

Women Working Together: Understanding Women's Relationships at Work

Women's work relationships are a complex and often contradictory subject.¹ Popular culture portrays women's workplace relationships as largely negative, with women often described as catty, mean, or intrinsically untrustworthy. In the same vein, practitioner-oriented publications focus on women's relational aggression and competition.² On the other hand, a large body of feminist literature describes women's experiences as grounded in oppressive systems and focuses on positive contributions that women make to organizations.³

I undertook the research reported here because I believe these polarized views do not adequately describe the full range of women's relationship patterns in the workplace, nor do they adequately address the contextual and societal factors that might influence these patterns. I designed this research to describe a full range of patterns and answer questions such as: How might the workplace context be contributing to women's experiences with other women? How might gender socialization be influencing these patterns of relationship? What types of individual and organizational changes could be made to address issues that arise?

Overview of the Research

Using a methodology that involved role-plays, group discussions, and in-depth interviews, I studied the work experiences of a diverse group of 115 women in a wide range of work environments (technology, financial services, nursing, government, academia, non-profit, etc.) in the U.S., Spain, and Mexico. I found a continuum of patterns of behavior among women, from positive to negative, in the context of organizational cultures that value and reward masculine behaviors. The study reveals a clash between friendship expectations that women carry into the workplace and the masculine norms that dominate most workplace cultures. It 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. This

research also uncovers some positive elements of women's behavior in the workplace previously only seen as negative and adds new language, "transknitting," to name a pattern of behavior that could be leveraged as an asset for both women and the organizations in which they work. This study also sheds light on sabotage behaviors. By deepening our understanding of the origins of dysfunctional patterns, and describing previously overlooked positive patterns, this research suggests that if women gain awareness and develop skills, they can change their work environments and enhance their capacity to support each other.

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Two Overarching Frameworks: Friendship Rules in a "Man's World" and Internalized Negative Stereotypes

Two overarching frameworks provide the context for the findings in this study. The first framework is Friendship Rules in a "Man's World." Scholar Joan Acker has described the gendered workplace as one where patterns of advantage and disadvantage between men and women, masculine and feminine are structured into the very fabric of the way the institution functions.⁴ In other words, masculine norms of behavior are privileged or rewarded, while feminine norms are devalued or discouraged. It is into this

hierarchical “man’s world” context that women unconsciously carry their more egalitarian friendship needs and friendship expectations—which include a taboo against discussing friendship expectations. These friendship expectations, which emerged as a theme across the first three patterns in the findings, are a macro structure for understanding the context of women’s relationships.

Both women and men have friendship rules, or expectations, but they are different because of gender socialization.⁵ Men’s friendship rules, which emphasize activity and status, fit more neatly within the norms of the hierarchical workplace. Women’s friendship rules are often at odds with workplace norms and can create confusion between women colleagues about what to expect from each other in the workplace environment.

The participants in this study confirmed what scholars have found about women’s friendship expectations: there

is a core set of rules, or expectations.⁶ These expectations include unwavering loyalty, trustworthiness and the ability to keep confidences, good listening, and entertaining companionship. Friends share gossip and air problems, offer self-disclosure, unconditional acceptance, affirmation, sympathy and healing—and do not discuss or negotiate their expectations. Cultural differences and other factors

make it unlikely that all women share the exact same friendship expectations. However, the taboo against discussion means that mismatched assumptions may not be discovered until damage has been done to the relationship.

The second overarching framework, internalized stereotypes, provides the context for the last two patterns in the findings at the negative end of the relationship continuum. Scholar Rosabeth Moss Kanter and other researchers have described the dissociation, disconnection, powerlessness, and self-hatred that people in subordinated groups can experience when they internalize the negative stereotypes of the dominant culture.⁷ Paulo Freire explained that striking out at another oppressed group member, or horizontal violence, is a way of acting out internalization of the negative stereotypes of the dominant group in order to feel

powerful.⁸ It is vital to understand this as the context of the destructive patterns described in this research.

Pattern #1: “You Can’t Get Too Buddy-Buddy With Women”: Double Binds and Limited Spaces at the Top

Unspoken (and often unconscious) friendship expectations can become filters for interpreting the behaviors of another woman. For example, many women in the study described having different behavioral expectations for female and male bosses, expecting more relational behavior from female bosses. One participant explained,

“I had a lady that I worked for who was more like that [task focused], and it did drive me away more. With a guy I would have expected it, but I expected a little bit more of a relationship from her. It was all she could do to say, ‘How was your day?’ It just killed her to say it, and that made it real uncomfortable for me. If a guy did it I guess it wouldn’t bother me as much.” (Sheri – High Tech)

These expectations create problems for women who do not have a feminine leadership style and who are subsequently evaluated as “difficult to work with.” A participant with a masculine style explained that,

“It [a masculine style] can be a disadvantage, too, because if you are around people who value chatting, and you just come in, you can seem too cool and not interested and that can be a disadvantage. More women seem to value the personal relationship, even if it’s not that deep [laughs], than men do.” (Shantel – High Tech)

The study participants also 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. One participant described it this way:

“It’s just so political, and still male-dominated. But you know, I tended to be able to keep up with them, and give ’em one for one back, but it wasn’t comfortable for me. They had, like eight other men. It was like constant battle, and you almost had to be perceived as a bitch to get your point across, and then you were perceived as a bitch.” (Alice – High Tech)

Scholars 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.⁹

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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.” (Grace – High Tech)

Participants describe seeing each other as competition, more so than other men, for these limited spaces:

“I mean, and very sadly, I see it a lot and more often than not—women doing other women in because that’s the way you get power in a very politicized situation—in the upper levels of government. There are a lot of women in significant management positions, but women will tend to be appointed at one of the lower steps in a 5-step salary scale. The men almost always come in at the top. Women will try to do one another in at that upper level because you certainly don’t want some woman to be doing better at this than you are or to start higher than you did.” (Marissa – State Government)

“You have women that are successful, you see that as your competition. You don’t really see the whole pie or all of the people out there as your competition. I think it’s easier to compete one on one with a woman sometimes than it is with a man.” (Tammy – Travel Industry)

Pattern #2: “Let’s Be Women Together”: Boundary Confusion

The next pattern describes different aspects of the boundary confusion women can experience as a result of the clash of women’s friendship expectations with the norms of the gendered workplace as described above, compounded by the taboo against discussing friendship expectations. Scholars have documented that both feminine friendship and speech rules are founded on equality.¹⁰ 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 masculine discourse norms that value hierarchy:

“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.” (Penny – Higher Education)

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

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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.” (Penny – Higher Education)

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. As one participant explained,

“I think it’s just the female nature, is that you don’t have all these separations... your professional relationship is both your personal relationship is [*sic*] all in one ball of wax.” (Linda – High Tech)

These relationships provided support, validation, mentoring, and empowerment—all of which have been shown to be essential to women’s mental and emotional health in male-dominated work environments.¹¹ Nonetheless, it is easy to see that fluid boundaries might also create confusion and feelings of betrayal when friendship expectations are not met, and not discussed. One participant gave this example:

“Women, though, if you criticize them for something or point out a problem, the first reaction is, ‘I thought she was my friend!’ You have to be careful in how you deliver the message, because women tend to get mad at who they thought was their friend criticizing them for anything.” (Alice – High Tech)

Pattern #3: “Under Our Breath”: A Positive Side of Gossip

During the course of the study it became clear that the women in this research—during group discussions, individual interviews, and role plays—were struggling to express something about a common pattern between women identified as “gossip”. These positive interchanges among women designed to help another woman (not in the room) were labeled as gossip and not distinguished from interchanges designed to disparage or complain about another woman not in the room. In fact, it also became apparent that sometimes sharing information about others, with supportive intention, is a bonding ritual between two friends that enhances their connection to each other. One participant explained,

“We did talk behind her back. Not in a mean way, but just, like, what’s going on with her and what can we do...? I never talk to her, face to face.” (Patsy – Nursing)

This type of information sharing, with positive intent, can also strengthen teamwork. 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.

Scholars suggest 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.¹² One participant put it this way:

“There’s always sort of triangulated conversations [between women]. A doesn’t talk to B but A talks to C, expecting C to say something to B so B will

change the way things work with A.” (Marissa – State Government)

Certainly it is reasonable to assume that indirect, or triangulated, communication, which is preferred in many cultures, can have a constructive purpose in the workplace. However, direct communication, such as describing feelings and giving, receiving, and inviting feedback, is also necessary to strengthen and maintain work relationships.

Pattern #4: “Behind the Door” and “Under the Bus”: Intentionally Hurtful Behavior

This study reveals a continuum of shadow-side behaviors from mild to severe in intention and impact that occur in the context of the second overarching framework, internalized negative stereotypes. The continuum of behaviors described here all fit into the ways that horizontal violence, described by Paolo Friere and others, are expressed by subordinated groups.¹³ “Indirect aggression,” or behavior that is purposefully hurtful and denied, is at the milder end of the continuum. Here is one of many examples provided by study participants:

“And I walked in and there were two of the women that were in my group walking ahead of me. I said, ‘Oh hey—how are you guys?’ And they kind of looked over their shoulder and gave me this look, with that curl in your lip and roll in your eyes. They got on the elevator and as the doors closed, one of them said, ‘We’re going to get coffee,’ click, and the door closed in my face.” (Keri – Nursing)

Indirect aggression includes both verbal and nonverbal covert behaviors that could seem innocuous but are intended to hurt. Rachel Simmons has described these behaviors for adolescent girls,¹⁴ but the adult study participants described very similar behaviors. One participant described indirect aggression from her women co-workers and noted:

“I expect them in adolescence. I don’t expect it at 45 or 50.” (Keri – Nursing)

“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, sometimes by women they knew and sometimes when they weren’t acquainted at all. One participant recounted what happened when she got a new job:

“Pretty soon what happened is this group of three women who had been there a long time who were all friends began to really try to sabotage me. You know, they’d give me hate mail in my inbox. This was before email. They would steal my mail and throw it away. They would put a key to the side of my car on both sides. They would talk about me incessantly to other people, you know, and say I wasn’t really very good. You know, to anybody they would gossip about me and they’d tell stories about me like I was sleeping with the boss, which wasn’t true, and they would just try to sabotage me.”
(Kendra – Financial Services)

Or another example, where the victim didn’t know her attacker at all:

“She had told people that I had used my own urine in the urine collection [for a patient], which was like so far, I mean it never happened, I mean it had no truth to it, I mean it would never happen. I remember just shaking and being like “What do I do?” If that had gone to court or something had happened I would have lost my nursing license.”
(Karen – Nursing)

Pattern #5: It’s Just The Way Things Are: Illusion of Powerlessness

While this study reflects that women are negatively impacted by powerful forces in the gendered workplace, there is also an illusion of constrained agency, or powerlessness, expressed by the women in this study, which may be a product of the second overarching framework—internalized negative stereotypes. As previously noted, researchers have described a sense of powerlessness as a common experience of subordinated groups and internalized oppression.

When asked why they thought the negative behaviors between women occurred, almost every study participant described powerlessness: “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. For example, one participant explained,

“It is actually an inside joke to nurses probably throughout the country that a lot of times would say, ‘Oh well, you know it is all women here. This is how it is—catty and gossipy,’ and it is said frequently. Actually it’s unfortunate because not all women are like that, but it’s a broad response.

People will say, ‘You know how women are.’”
(Karen – Nursing)

In almost every case, the women in this study seemed to hold other women responsible for the difficulties in their relationships or for the negative patterns of behavior they described, either because of “personality problems” or because they said, “it’s just the way women are.” They seemed unaware that these other women might be acting out internalized stereotypes, even as they themselves held these same stereotypes and blamed “other” women—and not themselves—for acting as “all” women do.

Discussion

The five patterns described by this study establish the importance of understanding that women’s relationships in the workplace take place in the context of gender-socialized friendship expectations in a “man’s world.” Most of the women in this study did not have this perspective, however. They were not aware of friendship rules as filters or the systemic context of the gendered workplace and explained their negative experiences with other women as the result of interpersonal or personality issues—or as “just the way women are.” They could not see the way systemic forces were setting women up to be confused and disappointed by each other. They could not see the impact of internalized negative stereotypes on their relationships. It is important to be able to see these larger forces at play in order to be able to resist being affected by those forces and strengthen our ability to support each other.

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Women need skills for naming and negotiating friendship rules and role boundaries when they are the boss, as well as in peer relationships and when reporting to female bosses. Negotiation skills will enable them to be explicit about whether they are wearing the hat of “friend”, “teammate”, or “boss” during interactions where expectations from each other may need to vary. Many women who work in predominantly-male teams complain that it is difficult for them to feel heard by their male colleagues. It can feel, then, like a violation of friendship rules if another woman on the team disagrees with her in front of the men in a team meeting—yet it is important to be able to express dif-

ferences of opinion when part of a work team. These women could explicitly agree that in mixed-gender team meetings they are free to disagree with each other. At the same time, they could agree to expect each other to help get their ideas heard by saying something like, “I think we moved away too quickly from consideration of Jane’s idea and we should come back to it before we make a decision.”

In other situations, women can clarify when they are stepping out of a “colleague” role and into a “friend” role where they need empathy, instead of challenge, on a professional level by naming the role switch they are making.

Women can develop skills to discuss and agree about what they expect from each other in different roles, make their friendship rules explicit, and negotiate them so that their relationships can survive the need to compete and differentiate as they advance in their careers.

Renaming and reclaiming the positive patterns that build relationships and teams can help us resist internalizing the negative stereotypes (such as, all women are catty and untrustworthy) that set us up against each other. Learning to differentiate between our positive and negative pat-

terns of talk—to embrace our positive patterns, such as transknitting, and stop gossiping—can also help create more trusting and collaborative work environments that will benefit everyone.

If we consider that 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 among women in the workplace? This study concludes

that these shadow-side behaviors, described here as indirect and career aggression, result from the dynamics of gendered organizations—as a legacy of distorted power relationships where oppressed groups internalize the negative stereotypes about their own group and turn on each other. Paolo Freire called this dynamic “horizontal violence” and other scholars have described it as “internalized oppression.”¹⁵ This behavior, women sabotaging other women, does not reflect something that is “essential” about women. All oppressed groups, or groups that experience systematic exploitation, exclusion, and devaluing, act out against members of their own group because they internalize the negative stereotypes about their group and feel powerless to change things. Women can transform this behavior by becoming aware that career aggression is a response to our environments, and by developing a code of conduct and a positive shared vision about how we want to be in relationship with each other. We can learn to both compete and support each other while staying in relationship.

Powerful forces are at play that influence our internalizing negative beliefs about women. Yet when we act out these beliefs against other women, it is hurtful. Indirect and career aggression 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 systemic and the patterns deeply rooted, it is important that women work in collective settings such as all-woman workshops or retreats to get the clarity and support required to resist the negative messages and replace the “illusion” of powerlessness. Organizations with Women’s Networks can also invite speakers to expose them to research and raise their awareness about internalized oppression and negative stereotypes. Choices come from awareness of where our patterns come from—we can then decide what we want to keep and what we want to change about our relationships and our organizations.

It is also important for both male and female managers to learn how women’s friendship culture can add value to an organization in order to enhance morale and productivity among their work groups. By developing both skills and a positive shared vision, or code of conduct, we can shift the negative dynamics between women and prevent them from occurring. With support from interventions such as workshops, guest speakers, and coaching, we can access the agency on both the individual and group levels to disturb these old, destructive patterns that result from our

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unequal structural positioning, join forces to change organizational cultures, and reclaim and cultivate positive relational dynamics with other women in the workplace.

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Endnotes

¹It is challenging and important to acknowledge cultural differences when writing about women as a group. In this research, I identify the cultural differences that emerged among study participants. The participants also described some similarities. Feminist standpoint theories (FST) provide the framework in this study to hold these similarities and differences. Feminist standpoint theorists acknowledge cultural differences and argue that, at the same time, women occupy a distinct position or standpoint in culture because, under the sexual division of labor ensconced in capitalist patriarchy, women have been systematically exploited, oppressed, excluded, devalued, and dominated. See Halstein, D.L.O. 2000. Where standpoint stands now: An introduction and commentary. *Women's Studies in Communication*, 23(1): 1-15.

²Heim, P., Murphy, S., & Golant S.K. 2001. *In the Company of Women: Turning Workplace Conflict into Powerful Alliances*. New York: Putnam. Also see Simmons, R. 2002. *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls*. New York: Harcourt.

³For example, Ashcraft, K.L., & Mumby, D.K. 2004. *Reworking Gender: A Feminist Communicology of Organization*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; Buzzanell, P.M. 1995. Reframing the glass ceiling as a socially constructed process: Implications for understanding and change. *Communication Monographs*, 62, 327-354.

⁴Acker, J. 1990. Hierarchies, jobs, bodies: A theory of gendered organizations. *Gender and Society*, 4(2): 139-158 (p. 146).

⁵Bem, S.L. 1993. *The Lenses of Gender*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press; Wood, J.T. (Ed.). 1996. *Gendered Relationships*. London: Sage. Also Wood, J.T. 2003. *Gendered Lives*. Belmont, CA: Thomson/Wadsworth.

⁶Apter, T., & Josselson, R. 1998. *Best Friends: The Pleasures and Perils of Girls' and Women's Friendships*. New York: Crown. Also see Eichenbaum, L., & Orback, S. 1988. *Between Women: Love,*

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⁷Kanter, R.M. 1977. *Men and Women of the Corporation*. New York: Basic Books; Simmons. 2002. Also see Miller, J.B., & Striver, I.P. 1997. *The Healing Connection: How Women Form Relationships in Therapy and in Life*. Boston: Beacon Press.

⁸Freire, P. 1970. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum.

⁹Buzzanell, 1995. Also see Meyer, M.D.E. 2007. Women speak(ing): Forty years of feminist contributions to rhetoric and an agenda for feminist rhetorical studies. *Communication Quarterly*, 55(1): 1-17.

¹⁰Bem, 1994. Also see Coates, J. 1997. Women's friendships, women's talk. In R. Wodak (Ed.), *Gender and Discourse*, pp. 245-262. London: Sage; Ely, R. 1994. The effects of organizational demographics and social identity on relationships among professional women. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 39(2): 203-238.

¹¹Miller & Striver, 1997.

¹²Kolb, D.M. 1992. Women's work: Peacemaking in organizations. In D.M. Kolb & J.M. Bartunek (Eds.), *Hidden Conflict in Organizations*, pp. 63-91. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

¹³Freire, 1970. Also see Miller & Striver, 1997.

¹⁴Simmons, 2002.

¹⁵Fanon, F. 1963. *The Wretched of the Earth* (C. Farrington, trans.). New York: Grove Press. Also see Gramsci, A. 1971. *The Prison Notebooks: Selections*. (q.s. Hoare & G.N. Smith, Trans.). New York: International; Scott, J.C. 1985. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

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