Red Light, Green Light: Making Sense of the Organizational Context for Issue Selling

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the contextual cues female managers attend to when considering raising gender-equity issues at work. Study 1 provides a qualitative look at the range of cues indicating context favorability, including demographic patterns, top-management qualities, and cultural exclusivity. Study 2 experimentally manipulates these cues and reveals that the exclusiveness of organizational culture is the most potent cue affecting willingness to sell a gender-equity issue. A discussion of mediators sheds lights on why cultural exclusivity affects issue selling.

(*Issue Selling; Contextual Sensemaking; Gender Equity; Culture; Demography; Top Management Openness*)

In the children's game "Red Light, Green Light," someone gives a set of eager competitors clear green or red signals that indicate when it is safe and appropriate to move and when to stay still. In the real-world game played inside many organizations, signals about whether it is advantageous to take discretionary action are often not clearly available and are frequently difficult to interpret (Weick 1995). Managers often "read" these signals and decide if and when to act: when to push for a change (Howell and Higgins 1990), raise a new idea (Weiss 1989), seek help or feedback (Ashford 1986), blow the whistle (Miceli and Near 1992), or sell an issue. This paper focuses on the sensemaking required for one type of discretionary action: issue selling. Issue selling is the voluntary, discretionary behaviors organizational members use to influence the organizational agenda by getting those above them to pay attention to an issue (Dutton and Ashford 1993). Issue selling is an important form of change instigation (Morrison and Phelps 1999) that enhances an organization's dynamic capability (Floyd and Wooldridge 1999) by influencing what issues are treated as important enough to trigger action.

A primary assumption of our paper is that individuals' discretionary action is often based on contextual sensemaking. A key part of these sensemaking efforts is diagnosing whether or not the context is favorable for taking some type of action. Individuals make a diagnosis by evaluating features of the organizational context as indicative of underlying values. For example, psychologists argue that before individuals decide to act, they make broad-brushed appraisals of how encouraging, benign, or threatening a situation is (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). Also, previous work on issue selling suggests that context favorability is important for explaining issue-related intentions to act (Ashford et al. 1998, Dutton et al. 1997). Thus, we assume that individuals make such appraisals when noticing and using cues to decide whether or not taking action is sensible.

This assumption positions our research as part of a broader body of theory focused on how individuals use sensemaking to navigate organizational contexts. Our work relates to existing research on sensemaking in organizations (e.g., Weick 1995, Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991) and, in particular, sensemaking at the intra-subjective, individual level, where individuals are struggling to diagnose, "What is going on here?" (Drazin et al. 1999). It is also consistent with models of decision making that suggest the importance of sensemaking prior to decision.

Contextual sensemaking involves interpreting contextual cues of varying diagnosticity. Diagnosticity refers to the extent to which a cue gives information about an existing condition that can serve as the basis for a later judgment or decision, and cues are more diagnostic if they are accessible and relevant (Feldman and Lynch 1988). In practice, the use of these cues in interpreting the context

is complex. Organizations contain ambiguous cues about top management's priorities, shared values and norms, and political landmines or opportunities. Managers struggle to decipher the meaning of unexpected events and their implications for individual and organizational action (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991). Newcomers must work even harder to interpret the meaning of cues because they have no history and limited contacts for making sense of the context (Louis 1980). The challenge for all individuals is to evaluate the diagnosticity of organizational cues and infer the desirability of action.

When applied to a specific issue-selling effort, the perception of context favorability serves as a general rubric for assessing whether the effort will be successful and receive support. What cues are diagnostic (e.g., accessible or relevant) depends significantly on the nature of the issue (Dutton and Ashford 1993) and the idiosyncrasies of the context. In this study, we focus on a specific issue (gender-based pay equity) and ask two questions about contextual sensemaking: (1) What cues signal favorability for selling gender-equity issues? and (2) by what process do these cues motivate the selling of gender-equity issues? Gender-equity issues generally refer to the array of concerns about the differential treatment of women and men in work organizations. For example, individuals might have concerns about career opportunities for women in the organization, about inclusion in or exclusion from organizational events, or about how members of their sex are treated in daily activities. While both male and female managers may be aware of and affected by gender-equity issues in their work organizations, the focus of this research is on female managers and their sensemaking about selling gender-equity issues.

Female managers in many organizations face challenges in trying to discern the favorability of the context for selling gender-equity issues. First, they tend to be in lower power positions, which means that they often bear risks in speaking up about potentially important yet value-laden issues. They also have reduced access to and less status for gaining necessary contextual information directly (Fiske and Dépret 1996) and thus may have a less accurate sense of the political landscape and how to acquire and use power (Krackhardt 1990). Given these challenges, understanding how female managers make sense of the cues that signal a favorable or unfavorable context is important. This understanding, in turn, provides insights into why and how various contextual conditions contribute to organizational silence by discouraging underrepresented voices (Morrison and Milliken 2000).

Study 1 is an inductive study that identifies the unfavorable and favorable contextual cues within organizations—"red lights" and "green lights"—that dissuade or encourage women from raising gender-equity issues. Study 2 tests the relative importance of several of these cues in combination and examines how different cues motivate selling through different psychological pathways. The experimental design of Study 2 focuses on the issue of pay inequity as a concrete instance of gender inequity in the workplace. Together, the studies shed light on the psychological processes that motivate discretionary action (such as issue selling) in organizations.

Our research builds on issue-selling research in three specific ways. At a descriptive level, Study 1 helps to paint a more precise picture of the cues to which female managers attend when diagnosing the favorability of an organizational context. This work extends and complements the empirical work described by Dutton and her colleagues (1997) by focusing on a specific issue and capturing the cues that women notice in a broad spectrum of organizations. Second, Study 2 adds to the accumulating literature on the mediating processes through which contextual cues affect women's willingness to raise gender-equity issues (Ashford et al. 1998). In particular, we assess perceived political support—a more political path than has been considered in previous research—as one means by which context shapes intention to act. Third, while previous work suggests that contextual factors were more important than dispositional factors in predicting willingness to sell gender-equity issues (Ashford et al. 1998), the aspects of the context that mattered were theoretically and not empirically derived. In the present research we do both. We specifically ask women what cues matter for selling this issue (Study 1), and then we theoretically derive three potential processes by which these different cues affect willingness to sell (Study 2).

Study 1

The goal of Study 1 was to identify inductively the negative and positive organizational cues (red and green lights) important to women managers deciding whether to raise gender-equity issues. We coded an open-response survey for general themes and specific cues.

Method

Respondents included all the women Bachelor's and Master's degree graduates of a Midwestern business school. A random selection of 20% of the total population of graduates received an open-ended survey. Two-hundred eighteen surveys were returned completed, resulting in a response rate of 28%. Of the 218 respondents, 90% were white, 3% African-American, 4% Asian, 0.5% Hispanic, and 0.5% other. Their average years of full-time work experience was 11.5 years, their average job

tenure was 3.2 years, and they had been out of the business school for an average of 9.7 years (s.d., 7.8 years). The respondents worked in a broad range of industries.

Procedure

We mailed our sample a short, open-ended survey designed to capture: (1) descriptive accounts of the ways gender-equity issues manifested themselves (if at all) in their work organizations, (2) the perceived consequences associated with raising gender-equity issues in their workplace, and (3) the aspects of workplace environment that were favorable or unfavorable to raising these issues. We described gender-equity issues by using a case description developed by Reardon (1993) and used by Ashford et al. (1998). We asked two questions: "What factors make the environment within your organization favorable (unfavorable) for selling this issue?" We defined selling as explicit attempts to bring the issue to the attention of those who must be involved to get action on the issue. We defined success as getting critical decision-makers to invest time and attention in the issue.

We used standard qualitative coding practice (Miles and Huberman 1984) to build inductive categories. We generated an exhaustive list of all contextual cues mentioned by respondents and clustered them into themes. We coded each phrase for the different cues mentioned, then tallied and put them into categories. Cues only qualified for themes if at least 3% of responding managers mentioned it in their open-ended responses. Two researchers coded the open-ended questions and achieved an 87% agreement rate on category coding for each cue.

Results

Table 1 summarizes the categories of the most frequently mentioned contextual cues. Most important to our formulation of Study 2 are the findings that respondents identified demographic patterns, perceived qualities of top management, and perceived qualities of the organization's culture most often as favorable and unfavorable cues. Often, there was overlap between and red lights (unfavorable cues) and green lights (favorable cues). We briefly discuss some of the findings for each of these areas below.

Demographic Patterns. Thirty percent of the women responding to the survey mentioned a demographic feature as an unfavorable contextual cue or red light. Women singled out the numerical distributions of men and women at the top as particularly informative. Respondents described this feature either in terms of "few or no women at the top" or by noting the dominant presence of senior men. Beyond numerical presence at the top, female managers considered the relative presence of men in the

Table 1   Red Lights and Green Lights: Unfavorable and Favorable Contextual Cues for Selling Gender-Equity Issues[a]

	Number of Mentions per Category
"Red Lights"	
Demographic Patterns	65
Qualities of the Culture	44
Qualities of Top Management	27
Negative Consequences for Issue Sellers	27
Limited Attentional Capacity of Organization	13
"Green Lights"	
Demographic Patterns	67
Qualities of Top Management	52
Organizational Goals	20
Voice Mechanisms	16
Existence of Supportive Structures	15
Position or Reputation of Issue Seller	12
Small Organizational Size	9
Desire Positive Organizational Reputation	9
Regulatory Compliance and Litigation Fears	9
Qualities of the Culture	8
Industry-Level Characteristics	8

[a] The category totals reflect the number of unique respondents who mentioned each cue.

total organization as an unfavorable cue. We called this feature "male dominated," reflecting the way that respondents described the presence of high proportions of men across the breadth of an organization.

Thirty percent of the sample also mentioned demographic features of their organization as diagnostic of a context's favorability or as a green light. Favorable demographic composition cues included the number and location of female managers in the firm, the prominence and location of male managers characterized as open, age distributions of organizational members, and changes in patterns of demographic composition. Female managers attended not only to how many women were present, but also to where women were located in the organization. Respondents identified female presence as a favorable cue in the following ways: "Our CEO is a woman, and she is very good and respected," or "There is a handful of women in upper management (approximately 3% at the director level and above)." Respondents also noted that having women in middle management was a meaningful favorable contextual cue (e.g., "Most of middle management is women.").

Qualities of Top Management. Beyond demographics, respondents also noted top management's attitudes as di-

agnostic. The most important qualities were top management's level of awareness of, understanding of, and openness to the gender-equity issue, their level of bias against women, and their accessibility or approachability. Twenty-seven different women mentioned these features of top management as red lights, often singling out top management's lack of understanding or awareness as the primary unfavorable contextual cue. Sometimes respondents attributed this lack of understanding to a top manager's age or marital status (e.g., older men and men married to stay-at-home wives were thought to be less understanding). Other times, they did not explain the cause of the unawareness or lack of understanding, but the impression was firmly stated. "There is a lack of understanding or empathy by people at the top who most influence corporate culture and action." Respondents singled out supportive versions of these top-management qualities as positive cues. In fact, many more women mentioned top management features as positive (52) than as negative signals (27). In particular, respondents identified top management's openness, accessibility, and awareness as meaningful signs that the context was favorable, most often mentioning the openness of their attitudes (e.g., "Selective individuals (men) with influence appear open to women in executive positions.").

Qualities of the Organizational Culture. Respondents often described an unfavorable culture as a "men's club," an "old boys' environment," or an "old boys' network." Respondents mentioned this feature directly in some cases (e.g., "The good old boys' network is really secure here.") and in other cases more indirectly (e.g., "Certain men stick together and create uncomfortable situations, our engineering department in particular."). Respondents often explained that this feature meant a perceived lack of sensitivity to gender-equity issues, making the selling of gender-equity issues more difficult. Another unfavorable cultural feature involved the culture's conservatism, traditionalism, or paternalism. This feature is very similar in spirit to the old boys' environment. However, conservatism most often referred to qualities of the organization's values and beliefs, while the clubbiness feature referred more often to the perceived ties that existed between men in the firm that made it more difficult for women to raise gender-equity issues.

In contrast to negative cultural cues, respondents rarely mentioned aspects of the organization's culture as signals of context favorability. In fact, respondents mentioned just one characteristic frequently enough to warrant its inclusion as a green light. This feature was the sense of general cultural awareness of issues concerning women in the organization.

Discussion

The results of Study 1 indicate that women identify a wide range of positive and negative cues as informative for diagnosing whether a context is favorable for selling gender-equity issues. Some cues appear to be more diagnostic than others, judging from the frequency with which they were mentioned.

Specifically, demographic patterns, qualities of top management, and qualities of the organizational culture may be particularly accessible to these respondents and relevant for this issue. For example, the number of women in top positions might signal to a woman who is considering raising a gender-equity issue that women are valued in that context. The perception that women are valued is relevant to this issue. In addition, demographic proportions are cognitively accessible because their physical presence is hard to miss. Second, top management openness to gender-equity issues is relevant because these managers are the ultimate arbiters of important issues. Third, an organization's "clubbiness"—the exclusiveness or inclusiveness of its dominant group—is very accessible because it pervades the day-to-day work environment. Moreover, this feature is relevant to gender-equity issues because clubbiness excludes and devalues out-group members, in this case, women. Even though each of these cues have features that are diagnostic for deciding whether to raise gender-equity issues, some may be more diagnostic than others. Study 2 explores the diagnosticity of these three contextual features.

Hypotheses for Study 2

We conducted Study 2 for three reasons. First, though Study 1 uncovered the range of cues that stimulate or deter the discretionary act of issue selling, the process by which these contextual features affect motivation to act was unclear. Theories of motivation and issue selling suggest that perceptual and psychological processes are involved. Second, while past research has examined the effects of contextual features on the willingness to sell issues, it has not taken into account differences in the salience of the various cues that may account for past findings. For example, if culture is a particularly salient cue in certain organizations, it may be rated as more important. Third, the cues identified as diagnostic in Study 1 were mentioned as if they operated independently. Lost in this portrayal is any sense of how these cues might interact to affect motivation to raise this issue. Therefore, we conducted Study 2 to test theoretically derived hypotheses about the processes by which contextual cues affect willingness to sell issues, test cues under conditions of equal cue salience, and explore the interactions among cues. (See Figure 1 for our theoretical model.)

Figure 1   Model of Contextual Cues and Mediators Affecting Willingness to Sell Gender-Equity Issues
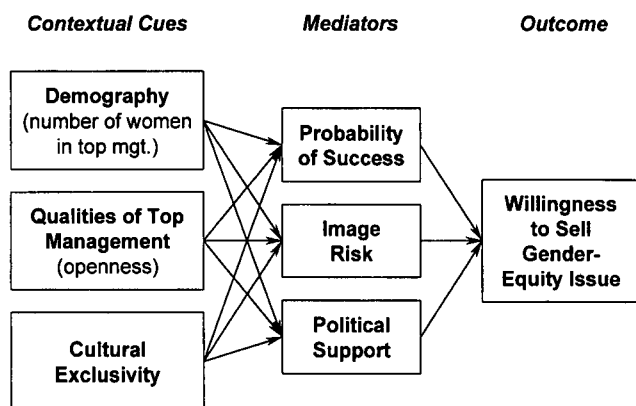
While the managers in Study 1 identified a wide range of cues that might affect their issue selling, we focused on three contextual cues that were most salient for these managers (as indicated by frequency of mention): demography, openness of top management, and the exclusiveness of the company culture. The rationale for choosing these three contextual cues was empirical, but also theoretical. We describe the theoretical rationales for each below.

Main Effects of Contextual Cues on Willingness to Sell a Gender-Equity Issue

Demography. Respondents in Study 1 singled out demographic cues as both red and green lights, making them dominant cues in assessing context favorability. These findings support theoretical arguments that individuals use demographic distributions to diagnose social values and what is important in a context (Lawrence 1997). Empirical research shows that demographic characteristics carry meaning to the degree that they act as proxies for less available information. For example, research has shown that age distributions signal how an organization is likely to evaluate an individual's performance (Lawrence 1988) and that gender distributions at senior levels influence the collegiality of women's relationships at lower levels (Ely 1994). Together, these results suggest that demographic distributions may be informative cues in women's decisions to take discretionary action on an issue.

While study respondents did not always explain why the presence of women at the top was a positive cue, several studies offer explanations. Kanter's (1977) work suggests that when any group is represented in small proportions, their presence and behaviors will be salient. Research also shows that when more women are represented

at the top levels of an organization, junior women experience greater in-group identification (Ely 1994). In general, when an individual sees that there are others "like me" in the organizational hierarchy, he or she may conclude that they will share his or her values and agenda, or at least be sympathetic to them (Bryne et al. 1966). When there is greater identification as a member of the social group "women," individuals may be more likely to advocate for this social group by raising gender-equity issues (Harquail 1996).

HYPOTHESIS 1. *The greater the perceived presence of women at top levels of management, the more willing a woman will be to sell a gender-equity issue.*

Top Management. Respondents in Study 1 identified the openness and awareness of top management as a green light; they also identified unawareness or lack of understanding of gender-equity issues as an analogous red light. These findings echo prior research that top management's willingness to listen was a key dimension of context favorability for issue selling (Dutton et al. 1997). Following Turner's (1971) observation, top managers' behaviors are routinely mined for meaning. When top management appears willing to listen to sensitive issues, employees may infer that the organization cares about its employees' concerns (Whitener et al. 1998). In addition, given that managers face numerous time demands, indicators that management wants to hear from employees may signal that employees' opinions are a priority. In contrast, a sense that management is closed to hearing sensitive issues intensifies the challenge of proving that the issue is worthy of managerial attention. Thus, top managers who appear open to hearing issues may signal to their employees that the context is favorable for selling a gender-equity issue.

Others have found that employees were more likely to undertake change initiatives when they perceived that top management was open to employee suggestions and employee-initiated change (Morrison and Phelps 1999). Thus, signals that top management is open to and aware of sensitive issues may help to encourage women to raise equity-related concerns.

HYPOTHESIS 2. *The more top management is perceived as open to sensitive issues, the more willing a woman will be to sell a gender-equity issue.*

Cultural Exclusivity. Cultural exclusivity refers to the degree to which individuals believe that they are excluded from interacting with a dominant in-group (in this case, men). In Study 1, respondents saw the "clubbiness" of the culture as a red light. This cue could indicate that the

company has an implicit tradition of supporting the careers and interests of men over women and excluding women from important organizational networks and events. In such a culture, women attempting to sell a gender-equity issue may run the risk of being ridiculed, ignored, ostracized, or denied access.

Past research shows that the degree to which individuals feel they are part of the group can influence their interaction patterns and behavior. For example, collectivist cultures emphasizing group commonalities, interests, and objectives promote increased social interaction between group members and thereby make demographic attributes less salient (Chatman et al. 1998). This finding suggests that inclusive cultures might allow members, regardless of their differences, to learn group values, norms, rules, and appropriate behavior through their interactions with the group. This knowledge can be invaluable for raising risky issues. This finding is also supported by theoretical work in the social interactionist perspective (e.g., Koene et al. 1997). Martin and Meyerson's (1998) argument that women can become "outsiders" in a supposedly "gender-neutral" context that privileges masculine behavior suggests the importance of the cultural exclusivity variable for the gender-equity issue and the all-female sample used in this study. Taken together, past research suggests that those who are excluded from interacting with dominant group members are less likely to be privy to tacit organizational values and norms for how to raise issues and will, therefore, be less likely to raise gender-equity issues.

Research on in-groups has shown that, even when group membership is arbitrary, individuals will favor the members of their group in competitive or discriminatory ways and, when threatened, will attempt to maintain or justify the status quo (Tajfel and Turner 1986). Moreover, when resources are scarce, groups are likely to guard privilege even more closely (Brewer and Brown 1998). These processes are at the core of an exclusive organizational culture. In a clubby or exclusive culture, individuals who are different from the dominant in-group may risk being further excluded if they challenge the status quo. In addition, if a woman were to raise gender-equity issues in a culture that supports rigid gender boundaries, others may interpret her behavior as typical of "all women." Consequently, a woman may fear taking an action that promotes negative stereotypes of her group (Steele 1997). In contrast, an inclusive culture might be seen as minimizing the risk of stigmatization because women would be as much a part of the "in-group" as anyone else in the organization. In this culture, her issue may be seen as important to the organization as a whole because the members will identify the issue as a concern

for members of the broad "group." As a result, others may be more likely to support an individual's efforts to gain attention for an issue. Thus, cultural exclusivity has consequences for women's ability and inclination to raise gender-equity issues.

HYPOTHESIS 3. *The more exclusive and "clubby" the company culture is perceived to be, the less willing a woman will be to sell a gender-equity issue.*

Mediators

We propose that these contextual signals prompt three evaluative perceptions that mediate an individual's willingness to sell this issue: probability of success, image risk, and political support. Probability of success is a simple assessment of the likelihood that an issue can be raised successfully in the organization. Image risk is the degree to which an individual expects that "others will form an undesirable impression of them because of their actions" (Ashford et al. 1998, p. 27). We define political support as the presence of allies who actively support or help the efforts of an actor (in this case, the issue seller). We propose that the mediation works as follows: When the contextual cues are more positive, women should perceive the probability of selling success as greater, image risk as lower, and political support as greater, and therefore have an increased willingness to raise a gender-equity issue.

Probability of Success. Expectancy theories of motivation suggest that willingness to sell an issue will be positively related to the perceived likelihood of successfully gaining attention. Where probability of selling success is low, female managers may be less likely to put effort into selling the issue. The features of top management and culture that respondents referenced in Study 1 may have been diagnostic of a favorable environment because they allowed respondents to assess the probability of success if they were to sell this issue. The cues allow these female managers to form opinions about the values and attitudes of the people at the top. If these opinions lead them to believe that getting a hearing for their issue is more likely, then a motivation for action is created. In other words, when managers believe that their efforts can create change, they are more likely to take actions to remove inequality (Martin et al. 1984). Thus, women managers may look for signals from management and from the culture to evaluate their probability of success before deciding to take action.

HYPOTHESIS 4. *Perceived probability of success mediates the relationship between the perceived presence of women at top levels of management (4a), the perception that top management is open to sensitive issues (4b), the*

perceived exclusivity of the culture (4c), and the outcome of willingness to sell a gender-equity issue.

Image Risk. When respondents in Study 1 mentioned unfavorable cues (e.g., top management's lack of understanding or a clubby culture), their explanations often suggested that conditions made the personal risk of raising the issue greater, possibly doing damage to a seller's image in the organization. Image risk could result from labeling, inappropriate attributions, and stereotypes. Raising gender-equity issues could prompt organizational members to label a female manager a "feminist" or as someone only interested in personal gain. Management that does not recognize an inequitable situation may commit a "fundamental attribution error," attributing her actions to stable dispositions rather than to the situation (Jones and Nisbett 1972). This tendency may be even stronger when demographic proportions indicate there are few women at the top. Furthermore, although some women may consider their female identity as positive, they may be aware that others have stereotypical views of women and their performance, and the fear of unintentionally confirming others' worst expectations can be paralyzing and inhibit performance (Steele 1997). In addition, where issue sellers are already in a lower power position and vulnerable to others' judgments, exclusion from privileged groups, unjustified attributions, and stereotype threat represent substantial risks to image, and to job security (Morrison et al. 1987).

HYPOTHESIS 5. *Perceived image risk mediates the relationship between the perceived presence of women at top levels of management (5a), the perception that top management is open to sensitive issues (5b), the perceived exclusivity of the culture (5c), and the outcome of willingness to sell a gender-equity issue*

Political Support. Demography can be informative for women managers because they may assume that women will be open to a gender-equity issue and provide support for it. Similarity-attraction processes (Bryne et al. 1966) suggest that lower-level women may believe that women at the top will be "like me," generalizing their own level of comfort about gender-equity issues to the comfort level of top-level women. Potential sellers may also project assumptions about the centrality of the social identity group "women" to these upper-level women. If they believe that this identity is central for these women, then they may infer a positive response to the issue. Thus, the significant presence of women suggests that the sellers may be able to expect a certain degree of support when raising an issue.

The importance of perceived political support to motivating action is also evident in the social movement literature. Social movement theory suggests that a broad range of support is necessary for change efforts to be effective and that these supporters need to be motivated for reasons other than profit or money (Zald and Berger 1978). Not only can the presence of women in top management be a signal of potential support, but the behavior of top management may also signal the potential for political support in the context. For example, management that is committed to hearing sensitive issues may indicate that they are motivated to identify necessary changes for the organization. In contrast, coworkers who are exclusive might be perceived as offering little political support for an issue-selling attempt because they are not oriented toward supporting other organizational members in their daily interactions. Such impressions of top management or the culture may lead issue sellers to conclude that the context is favorable or unfavorable for selling gender-equity issues.

HYPOTHESIS 6. *Perceived political support mediates the relationship between the perceived presence of women at top levels of management (6a), the perception that top management is open to sensitive issues (6b), the perceived exclusivity of the culture (6c), and the outcome of willingness to sell a gender-equity issue.*

Method

Sample
We mailed a questionnaire to 960 members of a national membership organization for women in business, asking them to participate in a study assessing what factors influence women to raise gender-equity issues. Thirty-three percent returned the survey in a usable form. An additional 23 surveys were unusable; they were either incomplete or respondents responded that the survey was irrelevant to their work situation. All of the respondents had previously self-described their career category as "Management." None of the respondents owned their own businesses at the time of the survey.

Of the 317 women who participated in the study, 92.1% were white, 3.2% African-American, 1.6% Native-American, 0.9% Mexican-American/Chicana, and 1.3% other. Respondents' ages ranged from 23–83, with an average age of 49 (mean and median). The mean level of full-time education beyond high school was 3.6 years and of full-time work experience was 25 years. Eighty-eight percent of the respondents were salaried; the remaining were in hourly or commission-based employment.

Questionnaire

Scenario Development. This study employed eight scenarios in an experimental 2x2x2 between-subjects design that examined the main effects and interactions of three contextual variables and the likely mediators of the subjects' responses (see Figure 1). We developed a generic scenario that described a hypothetical company and the respondent's role in that company. The three contextual features of the company's situation were manipulated in eight experimental conditions. To control for order effects, we counterbalanced the three manipulations for each of the 6 possible sequences, generating 48 different surveys representing the 8 conditions. We selected pay equity as the issue to be sold because it is a serious and well-documented issue in a variety of organizations (U.S. General Accounting Office et al. 2002). (A sample scenario and the wording for the manipulation of the cues is available from the authors by request.) The three cues we manipulated were the prevalence of women at the top three levels of the organization (demographic cue), the openness of top management to sensitive issues (openness cue), and the exclusivity and "clubbiness" of the company (cultural exclusivity cue). We defined the term "clubby" in the scenario as the degree of interaction between individuals, thereby indicating an inclusive or exclusive tone. Because any person deciding whether to raise an issue must decipher the relevant cues within an organizational context, we interspersed irrelevant "facts" about the organization's structure, history, and management responsibilities with the experimental manipulations of the scenario. To make the situation plausible, we wanted to give the survey respondent a "role" that would place her in a position of authority, but not with so much authority that her initiatives would be accepted automatically. In addition, to reduce the likelihood that issue selling would be perceived as self-interested behavior, we indicated that the respondent was not concerned about her own salary but was concerned that other inequities would cause problems of turnover and recruitment for the company. We pretested the scenario and survey twice with two samples of women (59 total) to develop a scenario that was sufficiently realistic. Pretesting also ensured that our manipulations of the contextual features were effective and confirmed that the items used for the dependent variable and mediator scales assessed distinct constructs.

Survey Scales. To measure willingness to sell the issue, probability of success, and image risk, we used validated measures from previous studies (Ashford et al. 1998). These measures use seven-point, Likert-type survey questions. The coefficient alphas suggest adequate reliability

for all scales. As described earlier, willingness to sell assesses the degree to which an individual is willing to influence the organizational agenda by getting those above them to pay attention to an issue (Cronbach's alpha = 0.94). Probability of success is an assessment of the likelihood that an issue can be raised successfully in the organization (Cronbach's alpha = 0.94). Image risk is the degree to which an individual expects that "others will form an undesirable impression of them because of their actions" (Cronbach's alpha = 0.89) (Ashford et al. 1998, p. 27). We were also interested in measuring the respondent's perceived degree of political support in the organization, so we designed and tested three scale items to match our definition of political support. We define political support as the presence of allies who actively support or help the efforts of the issue seller (Cronbach's alpha = 0.88).

We also conducted a principal axis factor analysis using varimax rotation to the items measuring willingness to sell, probability of success, image risk, and political support. Four clear factors with eigenvalues greater than one emerged, accounting for 80.1% of the variance. Inspection of factor loadings showed excellent simple structure, with items loading greater than 0.73 on their primary factor and less than 0.25 on all other factors. The results of the factor analysis corroborate the high internal reliability coefficients of the individual scales.

We also included questions about the realism of the scenario and manipulation checks of the independent variables. All items were counterbalanced within each set of questions representing a particular dependent variable.

Results

Manipulation Checks and Order Effects

We embedded demography, top management openness, and cultural exclusivity as representing positive or negative cues in each of the scenarios. We included three questions to assess whether respondents' perception of the hypothetical organization matched these manipulations (e.g., "How prevalent are women in the top ranks of Stereo Design, Inc.?"; "How open is top management. . .?"; and "How inclusive is the culture. . .?" [reverse-coded]). *T*-tests indicated that there were significant differences in responses on these questions based on scenario content ($t_{313} = -16.70, p < 0.001$ for demography, $t_{313} = -13.36, p < 0.001$ for openness, and $t_{313} = -10.60, p < 0.001$ for culture). These findings gave us confidence that the pattern of responses was based on the manipulated content of the scenarios. Despite the successful manipulations, 17 respondents were excluded

from further analyses because their scores on the manipulation check items showed that the manipulations were not interpreted properly. Respondents were dropped when they responded at the extreme opposite end of the scale from the intended manipulation (e.g., they responded that the top management was not open to sensitive issues [a "1" on the 7-point scale] when the scenario content described them as open). There were no significant differences in responses based on the order of manipulation presented. Following previous scenario research (Fedor et al. 1989), we included a single item to assess the perceived realism of the scenario. We treated this item as a control variable in all analyses to control for methodological influences on the dependent variable (e.g., responses of unwillingness to sell due to the fact that the scenario seems unreasonable given the respondents' personal experience). As Table 2 shows, the mean for scenario realism was 6.06 on 7-point scale, suggesting that respondents saw the scenario as realistic.

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Table 2 presents the means, standard deviations, correlations, and scale reliabilities of the predictor, mediator, dependent, and control variables. Table 3 presents the means, by cell, of the mediating and dependent variables in the eight manipulations. We used the three questions assessing respondents' perceptions of the demography, openness, and cultural exclusivity of the organization (e.g., "How prevalent are women in the top ranks of Stereo Design, Inc.?"; "How open is top management. . .?"; and "How inclusive is the culture. . .?" [reverse-coded]) as the three predictor variables in all regression analyses. We used these perception measures because even though the manipulation check was successful, respondents' responses still ranged across the scale, suggesting that people often do not predictably gauge

cues as strongly as they were intended and that there are individual differences in the perception of contextual cues even when they are held constant. Consequently, we were interested in individuals' perceptions of these aspects to capture the variance in respondents' interpretations of the manipulations.

Regression Analyses Predicting Willingness to Sell

In Hypotheses 1–3 we predicted that demography, top-management openness, and cultural exclusivity would influence willingness to sell a gender-equity issue. Table 4 (Model 1) presents the regression analyses of demography, openness, and cultural exclusivity on willingness to sell. There was a significant main effect for realism ($\beta = 0.19, p < 0.001$) and for cultural exclusivity ($\beta = -0.22, p < 0.001$), such that the more exclusive the culture was perceived to be, the less women were willing to sell a gender-equity issue, confirming Hypothesis 3. There was no support for Hypotheses 1 and 2.

Mediational Analyses

In Hypotheses 4, 5, and 6 we predicted that the perceived probability of success, image risk, and political support would mediate the relationship between the demography, openness, and cultural exclusivity cues and the outcome of willingness to sell. According to Baron and Kenny (1986), to show mediation we must first show that the independent variables predict the dependent variable. As presented above, this was only true for the cultural exclusivity variable. Next, we must show that any significant predictors of the dependent variable (in this case cultural exclusivity) also predict the mediators. Finally, we must show that the effect of the significant predictors on the dependent variable (i.e., cultural exclusivity on willingness to sell) is reduced when the mediators are included in the regression predicting willingness to sell.

Table 2   Descriptive Statistics, Correlations, and Reliabilities of the Predictor, Mediator, Dependent, and Control Variables[a]

Variable	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
(1) Perceived presence of women at top (demography)	3.49	1.79	—							
(2) Perceived openness of top management	3.60	1.79	0.36***	—						
(3) Perceived cultural exclusivity	3.71	1.74	−0.22***	−0.33***	—					
(4) Probability of success	4.12	1.40	0.25***	0.37***	−0.24***	(0.94)				
(5) Image risk	4.03	1.26	−0.12*	−0.14*	0.14*	−0.24***	(0.89)			
(6) Political support	4.95	1.05	0.15**	0.26***	−0.21***	0.44***	−0.30***	(0.88)		
(7) Willingness to sell	5.24	0.96	0.09	0.14*	−0.11†	0.47***	−0.17*	0.33***	(0.94)	
(8) Realism	6.06	1.15	−0.05	−0.11†	0.03	−0.06	−0.02	0.07	0.18**	—

[a]$N = 288$ (with listwise deletion). Scale reliabilities (alphas) are along the diagonal.
†$p < 0.10$; *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.

Table 3   Experimental Conditions and Means of the Mediator and Dependent Variables by Cell[a]

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Sample Size	52	38	37	30	40	33	31	39
Manipulated Cues[b]								
Many women at top	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Top management open to sensitive issues	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
Cultural exclusivity	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mediator and Dependent Variables[c]								
Probability of success	4.76[x]	4.63[x]	4.15	4.16	4.18	3.47[y]	3.54[y]	3.68[y]
Image risk	3.45[x]	4.13	3.81	3.87	4.23	4.42[y]	4.25	4.36[y]
Political support	5.15	5.03	5.05	5.23[x]	5.01	4.89	4.72	4.44[y]
Willingness to sell	5.37	5.45	5.41	5.58[x]	5.38	4.99	4.83[y]	4.87[y]

[a]$N = 300$.

[b]"Yes" denotes that this cell has this manipulation. "No" denotes that the cell has the opposite manipulation.

[c]Means (in the same row) with different superscripts from each other differ significantly at $p < 0.05$. Means with no superscripts do not differ significantly from any other means in that row.

Table 5 presents regression analyses of the mediators (probability of success, image risk, and political support) on the three independent variables (demography, openness, and cultural exclusivity). This table shows that cultural exclusivity was a significant predictor of the probability of success ($\beta = -0.25$, $p < 0.001$), image risk ($\beta = 0.21$, $p < 0.001$), and political support ($\beta = -0.17$, $p < 0.01$), confirming the second condition. In Model 2 of Table 4, we entered the demography, openness, and cultural exclusivity cues together with the mediators—probability of success, image risk, and political support—to predict willingness to sell. In this equation, the effect of cultural exclusivity dropped substantially and was no longer significant ($\beta = -0.09$, $p < 0.08$). Perceived probability of success ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < 0.001$) and political support ($\beta = 0.11$, $p < 0.05$) remained significant predictors of willingness to sell, confirming two of the three mediation hypotheses (Hypotheses 4c and 6c). Perceived image risk, however, was not an important mediator in these processes, at least not in this study. The mediational model accounted for 28% of the total variance, a change of 22%.

Other Findings

Table 5 shows that when we regressed probability of success, image risk, and political support on the demography, openness, and cultural exclusivity cues, openness was also a significant predictor of perceived probability of success ($\beta = 0.13$, $p < 0.05$). Demography marginally predicted perceived image risk ($\beta = -0.11$, $p = 0.07$). In contrast to our hypotheses, demography and openness

had little effect on willingness to sell via these mediators. Finally, we conducted an exploratory analysis to test for the presence of interactions and found that there were no significant two-or three-way interactions between the predictors on willingness to sell.

Discussion of Study 2

Of the three contextual cues tested in Study 2, only cultural exclusivity had an effect on willingness to sell a pay-equity issue. The more women saw the culture as exclusive, the less they were willing to act. Although demography was the most frequently mentioned cue in Study 1, the manipulation of this cue had no discernable effect on willingness to sell. Likewise, the openness of top management was not as influential as expected. This raises the question of why women identify these cues as making their context more favorable for selling gender-equity issues but they are not influenced by them when these cues are experimentally manipulated. In the following sections we discuss how aspects of cultural exclusivity that are qualitatively different from demography and top-management characteristics could explain these results.

The Impact of Cultural Exclusivity

Three features of cultural exclusivity may explain why this cue was particularly important for women's willingness to sell the issue. First, it may be that cultural exclusivity captures such a pervasive feature of the organization that it overwhelms the effects of the other, more

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Table 4   Coefficients of Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting "Willingness to Sell"[a]

	Model	
Variable	1	2
Control		
Realism	0.19***	0.20***
Contextual Cues		
Demography	0.02	−0.01
Openness	0.07	0.03
Cultural Exclusivity	−0.22***	−0.09[†]
Mediators		
Probability of Success		0.42***
Image Risk		−0.03
Political Support		0.11*
Adjusted R²	0.07	0.28
Δ*R²*		0.22***
F	6.68***	17.66***

[a]$N = 300$. [†]$p < 0.10$; *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.

Table 5   Results of Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting Mediators[a]

	Model		
Variable	1: DV = Probability of Success	2: DV = Image Risk	3: DV = Political Support
Realism	−0.05	−0.02	0.06
Demography	0.06	−0.11[†]	0.04
Openness	0.13*	−0.01	0.08
Cultural Exclusivity	−0.25***	0.21***	−0.17**
Adjusted R²	0.08	0.05	0.03
F	7.84***	4.63***	3.07*

[a]$N = 300$. [†]$p < 0.10$; *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.

specific cues. Cultural patterns of interaction influence every aspect of an organization and give information about what is collectively valued and how people typically behave and react (Schein 1985). Thus, this cue may seem especially diagnostic as an indicator of how successful the selling attempt may be and how others will likely react to it. Cultural exclusivity is a cue that is immediate to women's daily experiences, whereas top-management openness and demographic cues may seem more distant and consequently less informative for women's willingness to raise a pay-equity issue.

Second, an exclusive culture may be more diagnostic when a potential seller is evaluating whether to raise a pay-equity issue. Pay-equity issues demonstrate unfairness based on demographic differences, which is consistent with an exclusive, rejecting culture. Moreover, some theory suggests that negative information is perceived as more diagnostic and may carry more weight than positive information (Herr et al. 1991). Thus, sellers in an exclusive culture may have lower expectations of getting a hearing for their issue than sellers in an inclusive culture. Moreover, the existence of cultural norms that allow for unfairness or maltreatment can block efforts to rally others in support of an issue that aligns with those values. These arguments are supported by the negative relationship between cultural exclusivity and the perceptions of both the probability of selling success and the political support for the selling attempt (see Table 5).

Third, research on women's experience in professional settings suggests that men and women in many professions have fundamentally different relational experiences (McGowen and Hart 1990). In essence, men and women carry in their heads different models about the meaning and the methods of success in an organization, particularly when women experience themselves as "outsiders" who must exert effort to be included (Martin and Meyerson 1998). When women's experience is so different, cues about the local context—whether it is exclusive or inclusive—become powerful messages about whether one's effort might be noticed and evaluated positively. Given our sample, cultural exclusivity would tend to be a diagnostic cue regarding the safety and instrumentality of selling this kind of issue. The link between cultural exclusivity of the context and the two mediators of perceived probability of success and political support are consistent with this interpretation.

The Impact of Demography and Top-Management Openness

Aspects of the cues of demography and top-management openness suggest why their diagnosticity is correspondingly less than cultural exclusivity. First, although Study 1 suggested that proportions of women in management can appear to be indicative of an equitable organization, favorable demographics do not guarantee equitable treatment. The demographic composition of the top-management group can vary independently of the attitudes of that group. An organization could install women to meet legal or public-relations imperatives but still maintain a negative attitude. Conversely, the attitudes could be very positive, yet labor markets could offer few female candidates, or women could leave the firm for independent reasons. Also, women in top positions in firms may not present clear signals of their abil-

ity or willingness to help. Women in top management are frequently disempowered, particularly in informal power structures (Martin and Meyerson 1998). Martin and Meyerson (1998) found that the executive women they studied were "generally expected to be silent about gender-related difficulties. . . most of the women tended, most of the time, to conform to these expectations of silence" (p. 341). Thus, while demography may indicate progress in the general area of gender equity, these cues may not provide confidence of additional political support or any particular openness to this issue. Further, if demographic proportions simply reflect an "add women and stir" top-management logic, then real norms and values in an organization are unlikely to be favorable to women (Martin et al. 1998), and such practices may even obscure true inequities by making the organization seem like a meritocracy (Meyerson 2001). In this way, demographic indicators can be relatively empty of meaning.

Second, the finding that top-management openness was less important to women than expected could be an artifact of the scenario design. In the scenarios, we placed the respondents in a role that was several tiers down the managerial hierarchy. For issues of this nature, issue sellers may begin by raising the issue with their immediate bosses. If this is the case, top management may have seemed too remote from the locus of actual selling, which could explain, in part, why openness did not have much impact.

The lack of interaction effects between the cues provides further support for the relative weakness of demography and openness as contextual cues. Interactions among the cues are conceptually plausible, however. For example, women might be more willing to sell an issue in an organization that has both many women at the top and an open top management, in contrast to a situation in which only one of these cues is positive. Another example is that a demographically positive context with an exclusive culture might be difficult to interpret, and the perception of openness could be the deciding factor in whether or not to raise the issue. Clearly, further examination of such interactions would be a valuable area of future research.

General Discussion
The results of this pair of studies suggest that individuals assess the favorability of a context by weighing a wide variety of cues that vary in their diagnostic value. Making sense of the broad array of cues contained in organizational contexts takes effort. While Study 1 uncovered a wide range of red and green lights for selling gender-equity issues, Study 2 suggested that some contextual

cues are better guides than others. In this case, cues about the exclusivity of the culture were bright lights, offering "stop" or "go" signs for selling the pay-equity issue. These studies highlight the importance of contextual cues as aids to discretionary and potentially risky action in organizations. Further, the results of Study 2 build on previous research by unpacking some of the psychological mechanisms by which these cues have their effects. Our results have implications for both existing and future research on issue selling in particular, but also for understanding individuals' contextual sensemaking more generally.

This pair of studies adds to our accumulating understanding of conditions that foster issue-selling behavior in organizations. First, the most potent contextual cue was the one that was most accessible and relevant to women's everyday experience (i.e., cultural exclusivity). This result supplements earlier research that found that relationships with critical decision makers was a key predictor of issue-selling willingness (Ashford et al. 1998). Both studies suggest that the quality of felt connection to others matters in determining willingness to take this form of discretionary action. However, the current study assessed the sense of connection quality to the whole organization (through a sense of exclusion or inclusion), while relationship quality in the previous study focused just on critical decision makers. Future research will need to consider the relative effects of both relational variables in encouraging or discouraging issue selling.

Second, this study is the first one to empirically demonstrate that issue-selling behaviors are conditioned by the political considerations of support from allies. For this issue, women's sense of being an outsider to the "men's club" deflated their willingness to sell through mediating pathways of perceived political support and probability of success. This finding supplements our understanding of the significance of cultural exclusivity.

Third, commonly cited signals of a positive setting for selling gender-equity issues are less useful than we assume. The openness of top management was not a meaningful contextual cue in this study, nor was it in previous work on the selling of gender-equity issues (Ashford et al. 1998). Likewise, the presence of women in the ranks of top management is not a diagnostic cue. These results are surprising given the frequency with which such features of the context were identified as favorable "green lights" in Study 1. Perhaps differences between the two samples contributed to the differences in our results. For example, the women in Study 2 had considerably more work experience than those in Study 1, yet all the women in Study 1 had degrees in business, which may have encouraged certain perceptual biases. Educational settings

often emphasize the importance of diversity and communication, whereas in the field, these factors may not appear as relevant to achieving issue-selling goals. Thus, while our first study suggested that employees consider demography and openness to be diagnostic cues, in actual practice, these cues do not carry much weight in prompting action.

This research also opens up new avenues for future research on issue selling and on bottom-up initiatives by individuals more generally. First, it encourages a more comparative analysis of what aspects of an organization's context are most important for indicating whether initiatives like issue selling will be acceptable, successful, and supported. We know that how individuals see an organization depends in part on where they sit and how they are connected with others (Krackhardt 1990). Future research might also consider how individuals located in different structural positions or networked with different people might see aspects of the organizational context differently, prompting different rates of or approaches to issue selling.

Limitations of the Study

Although we have made steps toward clarifying the connection between the sensemaking of contextual cues and individual discretionary action, our study has limits caused by a pallid representation of context, methodological constraints, and generalizability issues. First, our manipulation of the context does not reflect the historical and embedded nature of an organization's context as experienced by individuals (Gherardi et al. 1998). Our perspective ignores the possibility that action and contextual sensemaking are intertwined. This study has separated the two, construing action (or in this case, intent to act as captured in willingness to sell) as a result of contextual sensemaking. However, one might imagine that the anticipated approach to selling an issue would affect how the context is interpreted. This might include selling strategies, timing, and the sellers' relationship to other key individuals or parties. In the ideal study, one would trace the unfolding of issue sellers' sensemaking of the context during the iterative process of issue selling, thereby unearthing the interplay between context and action over time. Moreover, we have interpreted similarly worded cues mentioned by different respondents in Study 1 as if they had the same meaning; however, these respondents may attach more subtle meanings that are associated with their individual contexts.

Second, the nature of our research methods has oversimplified this investigation. In Study 2 our hypothetical setting has produced combinations of conditions that are more or less likely to be found in "real life." However,

respondents' evaluation of realism for the scenarios is quite high, suggesting that they might not have been measurably affected by the manipulations. Nevertheless, we recognize that certain combinations of conditions are more likely than others to appear in organizations. Also, our methodology implies that cues are discrete and clear, but in many organizations, and for many issues, it is not this simple or clear cut. Rather than red lights and green lights, potential sellers often face "yellow lights." Yellow lights are cues that are ambiguous or contradictory in their meaning, signaling that they may need to proceed with caution. Future research should examine a continuum of signals to begin to understand the links between contextual sensemaking and discretionary action.

Finally, our study focused on selling a particular kind of issue, and it included a restricted set of women managers, limiting the generalizability of the study. However, this study does extend the literature on issue selling by virtue of its specificity. Pay-equity issues are representative of a set of "charged" issues—those that are emotional, divisive, or complex—that raise specific concerns for those who choose to sell them (Ashford et al. 1998). Additionally, this study could be generalizable to employees' willingness to sell issues that concern their own, disadvantaged group. Further investigation of similar issues—such as racial discrimination or nonunionized sweatshops—could deepen our understanding of the role of context in such cases.

Implications

The implications of this research apply not only to the issue of achieving gender equity in organizations, but also to thinking more practically about what managers can do to encourage initiatives like issue selling. The results imply that changing the culture to be perceived as less exclusive would encourage the raising of gender-equity issues—or of any issues of relevance to less powerful and more marginal groups. In contexts where female employees experience less exclusion, our results indicate that women will expect to be more successful and will believe that they have sufficient political support to engage in this kind of activity. Unfortunately, top-level managers hoping to create a context that promotes voice have a tough task ahead. The evidence from this study suggests that simple acts such as indicating personal openness or promoting women to upper management will not create the desired context for speaking up. Without acting to affect the cultural context, efforts to create and sustain legitimate voice and to encourage the raising of gender-equity issues are likely to fall short.

Reading the context is a vital activity that is so taken

for granted that we barely notice it, yet this form of contextual sensemaking makes possible individuals' competent action in organizations. By reading and working the context through issue selling, individuals contribute to their organizations' adaptive capability (Floyd and Wooldridge 1996). Within the organization, it is an activity that helps to compose patterns of organizational and strategic change over time (Dutton et al. 2001). This same reading and working of the context also allows sellers to gain visibility, influence change, and gain a reputation for effectiveness (Ashford and Tsui 1994). It is a fundamental piece of the ongoing sensemaking that people do in organizations (Weick 1995). The outcomes of a better understanding of contextual sensemaking are thus important for both individuals and organizations. While the signals in organizations are never as clear as they are in the children's game of "Red Light, Green Light," when read effectively they supplement managerial and organizational effectiveness.

Acknowledgments

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