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Unseen and unheard? Women managers and organizational learning

Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to use (in)visibility as a lens to understand the lived experience of six women managers in the headquarters of a large multinational organization in the UK to identify how “gender” is expressed in the context of organizational learning.

Design/methodology/approach – The researchers take a phenomenological approach via qualitative data collection with a purposeful sample – the six female managers in a group of 24. Data were collected through quarterly semi-structured interviews over 12 months with the themes – knowledge, interaction and gender.

Findings – Organizations seek to build advantage to gain and retain competitive leadership. Their resilience in a changing task environment depends on their ability to recognize, gain and use knowledge likely to deliver these capabilities. Here, gender was a barrier to effective organizational learning with women’s knowledge and experience often unseen and unheard.

Research limitations/implications – This is a piece of research limited to exploration of gender as other, but ethnicity, age, social class, disability and sexual preference, alone or in combination, may be equally subject to invisibility in knowledge terms; further research would be needed to test this however.

Practical implications – Practical applications relate to the need for organizations to examine and address their operations for exclusion based on perceived “otherness”. Gendered organizations cause problems for their female members, but they also exclude the experience and knowledge of key individuals as seen here, where gender impacted on effective knowledge sharing and cocreation of knowledge.

Social implications – The study offers further evidence of gendered organizations and their impacts on organizational effectiveness, but it also offers insights into the continues social acceptance of a masculinized normative model for socio-economic practice.

Originality/value – This exploration of gender and organizational learning offers new insights to help explain the way in which organizational learning occurs – or fails to occur – with visibility/invisibility of one group shaped by gendered attitudes and processes. It shows that organizational learning is not gender neutral (as it appears in mainstream organizational learning research) and calls for researchers to include this as a factor in future research.

Keywords work organisation, Gender, organisational culture

Paper type Research paper

Abstract

Despite the increase in studies of women in the workplace over the past decade, there are still few studies that explore how gender may play a part in the way that organizational learning occurs. Searching for terms such as “organizational learning” brings over 2 million references; but finding research including gender as a factor in this is more problematic. In using the term “Gender”, we intend more than simply the biological sex of an individual. The term is understood to mean the social construction of gender through a “complex of socially guided aperceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine ‘natures’”. Through this, gender is created and recreated “as a routine, methodical, and recurring

accomplishment” by both men and women, who “do” gender as their competence as members of society relies on their doing so (West and Zimmerman, 1987, p. 126).

Doing gender involves individuals in understanding and fitting expectations of the female and male. Gender is something that is “said and done” (Martin, 2003), a situated social practice (Butler, 1990). Gherardi (1996) suggests that in suggesting that organizations “do gender”, we mean that there are organizational rules, values and meanings expressed in social situations which embed gender positioning such that gender meanings are created, recreated and institutionalized. Hence, the need to explore how this occurs within the field of organizational learning. When women are members of cooperating communities of practice and have other modes of participating in organizational learning, how is gender done by those concerned?

Holmes and Schnurr (2006) suggest that in gendered communities of practice, “certain kinds of gender performance are perceived as ‘normal behavior’” [...] which implies that others are not. It seems that organizational learning research has not so far considered the impacts of otherness on community and knowledge sharing. It does not recognize that women and their contribution may be invisible in organizations which are built on masculine norms (Acker, 1990; Simpson and Lewis, 2007; Adamson et al., 2016). How does “doing gender” impact on organizational learning?

While Stead (2013) uses the lens of visibility and invisibility to examine how women learn to be leaders, our study explores the way in which the invisibility of women may impact on the ways in which organizational learning occurs. If organizational learning is the capability of an organization to adapt to its environment by the ways in which it collects and processes information (Hedberg, 1981; Huber, 1991), then invisibility/visibility may play a vital part in whose information is recognized, collected and processed and how it is used to change an organization (Hau et al., 2013; Garvin et al., 2008).

Being visible may be more difficult for women, depending on the social and cultural definitions of what it means to be a woman. Despite this, the consideration of the individual and his or her influence on the knowledge shared in organizational learning remains under-explored (Swan and Scarbrough, 2005). Our study attempts to address this gap by exploring organizational learning within a large organization, through the lived experience of six women. In doing so, it uses the approach taken by Stead (2013) in her study of learning in leadership. She drew on earlier research which explored visibility and invisibility within organizations as a route to understand power relations and learning impacts (citing Lewis and Simpson, 2010; Simpson and Lewis, 2005, 2007). These participants in the study have roles with associated knowledge and understanding that are pivotal to the success of key functions. Their views of how valued or recognized their knowledge and skills are (in the way in which they perceive that the organization recognizes them and their knowledge) are indicative of the visibility or invisibility of women in the workplace and the way in which organizations are gendered entities (Ljungholm, 2016; Fotaki, 2013).

To contextualise this study, the next section therefore explores the definitions and nature of organizational learning within the context of gendered organizations as socially constructed institutions. This includes consideration of the tacit in organizational learning and the way in which social construction is an embedded part of the way organizations are formed, maintained and understood (Berger and Luckman, 1967). This leads to a discussion on the way in which visibility is constructed before introducing our study.

Understanding organizational learning within socially constructed entities

This paper considers the way in which (in)visibility in organizations impacts on organizational learning. Organizations seek to build advantage to gain and retain competitive leadership. Their position in a changing task environment depends on their ability to recognize, gain, create and use the knowledge likely to deliver these capabilities through organizational learning (Chadwick and Raver,

2015). Jakubik (2008, p. 2) suggests that it is essential for businesses, to have employees who “create knowledge continuously, learn faster” and contribute to organizational knowledge.

Organizational learning represents “the distributed and coordinated nature of individuals’ contributions to task performance” (Robinson, 2001, p. 56). This assumes that learning is a social practice so that knowledge emerges from the interplay between social contact, interpersonal relationships and everyday activities in the workplace developing meaning (Weick, 1995; Wenger, 2000). Hence, organizational norms provide an evolving context in which learning is situated and constructed when individuals observe others within the context of social interactions, experiences and outside media influences (Bandura and Walters, 1977; Sole and Edmondson, 2002). Thus, organizations are legal entities, but they are also socially constructed through overt and covert processes which are embedded but demonstrated in knowledge, practices and conventionalized behavior (Cleland, 1994).

In organizations, embedded routines and rituals maintain and transfer cultural norms (Sun, 2009), and they indicate to employees organizational expectations, norms and values (Deal and Kennedy, 2000). Coates (2015) suggests that the invisibility of women arises from the conflation of “culture” with “male culture”, with language constructed around a presumption of the masculine so that the male is both thenormandthegenericinlanguageusewhereasthefemaleis“other”. Organizations and their cultures are based on assumptions based on beliefs, which are signaled and demonstrated in a web of formal and informal practices and of visual, verbal and material artefacts which represent the most visible, tangible and audible elements of this culture (Schein, 1988). Lave and Wenger (1991) suggest that learning goes beyond the transmission of abstract and decontextualized knowledge from one individual to another to include social processes to co-create knowledge. It is in such interactions that learning occurs, through the recognition and sharing of tacit knowledge. This is clearly important as strategic success seems to lie more in the ability to use tacit rather than explicit knowledge (Baumard, 1999; Arnett and Wittmann, 2014). In this identification and sharing of tacit knowledge however, the impacts of culture and social capital are often unrecognized (Hau et al., 2013), and there is little understanding that in organizations “discursive practices, representations and language are embedded in material power relations” (Fotaki, 2013,p.1271).

The situated nature of learning and the importance of experience as a resource for understanding are a recognized component to understand, not just what managers and leaders learn but how they learn (Kempster and Stewart, 2010). However, this assumes that equal importance is attributed to knowledge across a group, despite potential difference. Yet, whether online or offline, learning is still determined by social norms, as in Swan et al.’s (2009, p. 432) view that while learning is a situated and social practice, the social aspect is “rarely understood as something structured and defined by gender, race or class”. Similarly, Abrahamsson (2001) found gender-related issues in organizations, suggesting that “gender exerts. Yet, whether online or offline, learning is still determined by social norms, as in Swan et al. (2009)’s view that while learning is a situated and social practice, the social aspect is “rarely understood as something structured and defined by gender, race or class” (p. 432).

Similarly, Abrahamsson (2001), found gender related issues in organisations, suggesting that “gender exerts an influence on the work organization and organizational structure” ...” which became obvious in connection with the organizational changes“. Her study showed that stereotypic gender-coding of workplaces and work tasks hindered “strategic organizational changes, and were obstacles also to both individual and organizational learning.” These findings therefore supported the development of a methodology to understand how the workplace explained by our six participants operated and how visible they felt they were.

Methodology .

This study takes a phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of six female managers from a group of 24 (i.e. 18 male) at the same level, employed in a large US multinational corporation

with an EU headquarters in the UK. The research data were collected via four semi-structured in-depth interviews with each of the six women over a 12-month period. Doing so over this period allowed stories to emerge about how knowledge was shared during a time of change for the organization. It also allowed for deeper understanding of themes as seen in Gioia et al. (2013) to allow the data to shape theory.

Dominant discourses within organizations determine how individuals define themselves; hence, the gendered organizations suggested by Trethewey (1999) and later by other authors imply that gendered discourses signal and construct the way that gender is expressed in organizations. With this in mind, the research focus on individual narratives and the language and stories told about knowledge sharing, cocreation and development.

The six women were chosen to provide a purposive or purposeful sample, where participants were identified and selected to participate to gain insights from a unique group with key knowledge in a particular domain as in Feldmann (2014). The six women all had both academic and professional qualifications as well as relevant experience (Table I). Their male counterparts had similar experience in the firm and in total and their education levels were also comparable.

As seen in Table I, these women all have first degrees plus postgraduate and professional qualification. Each had more than 10 years of experience with the company and at least four years at their current level. Identifiable details including organization, names, units and departments are anonymized. Taking a socially situated view of learning supports data collection that enables reflection on experience, this therefore figured in cue questions. The interviews as semi-structured discussions included cue questions or statements based around broad themes, including:

- *knowledge*: my knowledge base, what is knowledge here, when and how knowledge is shared, what knowledge means here, how does knowledge sharing happen here?
- *interaction*: how do things work around here in terms of interaction, relationships, whose opinion counts?
- *gender*: what does it mean to be a woman in this environment?

	Experience (years)	With firm (years)	In role (years)	Age group	Education	Team size
A	15	15	4	30-39	BA, ACCA	11
B	17	12	6	30-39	BSc, PG Cert, Banking	6
C	14	14	4	30-39	BSc, CPA	6
D	15	11	5	30-39	MBA, CIMA	5
E	18	13	5	40-49	BSc, ACCA	4
F	16	11	6	40-49	BA, LLM Insurance	9

As seen in the table, these women all have first degrees plus postgraduate and professional qualification. Each had more than 10 years of experience with the company and at least 4 years at their current level. Identifiable details including organization, names, units and departments are anonymized. Taking a socially situated view of learning supports data collection that enables reflection on experience, this therefore figured in cue questions. The interviews as semi-structured discussions included cue questions or statements based around broad themes, including:

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- Interaction – how do things work around here in terms of interaction, relationships, whose opinion counts?
- Gender - What does it mean to be a woman in this environment?

As in Stead (2013), data collection occurred via in-depth semi-structured interviews with the women's accounts identified as "individual narratives of experience" rather than representing an objective reality. This study used an iterative approach so that concepts might develop and emerge from the data (Gioia et al., 2013). Interviews were recorded and transcribed, with just under 3,000 min of interview time overall. The data were analyzed inductively, drawing on an interpretivist focus in its application of a particular lens [(in) visibility] to this particular context (the group of women who were part of a larger cohort of managers in a multinational corporation) (Edwards, 2011). Analysis was in two stages. The first led to over 40 sub themes; the second stage involved clustering the 40 sub themes into 11 construct areas before aggregating these into four themes, voice, visibility, exclusion and power, with typical comments seen in Table II.

Findings

The findings are discussed in two sections. First, we look at responses in terms of knowledge, interaction and gender as themes identified in the literature review, and as these formed the basis for cues in the discussion, then second, the key emergent themes are discussed from a visibility perspective. At no time were participants prompted about their visibility, but it was noticeable how many times participants used words signifying their difficulty in "being seen" and "being heard".

Knowledge: for these women, knowledge principally meant knowledge of "how to" or "who to go to". While technical expertise was valuable though, "knowing how to" really meant knowing how to make things work/happen given "the way things really work". Here, discussions of internal politics and how to finesse them to achieve the goal were the frequent focus, as in B's view that:

"[. . .] of course the tech solution isn't worth doing unless you know you have (the senior manager) onside so it's essential to spend time getting him to understand what you're trying to do and checking whether he's up for it".

Despite having knowledge to share though, knowledge sharing could present problems as suggested in the next section on interaction. Discussing knowledge, participants differentiated between knowing about and knowing how to, with tacit knowledge mentioned without prompting by A and D. All gave examples of how learning occurred. Within their own teams, participants felt that "their voice was heard" (B, C, F), while in cross organizational teams, being seen and being heard was more difficult. "While everyone has an equal voice, some voices are heard while others aren't" (participant E) and "it's all equal but some voices speak louder than others" (participant F).

Interaction: interaction included face to face, telephone and online discussions. The protocol as for online discussion had to be understood. Participant C explained that it was important to mimic the style of influential peers; she felt that participant A had problems because of her very long or overly detailed emails, which many of her colleagues just did not read. "It needs to be short and snappy and get to the point – some of the guys just delete them otherwise". Online discussion included in-house closed groups and out of house social media, where again brevity and humor were the expected norms. Participant D explained:

"[. . .] the views have to be punchy with great photos or infograms [. . .] the in-house site just for managers has areas for group discussion between us but that's a bit like a lads club, the humor's a bit near the mark.

Participant A explained her reluctance to engage on the in-house site "it's very superficial and there's a bit of point scoring and laddishness going on".

Team meetings could also be tricky. Four of the six participants all said it was "difficult to have your voice heard in these management team meetings as certain individuals dominated". On the other hand, one to ones or smaller groups were felt to be generally fine:

“No points to score there so you just get down to talking through a problem. Four participants described a lack of visibility in their participation in meetings (it’s like they can’t see you, and when you make a suggestion someone it has little impact” (Participant A).

When called into more senior meetings, experience varied:

“It’s one thing being called in for my IT knowhow but sometimes you are called in and it’s only when you’re there with the Big Boys that you realize they want “the woman’s perspective”- it’s very frustrating (Participant C).

Gender: Having seen the way these participants discussed knowledge sharing, what did it mean to them to be a woman in that organization? All felt that there was no bias as such in terms of the organization itself, just sometimes misogyny from some individuals. That meant that they had to work around people to fit in. Participants E and B described this as “trying to get a ticket into the boys club”. Participants A, C and D saw this as immaturity on the part of some of the men especially the doubtful humor or the way they used nonstandard routes to get things sorted. “There’s a lot of bravado and cutting corners which is great when it works but spectacularly bad when it goes wrong” explained Participant D, giving examples). Participant F felt that day-to-day being recognized was often an uphill battle and “just as you feel you have sorted things to be on a par with them, the playing field changes”. And what was the view of their experience of being a woman there?:

“If you’re asking me whether it’s hard for a woman to be a manager here then I’d say yes and no. You can become a manager – they (senior managers) are frequently being told off about the lack of gender parity by our US headquarters so people are actively looking for women to appoint to the management structure. After appointment though, being a manager who’s a woman is a bit different though, as the company is set up to expect men so finds it hard to see other ways of doing things as valuable” (Participant A).

In addition, the way discourse occurred in knowledge sharing groups could cause problems. Problem solving and bringing knowledge into the mix met with varied response:

If someone has an attitude to you because you’re a woman then it’s hard for them to see you have the right knowledge to solve their problems or to innovate” (Participant F).

Previous experience was not always recognized and more collegiate ways of working seen to be indecisive:

“Sometimes you have been in a situation similar to the one you’re facing so can call on your experience to solve things and sometimes it’s best to work as a team on things. That’s pretty obvious but sometimes people will use that against you – management by committee type remarks, when actually you’re trying to go for the group wisdom” (Participant E).

The language used in the knowledge sharing fora reinforced their otherness and the worth attributed to them (where they were not only invisible but, it appeared, inaudible). This all served to drive home their lack of fit with organizational norms.

Power and influence was something all participants discussed in connection to knowledge sharing, with credibility as a key art of the exercise or non-exercise of power. “It’s hard to exercise influence across the group (of managers) to get your ideas heard as they’ve often made up their minds beforehand at a meeting you weren’t at” (Participant B). To mitigate that, participants took steps to do what their male counterparts were doing in sorting support before engaging in discussion:

“It took me a while to realize that I needed to put work in beforehand behind the scenes to get people onside if I felt strongly about our knowledge being essential in this situation because in open competition we’d never get a hearing” (participant F).

All but one felt that their credibility was undermined by their being excluded from decision-making and knowledge sharing even when they were physically present at discussions. Mimicking men to be accepted as honorary men (authors) was one way to address this.

“It’s been a bit better since I’ve adopted their behaviors (drink after work) and I see my colleague is wearing the same uniform now clothing (black trouser suit, short hair) so we are more visible to them”.

Patronage was another. Participant B felt there had been “an enormous change in the previous 18 months” due to her being supported by a US mentor who had arranged a local senior manager to act as a sponsor to ensure her inclusion. She felt that because her sponsor was regarded as important and powerful, she shared that aura. She was “riding on his coat tails” – something she felt was normal for her male counterparts, most of whom had support from senior staff.

Discussion

In discussing the findings, we need to return to definition of organizational learning before considering the evidence of impacts of “otherness”. We began by defining organizational learning as the capability of an organization to adapt to its environment (Hedberg, 1981) where knowledge is shared and insights gained to empower change (Garvin et al., 2008). The social learning system which is expected to support the development of effective organizational learning relies on the active and equal participation of organizational members (Wenger, 2000), but these assumptions do not recognize the way in which perceived “otherness” can hinder the processes involved.

Organizational learning scholars emphasize community and knowledge sharing as key to it being effective (Swan et al., 2002; Senge, 2014). In this organization, these participants were other than the male norm and were marginalized in the community, and therefore as a result, struggled to share experience and to co-create knowledge. Those bridging the gap had done so via patronage by a senior male executive or by mimicking masculine dress and behaviors to be “honorary men” (Authors, 2015).

In approaching these narratives explaining the lived experience of women managers, it seems clear that there are problems in omitting factors such as gender and the assumption of neutral environments for organizational learning on which much earlier research is based. That in the words of participant A, the organization was “set up to expect men” and found it difficult to deal with difference. This supports and extends the view that visibility in organizations is embedded in their gendered nature. Organizations do gender through overt and covert processes, knowledge, practices and conventionalized behavior (Cleland, 1994). Here, embedded routines and rituals maintained and transferred cultural norms where these women felt marginalized (Sun, 2009). These routines and practices indicated to the management group not only organizational expectations but also organizational values (Deal and Kennedy, 2000; McKenna and Beech, 2002).

The rituals and processes identified by participants about offline and online interaction signaled to participants how to engage, mimicking the communication styles of the dominant males in the cohort. These women felt that their credibility as managers and their knowledge and experience were damaged by day-to-day interaction. Despite having ideas and experience to offer they experienced organizational learning as “an uphill battle” and that their voice would be unheard and their presence unnoticed. The participants seemed to recognize that they were not equal partners in the organizational learning process due a male culture where laddishness and being one of the boys were important if you were to be seen and heard. This was further demonstrated by language and processes

constructed around a presumption of the masculine both on and off line; where the male was the norm and the generic in language use (whereas the female is other) (Coates, 2015; pp. 14-16).

Table 2 – key emergent themes				
	Voice	Invisible/visible	Exclusion	Power
A	I have no voice (in these knowledge sharing activities)	It's like they can't see you	I find the real discussions happen elsewhere without me	In my team I feel powerful and with customers, not with contemporaries
B	I can voice ideas and can identify key aspects of learning our team has achieved but I often won't be heard	I'm much more visible now (the senior manager) is clearly supporting me as I have a bigger say in things	I have a sponsor now in the next team and he's really made sure we are included as he thinks we've made a difference and have significant knowledge and experience	I used to struggle to really exercise power outside of my immediate team but I hold onto my sponsor's coat tails - it's normal (for my male colleagues)
C	I'll say something but it's only when someone else (a man) says it 5 mins later that they seem to hear. "I feel like telling them to go to Specsavers"	What am I - the invisible woman? It's been a bit better since I've adopted their behaviors (drink after work) and clothing (black trouser suit, short hair) as I'm more visible to them	It's not deliberate just depressing when you suddenly realize the decisions have already been taken elsewhere	There are a few really powerful people in the group who dominate
D	If you want to be heard it has to be on their terms, in emails keep it short...	They just don't see me as adding to ideas	Nothing deliberate they just go round me but that means they miss our knowledge	If I mimic them enough I think I'll be able to occupy the same space
E	It's really hard to have your views and ideas heard	They just don't see me or my team as being a go-to team for technical expertise despite us having the highest rating	I realized I'd been bypassed so I couldn't add our teams expertise	I think I'm most credible in my tea, and with suppliers. It's hard to be credible when you're bypassed

F	In reality? It's all very equal except some voices speak louder than others	Being ignored is an odd experience, it	Innovations happen in particular teams who get a lot of support, it's always belated for us	I am disempowered by the exclusion from things, it affects my credibility
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Conclusions and recommendations

In carrying out this research, we drew on earlier research which explored visibility and invisibility within organizations as a route to understand organizational learning from the perspective of power relations and their impacts on learning (Stead; 2013; Lewis and Simpson, 2010; Simpson and Lewis, 2010). As part of this, Stead both conceptualizes and differentiates surface and deep visibility or invisibility in organizations. Surface invisibility refers to being “excluded, absent, marginalized or marked out as different due to a proportionate imbalance of women in leadership roles”. This reflects the comments on day-to-day marginalization from all participants. Deep invisibility explains the way that power is maintained through the visibility or invisibility of certain individuals and groups (Stead, 2013, p. 64), as seen in the way organizational learning processes occurred and in the extra steps needed (the local sponsor) to address these. This further confirms the views of Lewis and Simpson (2010) that deep invisibility is embedded in the status quo, supported by gendered organizational processes and practices which both establish and maintain the position where some are visible while others are not.

From the lived experience of these participants, it appears that the consequences of doing gender make it hard for effective organizational learning to occur, despite its importance for economic performance and survival (Chadwick and Raver, 2015). In a gendered organization, the invisible are more likely to be excluded rather than included in knowledge sharing. That perceptions of otherness work against the formation of those co-creating learning communities underpinning organizational learning (Wenger, 2000). While we have focused in this study on gender as other and have considered only the impact of “doing gender”, there are multiple differences – ethnicity, age, social class, sexual preference and disability – which all play a part in shaping the visibility possessed by an individual and which are attributed to his or her knowledge and to their inclusion in knowledge sharing. Organizations, it seems, are not gender neutral, so activities attributed to the organization, organizational learning, organizational memory, etc. need to be studied in ways which embed this. Hence, it seems that to theorize about organizational learning without incorporating the impacts of perceived difference is both unproductive and unwise. We call on organizational learning theorists to recognize organizations as socially constructed entities based on the masculinized normative model and to include these factors not only in their future research but also in their reflection on past studies, to make better sense of the lived realities of those working within organizations.

Limitations

This study focuses on the views of 6 women within organization but not their male counterparts, there might therefore be benefits in contrasting the views of the whole group at this level. It offers a valuable purposeful sample and the data offers insights into perceptions of invisibility as part of the experience of organizational learning processes for these women but clearly it is based in one organization so again, widening this to include other organisations might be useful to look at how common these experiences are. We have focused on gender but further research might include other aspects of otherness, including class, sexual preference, age and ethnicity (as seen in both academic and popular press in the USA in their comments on the invisibility of black women and poor white men). It is a qualitative study so brings with it the richness and the potential lack of generalizability such an approach provides.

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