a common and constructive pattern of behavior. Reclaiming the peacemaking discourse also offers us a way to put a positive light on common patterns of indirect behaviors, and make choices to be more direct when necessary to improve our relationships.

Recommendation:

I recommend all-woman workshops to **develop skills for direct communication**, such as giving and receiving feedback, and **rename and reclaim our positive patterns** to help us resist internalizing the negative stereotypes that set us up against each other. Learning to differentiate between our positive and negative patterns of talk and to embrace our positive patterns, such as transknitting, can also help to create more trusting and collaborative work environments that will benefit everyone.

“Behind the Door” and “Under the Bus”

It is not always true, however, that talk about someone else is conducted with supportive intent. This study reveals a continuum of shadow side behaviors from mild to severe in intention and impact. “Indirect aggression”, or behavior that is purposefully hurtful and denied, is at the milder end of the continuum. “Career aggression” is behavior that includes indirect aggression, but moves beyond hurtful to actions intended to damage or sabotage the careers of other women. Half of the women interviewed in this study reported experiencing career aggression from a woman at work.

If we consider that the peace-making discourse may be a foundational structure at the root of women's indirect behaviors, what else might we need to understand about how organizations and societal institutions help to distort peace-making behaviors into shadow-side behaviors between women in the workplace? I offer an analysis which considers these shadow-side behaviors as tied to the material and structural constraints that impact women's lives in organizations – and as a legacy of distorted power relationships where oppressed groups internalize the negative stereotypes about their own group and turn on each other. Freire (1970) called this dynamic “horizontal violence” and other scholars (Fanon, 1963; Gramsci, 1971; Scott, 1985) have described it as “internalized oppression”. I suggest that behavior associated with indirect and career aggression might be a symptom of women's continued position within organizational settings that systematically constrains, exploits, excludes, and devalues them.

Recommendation:

I suggest that we conduct workshops for women in which the continuum of career aggression among women in the workplace is explored and understood as a response to the constrained situation for women in male dominated environments. The workshop would then work to transform this behavior by developing **a code of conduct** and a positive **shared vision** for how women can both compete with and support each other while staying in relationship.

Illusion of Constrained Agency

While women are clearly negatively impacted by powerful forces in the gendered workplace, I submit that there is also an illusion of constrained agency expressed by the women in this study as: “it's just the way things are in organizations”; “it's just the way women are – catty”; “we can't talk about it” (friendship expectations) – as though there is no other possibility. It is not my intent to blame the victim and say that women, either individually or as a group, are responsible for the difficulties in our relationships and the barriers to our careers in the workplace. Options come from understanding. Choices come from awareness of where our patterns come from – and deciding what we want to keep and what we want to change about our relationships and our organizations.

Powerful forces are at play which influence our internalizing negative beliefs about women. Yet when we act out these beliefs as horizontal violence against other women, we also know that what we are doing is hurtful. These are not unconscious acts. However, without critical consciousness about the political systemic forces operating on us, and without the skills to name and negotiate with each other to change what we are doing and clarify our expectations of each other, these patterns, deeply rooted in childhood and adolescence will continue. Because these forces are powerful and the patterns deeply rooted, it is important that women work in collective settings such as workshops or retreats to get the clarity and support required to resist the negative messages and replace the “illusion”. With support from interventions such as workshops and coaching we can access the agency on both the individual and group levels to disturb

these old, destructive patterns that result from our unequal structural positioning, and reclaim and cultivate positive relational dynamics with other women in the workplace.

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