Closing the Social Distance: Mitigating Gender Inequality in Organizations Using Complexity Theory in Response to Remote Work During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The following paper is centered around the potential for organizational change in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper argues that the disruption of "business as usual" during the COVID-19 pandemic provides opportunities to both highlight gendered organizational practices during remote work and explore how organizational actors might contribute to a more equitable restructuring of gendered communication practices once employees return to in-person work. First, the paper contextualizes the COVID-19 pandemic at the time of writing. Next, the literature review examines the notion of organizations as inherently gendered, the history of organizational change from *Lewinian Planned Change* to models of non-linear change, and bureaucratic organizational structures using a feminist lens. The discussion section then argues that complexity theories offer significant opportunities for improvement due to the destabilization of current workplace practices. This argument is followed up by examples of how organizations can successfully engage complexity theories to reduce gender inequality in the post-pandemic world. The paper concludes that by emphasizing consensus and autonomy, improvements to network communication and the merging of public and private spheres should be the first steps towards the ultimate goal of reducing gender inequality through the deconstruction of bureaucracies.

Introduction

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization officially declared COVID-19 a pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020). Now, one year later, the repercussions of the pandemic have left the global community scrambling as people attempt to navigate the novel communication environments created by physical distancing and remote working guidelines. Gone are the days of water cooler talk and animated board rooms; Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and collaboration over cloud computing have ushered in new expectations and experiences of organizational communication. Among these new experiences is the disruption of traditional gendered practices in organizational communication: work-home balance is blurring, managerial communication is restricted to screen-mediated setups, and co-worker banter is constrained to the confines of an email.

The following paper argues that the suspension of in-person work and the disruption of "business as usual" during the pandemic provides opportunities to both highlight gendered organizational practices during remote work and explore how organizational actors might contribute to the restructuring of gendered communication practices once employees return to in-person work. First, this essay surveys previous literature on feminist organizational communication research to develop an understanding of gendered structures in organizations. In addition, the paper overviews main trends in organizational change scholarship. Next, the essay explores the restructuring of gender and masculinity in organizational communication

according to the recommendations of previous scholars. The aim of this essay is to synthesize the aforementioned research in order to make a series of theorizations and suggestions about how the advent of remote work and the subsequent return to in-person work might provide opportunities for organizational actors to promote gender equality. By re-building communication networks that benefit workers of all genders and intersections and introducing more elements of remote work into organizations, actors can create a balance of personal and professional lives, thereby promoting gender equality.

Literature Review

Gender in Organizations

Organizations are usually considered neutral structures into which social processes are integrated; however, there is a considerable amount of scholarship that argues the contrary—that organizations are inherently gendered, meaning that gender is a fundamental factor in the creation of organizations, and that the structure and function of organizations by definition are built on and privilege male biases (Acker, 1990; Ashcraft, 2005; Balmer et al., 2020; Ferguson, 1984; Kennedy et al., 2020; Mumby, 1998). Literature on organizations as gendered practices dates back to the mid-late 1900's, when feminist scholars began analyzing the structures that had contributed to the oppression of women in and by organizations. According to Britton (2000), inherently gendered organizations "have been defined, conceptualized, and structured in terms of a distinction between masculinity and femininity" (p. 419). Using gendered organizations as a theoretical framework, this paper will dive deeper into the consequences of dominant systems, their tendency to be overlooked and obscured, and possible remediations.

Further, Kennedy et al. (2019) discuss how "most public organizations are gendered institutions, molded based on a 'masculine ethic'" (p. 1102). This notion is widely upheld in the field, as many scholars—both past and present—agree bureaucracy is a stereotypically masculine organizational structure (Acker, 1990; Ashcraft, 2005; Britton, 2000; Kennedy et al., 2020). As "male-created and male-dominated structures of control" (Acker, 1990, p. 141), bureaucracies have been oppressing women for decades; their strict top-down hierarchies, unwavering managerial control, and suppression of emotions have contributed to a less-than-welcoming environment for most women trying to succeed in professional settings. Because men have been historically dominant, these masculine structures continue to perpetuate harmful discourses and practices, often without being questioned (Acker, 1990, p. 141). Mumby (1998) states the following reasoning for how social constructions like gender have come to carry the weight they do:

> Social constructions are neither arbitrary nor the product of consensus among social groups. Rather, they are rooted in power and reflect the ability of the powerful to "fix" meaning in ways that privilege those forms of reality that serve the interests of the powerful. (pp. 167-168)

A number of other scholars argue that avoiding top-down managerial styles and integrating more consensus-based decision making would be a significant step forward in improving the gendered power dynamics of organizations (Acker, 1990; Britton, 2000; Ferguson, 1984). Drawing on this literature, this paper examines how, as long as organizational systems are

rooted in unaccountable relations of power, they will not be able to escape oppressive gender binaries.

Another key area of scholarship involving gendered organizations is the distinction between public and private spheres (Acker, 1990; Ashcraft, 2005). The aforementioned "gender-blind bureaucratic objectivity and rationality ... depends on the organizational suppression of emotions, sexuality, and other feminized phenomena" (Ashcraft, 2005, p. 155). Historically, females have been designated to perform domestic labour and childcare duties, and their second shift responsibilities often create the assumption that they cannot offer the same level of commitment in the workplace as a man can (Acker, 1990, p. 149). As a result, women are significantly less likely to work managerial positions; in fact, only 29% of senior management roles in North America are filled by women (Catalyst, 2020). Further, in gendered organizations, high-level positions are typically associated with stereotypically masculine qualities, meaning that women must adopt masculine characteristics in order to succeed in the public sphere (Wilkens & Andersen, 1991).

Gendered organizations did not emerge overnight; the gendering of organizations has happened as a result of repetition. Seemingly small actions, conversations, and habits have snowballed to create systems so powerful they can control an entire managerial and organizational structure (Mumby, 1998). Ashcraft (2005) summarizes this idea by stating that, "gendered systems of privilege and oppression are not limited to the domain of symbols and discourse; they create institutional, economic, corporeal—in a word, lived—effects" (p. 154). These real-world effects of gendered processes in organizations have a different impact on each person they come into contact with—perhaps the assumption that a manager is male, that a woman must go home to take care of her kids, that a woman is not capable of being assertive. Thus, the only way to properly analyze the effect of one social structure on a person's life is to analyze how all social structures interact within their life.

Intersectionality—including that of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and ability—is a critical consideration when it comes to gender in the workplace (Acker, 1990; Ashcraft, 2005; Carrigan et al., 1985; Holvino, 2010; Mumby, 1998). According to Ashcraft (2005), intersectionality has been a point of contention for feminist organizational communication scholars, as much early literature in the field was crafted from a white, heterosexual, middle-class perspective. Thus, scholarship largely ignored experiences of women of colour, women from lower social classes, or people with different gender or sexual identities (Ashcraft, 2005, p. 147). Despite recent efforts, women who are not white, heterosexual, and middle-class still struggle to make their voices heard. An accurate representation of gendered organizations—which this paper hopes to achieve—must therefore acknowledge the experiences of all women, regardless of social determinants. Overall, the scholarship overwhelmingly agrees that not only have organizations been set up to reinforce gendered practices, but those organizations are also still thriving today.

Understanding Organizational Change

Just as the understanding of gender in organizations has evolved over time, approaches to implementing change in an organization are often debated and modified. In the past, organizational change was seen as an incremental and planned process that happened in

discrete moments separate from the day-to-day happenings of an organization (Burnes, 2005). The most well-known model for this method of organizational change was *Lewinian Planned Change*, which dominated perspectives on organizational change until the 1980's (Burnes, 2005; Crosby, 2020). Lewin's model involves three steps: unfreezing (preparing an environment to forgo the status quo), moving (implementing the change), and freezing (locking in the new measures) (Crosby, 2020). This model has received criticism for being too simplistic and too linear to apply effectively to contemporary organizations (Burnes, 2005; Crosby, 2020; Tentenbaum, 1998). With new influences of technology and a growing force of knowledge workers, organizational scholars have sought new ways of understanding change (Tentenbaum, 1998). However, the debate over the practicality of Lewin's model is still active today, with some scholars reiterating the relevance of the method even after its waning in the 1980's (Burnes, 2004; Crosby, 2020; Rosenbaum et al., 2018; Shirey, 2013). Despite the uses still found for Lewin's model, scholars have largely turned their gaze from the theory of planned change toward newer models more suited to the fast and continuous change that defines today's organizations (Burnes, 2005; Dawson, 2019; Styhre, 2002).

One feature of the current organizational climate is an increasing pace of change. According to *Moore's Law*, the processing power of computers doubles every two years, increasing the capabilities of technological interactions and creating a work environment that requires flexibility and agility (Itō & Howe, 2016). The transformations in the field of organizational change since the decline of Lewin's planned change theory have trended toward theories of change management that emphasize less top-down communication and more dynamic change occurring from the bottom up (Burnes, 2005; Dawson, 2019; Kerber & Buono, 2005; Styhre, 2002). This new, processual way of approaching organizational change embraces the constantly evolving nature of organizations, making it perfectly equipped to meet the aforementioned challenges of agility and flexibility faced by organizations (Dawson, 2019). In the search for innovative ways to approach organizational change, scholars have begun to explore ways to apply concepts from the natural sciences to the social sciences (Burnes, 2005; Styhre, 2002; Sullivan, 1999). Complexity theory allows scholars to understand organizational change in a non-linear fashion that embraces instability and agency as a precursor for self-organizing in organizations (Burnes, 2005; Tetenbaum, 1998). Complexity theory and its relation to organizational change will be further discussed later in this paper. Although understanding current perspectives on organizational change provides a foundation on which to explore restructuring gender in organizations in a post-pandemic world, one must first understand how feminist organizational communication theorists shape their perspective on organizational change.

Organizational Change Through a Feminist Organizational Communication Lens

The recent increase in feminist organizational communication scholarship has highlighted the need to examine current bureaucratic organizational structures (Acker, 1990; Britton, 2000; Ferguson, 1984). Bureaucracies perpetuate the historically oppressive gender roles that see men as the ideal workers and women relegated to undervalued roles in domestic labour and childcare. These conceptualizations have existed for decades, but Acker (1990) notes that feminist discourse "provides a ground for opposition to bureaucracy and for the development of

alternative ways of organizing society" (p. 144). As mentioned earlier, scholarship in the field calls for the elimination of top-down hierarchies and strict managerial roles. Doing away with these historically oppressive structures would create more gender equality; women would no longer be forced to adapt to masculinity and abandon perceived feminine "weaknesses."

Despite the recognized need for change, the organizational structures currently in place make change virtually impossible (Ferguson, 1984). Britton (2000) notes that, "if one is an advocate of social change in the direction of gender equality, taking the position that bureaucracy is inherently gendered logically requires the abolition of bureaucratic organizations and the establishment of radically different collective forms" (pp. 421—422). Not only will bureaucracies have to be demolished, but work relations will also have to be completely redefined (Acker, 1990, pp. 154—155): hierarchies dismantled, women's labour legitimized, and the differentiation between public and private spheres addressed.

However, these proposed changes are profound and not attainable under current organizational conditions. According to Britton (2000), "the goal of meaningful organizational change might be better served, at least in the short term, by trying to identify and understand the factors that give rise not to ungendered organizations but to *less oppressively gendered* forms" (p. 431, emphasis original). These less-gendered forms include structures and practices with an emphasis on "participation, power sharing, consensus, connection, and empowerment" (Britton, 2000, p. 422). Not surprisingly, many of the above structures are those that have often been discounted for being too feminine. Implementing these structures will help organizations "create a context in which gendered behaviours may be enacted and exhibited without reproducing inequality" (Britton, 2000, p. 430). The constant perpetuation of oppressive structures is the root of the problem; as long as organizations continue to operate using these systems, they will not achieve change.

Discussion

Opportunities for Change During Remote Work

Thus far, this paper has explored scholarship of gendered practices in organizations, current understandings of implementing change in organizations, and the problem of enacting organizational change in contemporary bureaucratic organizations through a feminist organizational communication perspective. In response to feminist organizational communication theorists' call for the restructuring of bureaucracy to overcome barricades to organizational change, this paper suggests that the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent surge of remote workers creates an environment in which key components of gendered organizations are dismantled enough to allow for greater gender equality in the workplace.

First, from a broad view, one can argue that the overall environment created during remote work is vastly different than that found in a bureaucratic organization. According to Baruch (2000), remote work more closely resembles that which took place in the pre-industrial era when workers performed work-related tasks in their homes before moving to centralized locations during the industrial revolution. In other words, remote work mirrors the behaviours that occurred before Max Weber's model of the bureaucratic organization was ever created

(Wrench & Punyanunt-Carter, 2012). COVID-19 and the subsequent period of remote work have resulted in an astronomical disruptive force to "business as usual" for organizations all over the world, reshaping the very bureaucratic structures that stymie organizational change toward greater gender equality.

Notably, remote work has been shown to break down the separation between public and private spheres, creating more opportunity and need for men to take on traditionally feminine roles like housework and giving women more freedom to take on the role of primary earners (Huws et al., 1996). This overlap of the public and private spheres is a key factor in addressing gender inequality in organizations, as well as allowing for organizational structures to "[adapt] to the rhythms of life outside of work" (Acker, 1990, p. 155). Remote work during the pandemic has done just this, giving many women the ability to be mentally present at work and at home at the same time and lowering their split loyalties to responsibilities within both the public and the private sphere. Additionally, many men are now expected to be present in both spheres at the same time as well. For example, if a heterosexual couple's child got sick, both parents would be physically present to take responsibility for his/her care, and a woman would be less likely to have to leave the office for the day to do so. Huws et al.'s (1996) publication suggests that remote work, therefore, has the ability to promote greater equality between men and women in organizations.

Another important factor of remote work to consider is the day-to-day communication practices that have changed due to remote work that may promote greater gender equality. One concern about gender equality in organizations (not just remote organizations) raised by Brass (1985) is that women have less access to information and communication networks in an organization, creating inequalities in decision-making, network-building, and even access to promotions. Underlying this problem is that people form relationships and communication networks with those they work closest to (Brass, 1985). This is not to say remote work provides a utopian path to equal communication networks. In fact, Milliken et al. (2020) found that remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic can actually disrupt and break down established communication structures in an organization; however, these are the communication structures that already promoted gender inequality (Brass, 1985). Therefore, remote work can eliminate the previous advantage men had by removing proximity relationships and giving women equal access to communication channels used by an organization to cultivate groups, networks, and relationships. After all, it is important to remember that the current goal of scholars is not to completely obliterate gendered structures, but rather to lessen gender oppression (Britton, 200). Although remote work presents unique opportunities to disrupt bureaucratic structures, this is not where the story ends. Governments and organizations are eager to re-open organizations and bring workers back to the office, and without the proper considerations, the brief glimpse of a more equal workplace becomes, in reality, the return to in-person work and the status quo. Expanding on the present considerations, this paper explores how organizational actors might preserve some of the opportunities presented by remote work in an in-person work environment.

Engaging Complexity Theories in Management for a Post-Pandemic World

Burnes (2005) describes complexity theories through the "emergence of order in dynamic, non-linear systems operating at the edge of chaos … [in which] patterns of behaviour emerge in irregular but similar forms through a process of self-organization" (p. 77). As mentioned earlier, this theory originates from the natural sciences but has been applied to social sciences by a growing number of organizational scholars (Burnes, 2005). Through an organizational theory lens, organizations are considered to be *complex adaptive systems*; they are made up of groups of individuals with agency that interact and adjust behaviour accordingly and are influenced by more than one factor at any given time, negating the validity of singular cause-and-effect understandings (Burnes, 2005; Styhre, 2002). To ensure the continued success of self-organization in complex systems, agents follow *order-generating rules* (Burnes, 2005).

As a basic example, consider a group of retail workers who order their organizational interactions according to the adage *the customer is always right.* When the workers want to raise their voices at an astonished customer, they must remember *the customer is always right*, so it becomes evident how communication structures are ordered through these underlying rules. Each actor in an organization has agency, but that agency tends to align with these order-generating rules (Burnes, 2005). However, organizations can also create new order-generating rules (through bottom-up, emergent processes) to re-establish structure in times of instability (Burnes, 2005). In the case of the aforementioned *the customer is always right* scenario, restructured order-generating rules may manifest as a shift in public opinion that values the worker's mental well-being over the customer's satisfaction after a public controversy regarding the matter. In the current state of the world, COVID-19 may provide the instability that is needed to push organizations to create a new set of rules. In addition, applying complexity theory to organizations presumes that change is continuous and dynamic, meaning that the possibility for future change is more accessible than it would be using linear modes of organizational change (Styhre, 2002). This is especially important in a world that changes faster than ever, as previously mentioned. As noted in the previous exploration of remote work and gender in organizations, feminist organizational communication scholars have called for a re-structuring of organizations, and remote work has broken down many of the structures that were previously in place, presenting workers and managers with the opportunity, and even necessity, to re-establish these rules when in-person work returns. This paper calls for the re-establishment of order-generating rules to be deliberate to the end of reducing gender inequality in organizations.

Incorporating Order-Generating Rules to Increase Gender Equality

As mentioned earlier, the current bureaucratic organizational structure is inherently gendered, placing women at a disadvantage. Whether they are punished for exhibiting feminine qualities, not considered for jobs because of their childcare duties, or not given access to the same information, women are consciously (and unconsciously) disadvantaged by organizational structure. The COVID-19 pandemic has shaken this organizational structure to the point where there are now opportunities for change. One way to create more gender equality in organizations is to implement new order-generating rules that emphasize participation, power

sharing, consensus, connection, empowerment, and autonomy (Acker 1990; Ferguson, 1984; Huws et al., 1996).

The restructuring of networks—the channels through which people communicate and exchange information—is one way to increase gender equality in the workplace. The pandemic has upended communication networks, giving organizations the perfect opportunity to assess inequalities and restructure dismantled networks once in-person work returns. As Milliken et al. (2020) note, the current networks for decision-making are male-dominated, meaning women are often not included. As a result, women have weaker network ties and will be disproportionately harmed in terms of the quality and quantity of information they receive through these networks. Restructuring the networks with a focus on power sharing, consensus, and connection would not necessarily give women a significant advantage; however, it would "level the playing field" so to speak. Men would no longer be disproportionately advantaged due to their gender, access, or proximity in the physical workplace. For example, an organization could implement a committee that works towards the even distribution of speaking time during meetings across all genders.

Another recommendation for post-pandemic organizational change is to minimize differentiation between the public and private spheres. Currently, there is a very strict separation of public and private spheres for women; they have work duties and domestic duties which cannot mix. New rules focused on empowerment and authority would lead to less differentiation between public and private spheres (Acker, 1990; Britton, 2000; Ferguson, 1984; Huws et al., 1996). For example, organizations could give women the ability to combine aspects of in-person and remote work to suit their lifestyles; women could choose to work from home when their child is sick and not risk losing out on work. Rhythms of work and life would become more balanced, as women would have the ability to decide how to manage childcare and other domestic duties (Acker, 1990). Since every woman is dealing with many different factors at any given time, it is important that they have the agency to choose what is best for their situation. On top of considering women's unique needs, promoting intersectionality through autonomy and empowerment would also reduce the need for women to fit into the typical (often masculinized) role of the ideal worker. This shift in autonomy ultimately gives more power back to women, as they are able to take control of the split between public and private spheres.

Yet, giving women the ability to structure their professional and personal responsibilities leaves them vulnerable to reinforcing gender norms by taking on the majority of childcare and domestic duties, as has been tradition. Giving all workers, regardless of gender identity, the ability to have flexible work structures and mix responsibilities from the private and public spheres could encourage a more equal division of domestic labour and professional opportunity for all households, whether heterosexual, homosexual, single-parent, or any other household dynamic. Schultz and Hoffman (2006) posit that one way to achieve a more equal division of professional and personal duties in a household is through a reduced work week (35 hours) for employees of all genders. According to Schultz and Hoffman, an alternative way to reduce 'working hours' may be to introduce flexible work structures for all employees, reducing commute time, increasing time at home, and allowing for a mix of professional and personal duties to be performed throughout the day. Since COVID-19 forced organizations to face any pre-existing hesitancies about remote and flexible work arrangements, the time to implement new norms and lessen the gendered structures of the public and private spheres is now.

Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic has shaken the only organizational structure that many people have known. Although this has created a lot of challenges, it has also created a great opportunity for organizations to examine their current structures and work to make them more equal in terms of gender (and many other social categories). If organizations do not take this opportunity to implement changes in structure and practice, things could go from bad to worse. For example, managers tend to centralize authority in a crisis, which may leave women at a disadvantage due to the aforementioned weaker network connections (Milliken et al., 2020). Further, according to Levin and Kurtzberg (2020), "going all virtual means that many interactions diminish, relationships recede, work networks shrink, and the organization becomes less interconnected" (para. 2). In a time when connection is already severely lacking, organizations will want to do everything they can to maintain a level of interaction between their employees. These examples indicate that if organizations do not take active steps, any continued virtual work or a return to in-person work may create even more gendered practices in work environments.

After exploring some potential order-generating rules that emphasize participation, power sharing, consensus, connection, empowerment, and autonomy (Acker, 1990; Ferguson, 1984; Huws et al., 1996), it is apparent that these suggestions give agency back to the individual, rather than the harmful organizational structure. It is crucial to remember that this paper does not aim to dismantle bureaucracies altogether. An organizational restructuring of that capacity would take decades to achieve; instead, the authors suggest taking small steps to make organizations less gendered. With small steps in place, organizations can begin to make progress with the ultimate goal of minimizing the bureaucratic organizational structures that disadvantage so many people.

Conclusion

This paper overviewed feminist organizational communication scholarship, change management scholarship, and organizational change through a feminist organizational communication scholarship lens to establish the need for a new approach to imposing greater gender equality in organizations in a post-pandemic work environment. A main consideration when trying to establish greater gender equality in organizations is that, because bureaucratic structures are built on and perpetuate gender inequality, organizational actors who want to enact change cannot do so from within bureaucracy. Rather, change must be addressed from the standpoint that organizations are complex adaptive systems that function using order-generating rules that can be reconstructed during times of instability. With that being said, remote work has been shown to both reduce the separation between public and private spheres and disrupt established communication networks in organizations, giving organizational actors the opportunity to restructure practices and promote gender equality through the introduction of remote work options for employees who need to balance their professional and personal lives and the re-building of disrupted communications networks that benefit workers of all genders and identities.

Future Areas of Study

It is worth noting that at the time of this paper's original conception (spring 2021), Canada, and much of the rest of the world, was experiencing high COVID-19 infections and hospitalization rates, meaning that many provincial governments had announced work from home orders. The return to in-person work and attempts at normalcy only truly began months later, in the summer of 2021. This paper explores multiple theoretical bases for ways to increase gender equality in the workplace once in-person work can be implemented again. Future studies may benefit from taking a hands-on approach to conducting primary research to study the impact of any of the above suggestions on reducing gender inequality in the workplace once employees return to work post-pandemic and organizations must face new understandings of remote work and organizational communication.

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