Mobilising femininities in the workplace: offering intra-gender support as a way to make work 'work'

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Abstract

Recent research has highlighted the negative intra-gender relations that occur between women in organisations, focusing on aspects such as micro-violence (Mavin & Williams, 2013), the queen bee syndrome (Derks, van Laar, Ellemars, & de Groot, 2011; Camussi & Leccardi 2005), negative intra-gender relations (Mavin et. al, 2014), and competition and distance between women (Mavin et. al, 2013; Cooper, 1997; Duguid, 2011). These studies have suggested that women's intra-gender relationships are based on competition rather than co-operation, and argue that gendered organisational cultures exacerbate these negative intra gender relationships (Mavin, Williams & Grandy, 2014). However van den Brink & Benschop (2014) expand this conceptualisation by framing both the positive and negative aspects of women's relationships within the context of 'mobilising femininities'. They suggest that women mobilise femininities in both a contested and affiliated way. However affiliation presents risks to the individual as this affiliative behaviour is scrutinised in a way which their male colleagues is not. This growing body of research both overlooks the positive aspects of women's relationships and ignores the impact that conservative feminists such as Sheryl Sandberg are having on discourse within organisations. Although Sandberg's book has created lots of debate in the media, there has been little discussion in the academic community about the impact this conservative feminism has made (GWO 2016 Call for Abstracts, Exploring the Rise of Moderate Feminism in Contemporary Organizations)

The aim of this paper is to further develop our understanding of women's peer relationships and the way in which women mobilise femininities in the context of conservative feminism. This article draws upon empirical data from interviews with sixteen women asked to consider their intra-gender relationships at work. Eleven of the interviews were conducted with women who worked at a corporate bank and five were members of a women's network and predominantly worked in small to medium sized enterprises. The interviews lasted between 40 and 70 minutes, they were recorded and transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The material shows that affiliation and mobilising femininities at work is an important part of the way women make work 'work' for them by providing a buffer from the dominant masculinities that prevailed. Women talked about the support and positive relationships they have being based on four themes. Firstly, 'seeing the whole you', this focussed on the importance of relationships that went beyond work, of being 'tight' and having conversations that were not work based. Secondly, a 'mum's network', this involved a bond that came from being a mother or providing advice to those who were thinking about having children. The third involved 'feedback', the importance of using other women as a sounding board, giving each other feedback and helping each other to advance their careers. Finally, 'I've got your back', a conscious recognition of the need to support each other and defend each other against men and masculinities at work. However, there is a fine line between supportive relationships and the point at which women seek to create distance from each other. A critical engagement existed within the relationships as the women need to enact femininity in an appropriate way or they are penalised. Behaviour that prompted distancing from other women involved 'over-mothering and smothering', women who are over-feminised and smother people therefore holding them back and 'not a real women', women who were too polished or too closed off, described as corporate 'cut outs'.

The paper argues that women's relationships can be conceptualised as a protection from the dominant masculinity that prevailed in their organisations and as a way to bring femininity to the workplace. Furthermore, it is argued that women emphasised the importance of fostering affiliative relationships. The paper thereby makes a contribution to understanding how women's affiliation can be seen in the context of a growing acceptability of moderate feminism within the media and corporate world.

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