

Toxic Dynamics Between Men and Women in the Workforce

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As society progresses, we find ourselves in the continuation of the equal rights movement meant to minimize the gender and racial equality gap. However, we have entered a transition period where people have started to become complacent with the changes already made in society even though they do not reflect true equality. Often the phrase “but things are so much better than they used to be” is thrown around in conversations about gender and race in the work force. Recently, a professor of mine asked the class about female experiences in the workplace and when a student answered that things were still obviously unequal and unfair, he replied with the previously mentioned phrase. I believe that when people utter that phrase, there is an implied “So you should just be grateful for the strides already made and leave it at that.” This mindset is detrimental to have, especially when women are facing huge challenges in the workforce that hinder their success. While initially conducting my ethnographic research, I saw a particular interaction in Schine that piqued my interest. A black, female commercial worker was reprimanding an Indian, male work-study student about the quality of his work. The conversation suggested that he often slacks off during closing and frequently questions her authority. The female worker had to raise her voice and demand his respect and cooperation. At the time, I couldn’t help but think this situation would have played out differently if the student had been given instruction by another male. After witnessing this, I couldn’t stop thinking of the sheer injustice of this woman’s situation. Imagine working at a job for 15+ years, only to be treated like a joke by a 20- something year old child who just started working this semester. I cannot

tolerate this kind of culture that the U.S has allowed to flourish, and it makes it all the worse to hear males and older people talk about “how far we’ve come.” Women in positions of power of any kind are forced to prove themselves every minute of the day, just to receive the same amount of respect their male counterparts effortlessly gain. Based on the strong feelings that the mentioned encounter evoked, I figured my interview project would be best devoted to this subject. In addition to the interest caused by my observation during my ethnographic research, I was also interested as someone who has worked in food services my entire three years at Syracuse University. I didn’t merely jump to generalizations when I saw this troubling interaction, I have witnessed similar behaviors in every job location that I have worked at on campus which includes multiple different cafes, Schine, and Goldstein Student Center. I decided to formally conduct research examining the experiences of female, student supervisors at Syracuse University. After analyzing three carefully conducted in-depth interviews, I confirmed many themes showing that female student supervisors do experience sexism by means of demeaning behaviors and refusal to follow orders from their male co-workers and staff.

I chose in-depth analysis as my method for research because what I really wanted was to receive a narrative from my subjects that would reveal their work experiences without too much direct questioning. I believe that the best way to receive information about daily happenings is to just ask for the general story. People tend to give greater detail to events that are related to strong emotions. After reading the article “When Gender is not Enough” by Catherine Reissman, I concluded that I would gather more useful information from a more episodic narrative. I liked the idea of the women naturally telling their story and letting their inflection and behaviors highlight the notable experiences. When planning out my questions, I attempted to make them more open-ended, with the intention to coax out longer, emotion-driven stories instead of clinical

answers to a straight-forward question. The weakness in this method came from personal error more than inherent methodology issues. My questions, although mostly open-ended were not always as good as coaxing out long, thought-out answers. The beginning of all my interviews were a little curt and not as soothing as I had hoped they should be. Additionally, there is always the matter of reliability of the description of events when they are coming from a single person. Gaining entrance and finding participants was easy, given my employee status and the connections I've made at work. When thinking about which paths I wanted to take with my questions, I used my prior knowledge of the settings to bring up subjects and events that were common and would likely trigger a reaction from my interviewee. I had less ethical reservations during this project because the interviews were conducted with the permission of the subject and names were omitted to retain anonymity. However, during one interview, I had an ethical dilemma due to the fact that it was conducted at the end of the work day while on the clock. Because of timing considerations, the interview could not be conducted at any other time. I became slightly concerned about professional interview procedures when we began discussing the behaviors of one of the workers who was closing in the other room. To ease my worries, I shifted our interview further away from the kitchen to lower the chance of unintended audiences. I conducted three interviews with supervisors from various backgrounds. One 20-year-old mixed (black and white) female, a black, 20-year-old female, and a white, 19-year-old female. They all worked in different locations, so I was able to gather data over a larger range of people. Two of the interviewees are close friends of mine and I had sometimes heard stories about their days at work, so I knew they would have valuable information to share for my project. My last interviewee is my student supervisor at my current job, so we have also established a relationship that made us comfortable with each other. All my subjects were willing to be interviewed

without any prodding on my part. I was really pleased to note that they all had different racial backgrounds because it might allow for some underlying factors that explain behaviors toward them. Although I was pleased with my demographics, I had not intentionally sought out these people with race in mind. My project is intended to focus on their identity as women in these situations

The first theme I noticed from my interviews was the demeaning behaviors demonstrated by men toward their female supervisors. All my subjects reported, at some time, instances of general male employees treating them as if they were peers or even sometimes subordinates:

“In the beginning the men didn’t want to listen to me and they tried to act like my co-supervisor and dictate tasks to me. “(XM, transcript 1, 11.12.18)

“I think a lot of the work study students that are men kind of see it as a joke - especially when I’m younger than a lot of people who are working there- they kinda see me as another employee or that I don’t have any authority, or I haven’t worked for the position that I’m in.” (SM, transcript 2, 11.29.18)

I believe this can be contributed to man’s learned inability to recognize a woman as their superior without excessive proof. In the workforce, it is rarely assumed that the woman in the room is the one in charge. I would be remiss however, if I did not take into consideration the cultural differences that contribute to this behavior. The Syracuse work-study program is largely comprised of Indian males completing their master’s degree. These students are not Indian-American, and they might still be carrying the conditioning of their country regarding treatment of women in the workforce. India is still very much male dominated and though that is not an excuse, it does give helpful background information. In both cases, the supervisors reported a

change in behavior after a few weeks of managing. To gain the respect of their subordinates, the supervisors had to change their managing styles to be more assertive and demanding. This is a good skill to have learned and I believe it is necessary in all situations with new management regardless of gender disparities. Nonetheless, the constant questioning of authority is detrimental to a healthy atmosphere in a work environment.

My second finding is that there exists a reluctance to follow orders given by a female supervisor. It borders on being an active resistance to tasks delegated to them by said female. The students are recorded as needing to be prompted multiple times and even the male supervisors have fallen in this category. There seemed to be a strange paradox of the male supervisors simultaneously not respecting their counterparts' decisions but also relying on them to take the brunt of the duties. In both accounts from the two women of color, their counterpart has continually relied on them to carry both of their weights in closing shifts and to step up when it comes to interacting with other general employees of color.

“Whenever they’re [the black employees] not working or they do something wrong, he’ll come to me and say he doesn’t want to get yelled at. So, I’m the one dealing with that.” (XM, transcript 1, 11.12.18)

This type of dependence is often seen in the workforce, where men will claim that a female employee is a “lifesaver” or that “___ does all the work around here.” Someone once said that if you ever describe your female employees like that, they’re not getting paid enough to do their job and pick up the slack on everyone else’s.

From my research I can conclude that societies across the world have conditioned the masses into the assumption of male dominance in the workforce. Even though we are on our way to equality, it will take a long time for the subconscious generalizations to fade away. Being a

woman with power is difficult because it forces them to be challenged daily about their decisions and their qualifications. Learning how to defend your position is a great skill, but it shouldn't need to be constantly revisited. Sometimes these sexist behaviors are unintentional, but as they continue to occur in high frequency, they cause strains on the dynamic between men and women in the workforce. If I were to continue my research, I would conduct a few interviews with male supervisors and attempt to find experiences not involving Indian men. During this project, I only got one collective narrative and I understand that It would be unfair to consider all these themes true and accurate without sufficient data from other perspectives. This topic is very important because the way we handle inequalities in the workforce determines the future of society. Forcing men to recognize their sexism and bias is the most useful and impactful way to get their behaviors to change.