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**“Special and wise”: The paradoxical nature of the representation of
women in management**

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“Special and wise”: The paradoxical nature of the representation of women in management

Abstract: Despite decades of academic enquiry into the under representation of women in management, leadership, and frequent calls for optimism invoked by the recognition of the skills and talents women bring to organisations, women’s participation remains paradoxical. In this paper we discuss the paradoxical nature of ‘wisdom’ and gender within the modern organisation through the theoretical lens of the works of Carol Gilligan (1982) and Dorothy Smith (1987, 1990), particularly in relation to their work on moral decision-making, relations of ruling and bifurcated consciousness. We argue that while women have been seen to bring a “special” kind of wisdom to organisations may lead to a hierarchical layering of legitimate organisational wisdoms.

A paradox arises for those studying the persistence of the under-representation of women in senior areas of management and leadership. On the one hand it seems advantageous to present the many qualities and talents women can bring to the workforce as highly desirable. However, this promotion of women’s qualities has led to a process of quarantining women as “special” or “different” which in turn may have led to a hierarchical layering of these very talents.

In this paper, we examine the persistence of this dilemma. After briefly examining the feminist frames of analysis most commonly applied in the mainstream management literature (see Myerson and Kolb 2000), we explore an analytical framework that attempts to recognise the contribution women’s talents and attributes can bring to organizations. We show that this approach often works against women’s position in the workforce as the tendency to undervalue ‘female characteristics’ persists. We then examine an emerging trend in the management literature, that is, the valuing of “wisdom” and “wise people” within organisations. The wisdom of many women leaders has been hailed as superior to that of men in a similar position, a perspective that has been touted in recent years through the feminisation of management literature (Frenier, 1996) diversity literature (Adler and Izraeli 1994, Segal 1997), and in examinations of women’s representation in senior management positions (Schwartz 1990, Bilimoria 2000 see Hopfl and Matlal 2007). However, much management literature subtly implies women remain in

deficit in terms of logical, rational and focused wisdom (see Huse and Solberg 2006). Further, media discussions about why women are unable to fill the upper echelons of the corporate world in greater numbers (Tischler, 2004) describe a perspective on the wisdom of women that infers women don't choose to give themselves over completely to corporate ambition because they are inherently concerned with sustainability of life through balance, temperance and a form of practical wisdom (phronesis) (Aristotle, 1967; Flowers, 2003).

In this paper we use the classical works of Carol Gilligan (1982) and Dorothy Smith (1987, 1990), in relation to traditional accounts of wisdom to show that while certain types of female wisdom are exalted, within traditional organisational contexts there is potential to lock women into a less influential and more restrictive type of wisdom that may inhibit their place in power hierarchies within organisations. We contend that the circularity in valuing women's special talents and qualities has implications for how women may or may not progress through their career.

WOMEN IN MANAGEMENT

Despite decades of legislative activity, considerable gender segregation persists within many western industrial countries, and although there have been significant increases in women in management, women remain hugely under-represented in corporate boardrooms and at executive and CEO level. For example, in Australia women chair four boards and hold 8.3 percent of board directorships in ASX200 companies positions (EOWA 2008).

Although Oakley (2000:322) refers to the lack of women in senior management as a concern for business ethics and thus human rights, much of the contemporary work in gender equity recognises what Bailyn and Harrington (2004) refers to as the "dual agenda" of improving gender equity and gender related organisational problems while simultaneously meeting the immediate and practical needs of organisational outcomes. This agenda has also been presented as 'the business case' for managing diversity (See Lorbiecki and Jack 2000). Arguments for the business case have included promoting diversity in decision making and creativity and even the

humanising of upper levels of management and the boardroom (Bilimoria 2000, Schartz 1990, Tanton 1994). Valuing and fostering the innate characteristics of women and minority groups therefore becomes a business imperative. In this paper we focus on recent work in the management literature which examines 'wisdom' as an important component of management and leadership in organisational life (McKenna and Rooney, Grint 2007). We argue that care must be taken not to present 'wisdom' as a gender neutral concept and that various feminist approaches provide a valuable lens through which to scrutinize the concept.

Feminist approaches to women in senior management and leadership

In an examination of feminist organisation studies, Calas and Smirchich (2006: 288) argue the key theoretical approaches of liberal, radical and psychoanalytic, carry the fundamental assumption that women's oppression is located in the condition of *women* [emphasis in the original]. Most arguments therefore become centred on issues of 'equality', 'similarity' or 'difference'. Much of the research into women in management and leadership has emerged from liberal feminist approaches. This literature has tended to examine psychological variables and sex/gendered differences in behaviour as illustrated through traditional organisational concepts such as leadership and management (Calas Smirchich 2006: 292). Much of this literature focuses on individualistic "deficit" barrier issues such as lack of mentoring, poor business networks, lack of the required experience for senior positions and inadequate financing (Still and Chia 1995; Still and Soutar 1996).

Gender-cultural feminists also emphasise women's difference. For example, Gilligan's (1982) work argued that women and men have different concepts of justice and morality. Nodding (1984) emphasized a feminine ethics of care as not just different from but better than a masculine ethics of justice (Calas and Smirchich 2006: 297-298). Subsequently women's difference and 'feminine qualities' have been featured in the women in management literature as 'special' and "value adding" within an organisational context. This work can be found in various examinations of women in leadership which have demonstrated that women leaders

bring a more relational, interactive and participative style to leadership and management (Marshall 1984, Rosner 1990). For example, Fondas (1997) provides an insightful analysis of mainstream management textbooks that promote the new work modalities required for an increasingly competitive world and that call for leaders and managers who can “reorient themselves toward a new role of coordinating, facilitating, coaching, supporting, and nurturing their employees” (258-259). She argues that new schools of management thought indeed redefined management work with characteristics traditionally defined as feminine in our culture while failing to name these as such (274)

Deeper examination of promoting “female” qualities brings numerous dangers. First, popular and academic work that promotes the value of these “female” qualities rarely notes the hierarchical status that exists within organizations and the boardroom. As Fondas (1997: 268) points out, contemporary organizations have produced layers of hierarchy where top layers of management and chairs in the boardroom are reached by competitive people who aspire to positions of power generally associated with men. Gant (1988: 59) draws on Jane Baker Miller’s (1976) work *Towards a new Psychology of Women* to demonstrate the complex and paradoxical nature of ascribing male/female quality or characteristics. Grant (1988: 59) points out that although biology has played a part, it is mostly women’s experience in the family, the community (the private sphere) and their place in economic and political structures that have led to the development of ‘feminine’ qualities. Over two decades ago she noted that “the very qualities that are elucidated are those that are least important for success as it is currently defined in such organizations” (Gant 1988:63).

The second danger in the promotion of ‘women’s special qualities also stems from the proposition that these valuable ‘female’ qualities emanate from and are still highly associated with the private sphere and relates to women’s caring role. This literature often calls on women to make a judgment which is both rational and value laden (that is balance the rational economic necessity of paid employment with the values of neutering and caring). This is exemplified by Hakim’s (1995, 2000 and 2003) “preference theory”, linking rising female employment rates with falling fertility. While acknowledging historical changes in the labour market and tensions in

work and family, Hakim (2003 and 2003) argues that women are heterogeneous in their preferences and priorities vis-à-vis conflict between family and employment and thus engage in a range of labour market choices. Hakim's work shifts the focus from barriers to individual women's logic and lifestyle preferences, shifting the focus from organisations and structural labour market barriers.

Given the focus on knowledge, relational management and leadership in the study of organisations it is not surprising then that "wisdom" has become an emerging topic (McKenna et al 2007; Rooney and McKenna 2007). In this paper we take a proactive stance examining how women as possessing a 'special' way of knowing might be treated within such a stream of management literature.

WISDOM IN MANAGEMENT

For the purposes of this paper wisdom can be defined as moral knowledge applied in a reasoned and true state of capacity within both broad and situated contexts to act with regards to human goods (Aristotle 1998: 1140). In the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle 1967 1024-1027), Aristotle suggests that there are three kinds of knowledge associated with wisdom – episteme (necessary and universal knowledge) techne (technical knowledge – knowledge of procedure) and phronesis (practical wisdom). In this paper we will focus on Phronesis, which is also known as either practical or prudential wisdom. The aim of phronesis is to adjust knowledge to peculiarity of local or situated circumstances. Phronesis is characterized by a perceptiveness with regard to concrete particulars, and is as much a way of knowing as it is a kind of knowledge, which is also embodied and habitualised knowledge (Dunne 1993). Above all, phronesis is considered to be a form of moral knowledge that provides guidance about the particular and the situated when we need to act in a given situation (Gadamer 1994 316-320).

Aristotle however, implied that phronesis is always related to the "good" and is thus divorced from the issue of power. Arguments about the meaning of phronesis also indicated that as a form of moral discretion, prudential wisdom cannot be learned, and that prudential leadership

is not associated with utopian thought (Grint 2007). Statler, Roos and Rooney (2007) also infer that leaders who are deficient in practical wisdom are more likely to succumb to hubris as a leadership style.

This brief overview of practical wisdom points toward several important considerations for how wisdom-based leadership and management practice may benefit or hinder women leaders and managers. As wisdom in management is not explicitly recognised as a gendered process, there is very little critical discussion or analysis within the nascent wisdom in management literature that specifically relates to women, management and leadership. We contend that this omission needs to be addressed by bringing together feminist approaches to female wisdom and discussion about the ‘business case’ for increasing women’s participation and decision-making power and ability within the workplace.

Therefore, we have drawn upon the works of Dorothy Smith and Carole Gillian to assist in illuminating the problems inherent in the gendering of practical wisdom, particularly when there is an accepted hierarchical layering of wisdom within society.

Phronesis and women’s wisdom: the influence of Dorothy Smith and Carol Gilligan

In the works of both Dorothy Smith and Carole Gilligan, we see a gendering of phronesis. In particular, Smith’s recent public work, with a focus on knowledge formation processes, emphasizes strongly the need to exalt the practical form of wisdom that is often an anathema to the rational, “objective” masculinised wisdom that dominates the neo-liberal, corporate world. It has been argued that Smith was the first to critique “objective” social science knowledge and methodologies (Spence, 2002). So, in a sense, Smith is simultaneously critiquing the hierarchical layering of what constitutes wisdom as well as the very process through which knowledge is constructed and disseminated. Smith’s (1987) central concept of bifurcated consciousness illustrates how phronesis is considered a second tier or subordinate form of wisdom, for it the kind of wisdom, according to Smith, at which women excel. Bifurcated consciousness is concerned with the disconnection and contradiction between a woman’s life as a woman, or a woman’s lived experience, and the objective abstracted, theoretical world in which she must

operate as a public person. It assists in illuminating a woman's struggle to negotiate two disparate worlds - dominant knowledge concepts versus lived experience. According to Smith, this struggle represents a unique "standpoint" of women, as the oppressed.

Smith also infers that the alienation that stems from this form of consciousness often leads to a deprivation in the ability to speak publicly. In other words, Smith is suggesting that women still do not have access to the *authority* to speak, which is one of the cornerstones of being considered "wise", at least in the corporatised, global economy. Therefore, Smith exposes the governance of the 'abstract conceptual mode' as stemming not from its location within a specific set of historical, material and social relations...knowledge is practice, both situated, relational, embedded within specific historical material systems of power". In other words, Smith is stating that "true" wisdom comes not from the *local* or situated context, but rather from the *extralocal*, with knowledge emanating from the *local* context considered inferior. Therefore, Smith's work suggests that the subordination of phronesis as a valid kind of wisdom is heavily gendered, and that women's ability to engage in phronesis needs recognition along with other forms of wisdom. Gillian (1982), in her work on gender and moral development, found that men and women use fundamentally different approaches. Like Smith, she documents how theories of moral development have found women in deficit, and have not recognized the possibility that there may be a unique women's approach. According to Gilligan, the male approach, the *justice* orientation, views morality as a question of individuals having certain basic rights. One has to respect the rights of others, and in doing so, morality imposes restrictions on what people do. On the other hand, the female approach to morality, the *responsibility* orientation, involves a responsibility towards others, and an imperative to care for others.

In relation to the paradox of gender and wisdom, both Smith and Gilligan become involved in the same dilemmas. First, both acknowledge and actively promote the possible existence of difference between men and women in relation to wisdom, knowledge construction and dissemination, and moral development. This kind of approach has been very influential in the feminization of management literature, where a woman leader is often scrutinized for her ability to use her special knowledge and power as a woman. Second, both implicitly acknowledge that

women have superior phronesis, a mastery of practical and situated knowledge. This kind of belief has also become extremely popularized, with the emergence of what we call the metaphysical turn in the practice of leadership. Examples of this include the rise of the “wise woman” movement which is heavily steeped within an essentialist notion of female spirituality, wisdom and power. The “divine feminine” is now becoming a popular topic for leadership and management consultants, where women are encouraged to draw upon their inner, essential feminine power to improve their position within the public world (see www.commonboundaries.com and www.emergingleadership.com).

To assist in explaining the absence of women being seen to publicly engage the creation of wisdom, we draw upon the modernist notion of the gendered division between the public and private domain. Until quite recently in history, most women were discouraged and even banned from seeking and developing wisdom through both formal and informal means. Even when women did attend formal institutions, it was not until the 20th century that women formally gained knowledge in co-educational settings. “Wise” women, often wrongly assumed to be pagan priestesses or practitioners of Wicca, were often persecuted and vilified. These women often were keepers of knowledge that was viewed as dangerous to the status quo. Private wisdom was gained through folklore and oral tradition, often metaphysical and spiritual beliefs and practices passed on from mother to daughter (Ford-Grabosky 2002). It is interesting to note that much of what has been written about women and wisdom in recent years has been within the context of spirituality, formal religion and new age beliefs and practices, and not within the context of the public sphere. While women have much greater access to the gaining and expression of public wisdom, many women are still discouraged from exhibiting public wisdom, and their sources of private wisdom are still not fully acknowledged as legitimate.

According to Gilligan (1982), men and women use fundamentally different approaches to moral decision-making. She argues that as the male approach to moral theory is based on the idea that individuals have certain basic rights that one has to respect. By contrast, the women’s approach is based on the notion that people have responsibilities to others, and hence, imposes an imperative to care for others. Gilligan argues that the male approach has been viewed as superior,

as the women's perspective is not taken as seriously, and therefore seen as less intellectually developed. In an organisational sense, to be wise, one had to adhere to the rational, male organisational norm (Acker, 1990).

Smith's (1987, 1990) conceptual framework, which includes notions of extralocal relations of ruling and bifurcated consciousness, is very useful for helping to understand the paradox of gendered wisdom within organisations. Smith's (1990) term "relations of ruling" involves society being divided into the local and the extralocal. While the local domain incorporates the everyday and the mundane aspects of social life, the extralocal domain relates to complex organisations that are organised by rules of impersonality, logic and objectivity. Smith asserts that through the tools of the relations of ruling such as texts, documents and formal processes of the extralocal, lead to a denigration of the everyday or local world. Smith and others (1987) have documented that the local domain and knowledge/wisdom that emanates from this domain is largely the world and work of women.

Discussion

An examination of phronesis through a gendered lens illuminates some answers but also raises many more questions about the paradoxical nature of gender and wisdom within the context of management and leadership. In relation to implications this discussion has for the establishment the business case for more effective gender equity within organisations, we wish to highlight five possible key issues.

First, our discussion of phronesis as being simultaneously an inherently feminine as well as a second tier attribute points towards to the problem of reifying the feminine. For example, women who are recruited into management positions on the basis of their 'practically wise' qualities often find themselves within an organisational culture that rewards epistemic or rational wisdom. Thus, the decision-making abilities of female prudential leaders and managers may be put under greater scrutiny as the culture in which they are situated may not consider them *comprehensively* wise. The very nature of prudentially based decision-making, where there is often no clear and logical outcome, is rarely executed quickly, and not always occurs as a visible process, heightens levels of suspicion about just how "wise" a female prudential leader is.

Second, we believe that there are also implications for what kinds of education, training and mentoring which women both seek out for themselves and what is offered to them at the organisational or industry level. Many current leadership programs for women either focus exclusively on epistemic or prudential wisdom, thus reducing the likelihood of women receiving a more full-bodied and comprehensive grounding in the development of wisdom. Many programs are based on the erroneous notion that all women are naturally good and that men are naturally deficient in the ability to lead prudentially, which often results in neither women nor men developing the self-knowledge they need to improve their managerial and leadership ability.

Third, we also contend that there are consequences for how women view themselves and other women as leaders and decision-makers. If women assume that they and other women will always possess a “special wisdom” this may provide significant challenges for how individual women managers mentor other women, particularly in male-dominated organisation and industries (Roca 2007).

Fourth, there is an implicit inference that women are now too wise to fully engage with the public world, and that they are more likely to make decisions based on a morality steeped in virtues of communal responsibility (Hammer 2002). We suggest that while this perspective has always been applied to women, it is very rarely applied to men. The implication here is that, to fully understand how to engage in practical wisdom, one must be able to step back from the demand of power, prestige and material acquisition, and embrace (if only momentarily) communitarian values and ideas during the decision-making process. We contend that, particularly in relation to the work-life balance literature, there is an implicit assumption that men are almost incapable of successfully engaging in practical wisdom, let alone becoming expert at it. As Hammer (2002) argues, wise people are becoming increasingly difficult to find as “wise” managers, both men and women, choose not to work in a contemporary managerial environment where work-life balance is poor and ethical and moral decision-making is often compromised.

Fifth, we challenge the idea that phronesis should be considered an innately feminine attribute, particularly in relation to the recruitment and selection of women managers (Case and

Gosling 2007). Historically, women were considered “unwise” by either virtue of their biological status, social invisibility or because they were possessors of “womanly” or “special” wisdom, imbued with intuitive ability and connected to an ancient “wise women” tradition (Ford-Grabosky 2002). The implication here is that when women are wise, it is a kind of wisdom that is mostly invisible, for it is concerned with matters of the private rather than the public domain. Thus, the disjuncture between centuries of the wise woman tradition as a hidden and intangible discourse throughout history, and the absence of authentic acknowledgement of wisdom in women in the modern corporation may mean that, in the sense of conventional wisdom, the combination of the terms “wisdom” and “women” are oxymoronic in nature.

In conclusion, the works of Gilligan and Smith outline some of the reasons why there is a constant challenge to women regarding their credibility as creators of wisdom within extralocal domains. The bifurcated nature of most women’s’ lives means that there will always be another domain or realm where women are seen to be truly wise. For women, wisdom should be passed on and applied through the private or local domain, as most societies are still uncomfortable with public displays of power and wisdom by women, There is always a reference back to the private domain with women, as though they could never be considered totally wise in a public context or in a role where they have no men as their superior, or where they receive full and public acknowledgement of their wisdom. We contend that the practice of wisdom is still highly gendered within organizational contexts, and that only a full understanding of the complexity of the paradoxical nature of gendered wisdom will help us address the inequities and asymmetries that stem from this paradox.

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