

Chapter 1

Gender Differences in Relation to Organization Sources of Power: An Exploratory Research of Individuals and Contextual Issues

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ABSTRACT

Women encounter more challenges than men in their attempts to reach top managerial positions. Challenges stem from proscribed social roles, employed life strategies, and/or organizational structures. The same challenges lead men and women to use organizational sources of power differently. This qualitative research examines gender differences in relation to individual and contextual issues. Individuals' issues are education, age, religion, and personal values. Contextual issues are exemplified in national culture and international culture. These issues lead interviewees to view sources of power in organizations differently. Sources of power illustrated in legitimate, reward, coercive, referent, expert, and information power are valued and ranked differently based on gender.

INTRODUCTION

Power plays an important role in organizations. It is argued that the possession of power reflects positively on power holder and the opposite is correct. There are many empirical studies and several theoretical frameworks to study the impact of power on humans in organizations. It is therefore important to study the effect of power – more specifically the sources of power – on individuals. The research focuses on employing sources of power by women. However it varies from earlier researches in relation to two

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factors. Firstly, it attempts to rank sources of power based on gender. Secondly, it examines the impacts of certain individuals and contextual issues on the use of power based on gender. The research starts by providing a definition of power in general and in organizations in specific. Then the research reviews the six different sources of power, namely: legitimate, reward, coercive, expert, referent, and information. It addresses literature concerning women in management and their utilization of the sources of power. Gender differences related to individuals and their unique contextual issues are presented in the section followed. The methodology employed and the research findings are explained then. Finally, the research identifies areas for future studies.

POWER DEFINITION

Power, as Hall (1999) states, can be simply defined in terms of relationships. This is common among all definitions of power referring to interpersonal source or power (Moorhead and Giffin, 2014; Hellriegel, Solocum and Woodman, 1989). McEachern (1984), however, explains that according to various dictionaries influence, authority and power are defined in terms of one another. McEachern (1984, p. 95) states that “influence is the power to sway or affect, power is the ability to exercise control or authority, and authority is the power to command”. He adds that the three terms are positive and negative based on many factors such as situations, individuals and purpose of using power. This may explain the reason behind conformity in relation to definitions of power as Heresy and Blanchard (1982) state. A widely accepted definition of power is “the capacity to produce intended effects, and in particular, the ability to influence the behavior of another person” (Dunbar and Burgoon, 2005, p. 208). In a more simple definition, power is the ability to influence others (Dahi, 1957; Etzioni, 1961; Fiol, O’Connor, and Aguinis, 2001; Nelson and Quick, 2012). Naim (2013) defines power as “power is the ability to direct or prevent the current or future actions of other groups or individuals” (p. 16). This to refer to shaping and shape others’ behavior.

Power is embedded in the organization processes (Haugaard and Clegg, 2012; McClelland and Burnham, 2003). Pfeffer (1993) believes that power is required to get things done; therefore, managers seek and use power to attain organizational goals (Lunenburg 2012). Katz (1998) asserts that one way to view power is from a system or structure perspective. This perspective, she suggests, exists as a mechanism to influence and control behavior to achieve goals such as increase employee productivity. The second perspective is highlighted by Lawrence and Robinson (2007, p. 389) in which “organizational power reflects actions of any individual or organizational system that controls the behavior or beliefs of an organizational member”. Rags and Sundstrom (1989, p. 51) define power as “a property of the individual, of the interpersonal relationship, or of the structure of an organization.” There are two approaches, Harriman expounds (1985), but not mutually exclusive to understand power in organizations. The first approach relies on interpersonal sources of power and the second stems from structural power. Interpersonal power is defined in terms of one’s ability to influence others (Griffin & Moorhead 2014)

This research attempts to understand gender differences in relation to interpersonal sources of power. For this, literature elaboration on interpersonal sources of power is scrutinized.

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