

Discord in the gender harmony: Mobilising femininities at work

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This article seeks to aid our understanding of gendered inclusion by looking at how femininities are mobilised at work. Whilst within the popular press there is a growing neo-liberal discourse about women supporting other women in organisations, little consideration has been given to men's reactions to women aligning with each other, in other words, women mobilising femininities. Furthermore, whilst studies of doing gender have considered this from an individual viewpoint, we are unclear about how the collective doing gender differs from individuals doing gender. The aim of the article is therefore two-fold. First we consider how, for women, the individual aspects of doing gender differ from the collective aspects of doing gender and in what situations doing gender, or in this case doing femininities, differs from mobilising femininities. Secondly, we consider how men respond when women mobilise femininities as a way to resist the gender order and as a challenge to hegemonic masculinity. This has implications for understanding the conditions and bases of inclusion in contemporary organisations.

The gendered order of organisations exists for men when; patriarchy is in place, men are enacting hegemonic masculinities, and women are in a subordinate position. We call this a 'gender harmony' and suggest that when women challenge this, the impact is 'discord in the gender harmony'; a ripple in the still water of the gender balance which makes men aware of women's presence and that something is occurring which is out of place or unusual. Drawing upon qualitative interviews with women managers in a corporate bank, we show how men react to this discord by becoming threatened by women's behaviour and seeking to create conflict among women, in this way men have the power to include and exclude. However, when women are aligning and supporting each other in ways which offers no challenge to hegemonic masculinity, this behaviour goes unnoticed and is seen as 'women being women'.

The article makes the following contribution. First, we suggest that women draw on each other as a source of support, which adds protection from mobilised masculinity within organisations. Furthermore, our research suggests that women actively seek to promote and support other women succeeding within organisations and, in this way, they are doing femininities. Secondly, we extend the literature away from doing gender as an individual practice to consider how women collectively are doing gender. However, we found that men react to women mobilising femininities as they become aware of a disruption to gender harmony by seeking to create conflict among the women and becoming threatened by women's affiliative behaviour. Finally, we make a contribution by conceptualising how mobilising femininities looks in practice and how this occurs in response to men mobilising masculinities. This has implications for women when they are seeking intra-gender support to challenge gender inequality and confirms men's power to include and exclude.