



## Culture, Gender, and Authority in Transnational Corporate Contexts

This study concerns itself with the men and women who work for the Japanese subsidiary of an American corporation that I call Transco. The pseudonym reflects the parent corporation's move toward a transnational corporate culture rather than a multinational one as part of a new globalization strategy. One idea contained within this strategy is that a transnational corporation, by virtue of its more interconnected structure, can create a relatively seamless, global corporate culture that is readily understood and operant at each geographic point around the world.

Originally I went to Japan in 1996 to research the nature of gender and authority in the cross-cultural workplace; specifically, I wanted to learn how Japanese women fare in an American organization that professes equal treatment of men and women in its hiring and promotion practices, as Transco does. Merit, as measured by objective criteria of evaluation, is the hiring and promotion policy claimed to be in effect throughout the parent corporation worldwide. Transco further claims special attention to the hiring, promotion, and retention of college-educated Japanese women as one competitive advantage in Japan, where Transco's native competitors still tend to hire and promote mostly Japanese men.

However, when I arrived on site in 1997 to begin my observations, many of the Japanese employees I met initially were eager to know whether the organization seemed to me to be “Japanese” or “American” in atmosphere. Having spent the preceding year in another part of Japan studying Japanese, conducting library research, and interviewing Japanese friends and acquaintances who had worked for both Japanese and foreign firms, I had to admit that the place felt very “American” to me. It was curious that one after another, those who asked seemed quite pleased by my response, as if my answer were just the one they wanted to hear.

As I was soon to discover, the question of Transco being Japanese or American in tone was very much on the minds of its Japanese employees at the time, and the senior American management had similar concerns, albeit with opposite conclusions. Although the new campaign of globalization was under way, mandated by Transco’s parent organization for all offices world-wide, no mention of this campaign had been made to me when I previously visited Transco to meet with the senior American management and set up my research. To the Americans at Transco, global restructuring was not a source of concern for the successful development of the subsidiary, but its “Japanese-ness” was; to the Japanese, globalization was of great concern because of its potential impact on both the corporate culture of Transco and the importance of Japan as a consumer market.

The globalization campaign heightened the cultural tension at Transco and became one vehicle by which culture could be viewed, but culture was an issue in its own right even before the campaign began. Members of the senior American management told me they thought that Transco was still “too Japanese” to be allowed to run on its own without express direction from expatriated management, while the Japanese employees confided that Transco was “very American,” and they doubted the ability of the American management to discern the difference between American culture and global culture. Although no one seemed to have a clear conception of global culture, everyone at Transco thought they knew the American and Japanese cultures quite well.

The Japanese used my answer—that the place felt American to me—as proof that they were right. Unlike the expatriated management, I was an American who both studied and lived in the “real” Japan. Hence my opinion was used to counter directly that of the other Americans. I soon realized that the Japanese had vested me with a kind of cultural authority over this topic because of their perception of my dual status: culturally, I was placed somewhere in between the Japanese employees and the expatriated managers and was expected to understand clearly the Japanese vantage point. The globalization drive outlined later in this chapter became one tool for my assessment of cultural strain at Transco because Japanese employees were so concerned with its potentially negative effects. At one point, someone told me that I served as “a well, into which people could shout their anxieties” at this time of upheaval.

Besides enabling new levels to my research, this act on the part of the Japanese employees to position me, as the outside observer, into a dual status in terms of cultural understanding also reflects a power imbalance at Transco. For their part, the American managers did not attempt the same thing. They had no perceived need for me to understand their side of things because they held most of the power, but it was also true that most of the expatriated management assumed I agreed with them on various and sundry issues simply because I was American. They took my positions for granted, if they thought about them at all.

Thus I was made party to all sorts of blanket statements about the Japanese versus American peoples and the cultural superiority of the American way of doing things, at least insofar as management at Transco was concerned. The Japanese also engaged in a great variety of stereotypic comparisons, but theirs was the perspective “from below” as set against the Americans’ view “from above.” These perspectives were both literal and figurative: the former in terms of relative placement in the organizational hierarchy, in which the Americans were mostly senior managers and the Japanese were mostly subordinate employees, and the latter in terms of perceived differences in power to define the culture of Transco.

Culture appeared to be one dominant framework for employee interactions with one another at Transco, but that framework

consisted of mixed types of cultural assessments that regularly moved in opposing directions. There was the presumption of greater cultural similarities when employees of a single nationality met together for some work-related goal and the presumption of greater cultural differences when employees of multiple nationalities were working together, but people did not necessarily agree on the precise nature of those similarities and differences. Individual attitudes about the respective values of the Japanese and American cultures often conflicted with one another. And gender differences in attitudes toward national cultures and the culture of Transco set Japanese women apart from Japanese men.

The differences (and similarities) between the Japanese and the Americans in their attitudes toward culture had many ramifications, with subsequent impacts on gender and authority as well as the culture of Transco itself. Every interaction at Transco seemed to be under the weight of constant negotiation, but in the meantime employees had still to decide how to behave at work, and their individual perceptions of culture, gender, and authority all intertwined to affect this decision making.

*Culture* is an elusive and often misused concept. Much of what was assumed to be the result of culture at Transco could have been considered instead as behavioral and personality characteristics that transcend culture, but employees of all nationalities and at all levels were heavily invested in culture's relevance to the organization. During my fieldwork, then, I looked at gender and authority at Transco particularly within the parameters of the parent corporation's strategic move toward a globalized corporate culture, and I observed that *culture* and *gender* shared many types of (mis)applications. People throughout the organization relied on their interpretations of these concepts to make decisions about individual and groups of employees, about the nations of Japan and the United States, and about Transco as a place to work and manage. My primary goal in writing this book is to offer parallel presentations and analyses of culture and gender, with the attendant effects on both assumption of authority and organizational effectiveness at Transco.

Another goal is to approach my analyses from both an interdisciplinary and a practical perspective. The following questions drove the fieldwork:

- Is it necessary to become like an American to be successful on the job? What does it mean to do so? Or is it enough just to know how to interact effectively with Americans?
- How responsible are the Americans for learning to interact with the Japanese?
- Who are the Japanese who get promoted, and why do some not make it as far as they would like to go?
- Do Japanese women want to be promoted to the highest levels of the organization? If so, do they have an equal chance at promotion? Do they have to subscribe to certain female stereotypes to increase their chances?
- Does the corporation see itself in Japan as American or Japanese or global, and what are the differences?
- What does the corporation understand to be, and respect as, the unique qualities of both Japan and the Japanese, or do those kinds of evaluations become moot in a global corporation?

These questions are not easy to answer if one sticks to a singular point of view. Therefore, I will take advantage of several decades of scholarship in both the social sciences and the humanities,<sup>1</sup> as well as consider issues of practicality, in seeking answers to these questions.

It is necessary to point out that my fieldwork at Transco represents but one segment of time, the late 1990s. I do not propose to analyze the company overall; rather, my goal is to evaluate the struggles that took place within that time frame over the following issues: globalization; gender; and American and Japanese assessments of one another, as each person sought a comfortable place within a seeming myriad of organizational change. These are struggles that any corporation potentially faces as it moves strategically from a multinational to a transnational form.<sup>2</sup>

I must also state that Transco's parent corporation is considered highly successful even though the global restructuring caused a number of problems. One problem in particular, the successful development of local markets in a number of countries, required rectification in the early 2000s. Nonetheless, judging by most measures, *including diversity*, applied in studies by academics and others, the parent corporation receives high scores. However, the point here is precisely to look at a successful corporation that has a verifiable intention to diversify personnel as a strategy for excellence and to see why pitfalls for Japanese men and women, in the case of Transco, continue to exist. As corporate forms of globalization spread further, are there opportunities to review and revamp how people interact with one another across gender, nationality, race, and so on, or will corporations just extend the more opaque forms of American discriminatory practices outward?

## Terminology and Related Issues

Some definitions are in order. The *transnational corporation (TNC)* goes beyond the *multinational corporation (MNC)* in both its complexity and its potential for ambiguity. On the one hand, the MNC has at least the expectation of a national and cultural center; the dispersal of subsidiaries is mainly geographic. On the other hand, the TNC ideally has no such center of cultural power. It is a hybrid form that crosses national and cultural divides, with each subsidiary as well as the original corporate headquarters feeling like the same entity. However, an emerging TNC likely clings to the more separatist (and comfortable) logic of the MNC, where each subsidiary looks toward the center and where, for example, an employee is either Japanese or American and working either in Japan or the United States. TNC logic would see that same employee as neither Japanese nor American and working globally.<sup>3</sup>

The expatriated managers at Transco understood TNC logic from a global production and coordination point of view but still cleaved to MNC thinking in their management of Transco's human resources. Claims of globalism in the corporate culture seemed to the Japanese employees to be little more than Americanism writ

anew. This disparity forced a kind of chaos onto Transco: in social interaction at the company, culture became contested terrain in both overt and covert ways, and workplace interpretations of culture, gender, and authority were subject to the various manifestations of this contestation.

For a working definition of *culture*, I draw from a wide variety of sources.<sup>4</sup> Although there are no perfect cultural boundaries, culture is a system of beliefs, values, behaviors, symbols, meanings, and so on that are shared by members of a group, whether citizens of a nation or employees of a corporation. Culture is shared both consciously and unconsciously among group members; it forms the set of assumptions under which group members operate and delineates the strategies members use to interact with one another. Cultural transmission is relational and subject to constant change. Working together, “social structure and culture affect action and its consequences” (Chang 2004:410, on Mead 1934).

*Culture* is a troubling concept to many both within and without academia in large part because of its porous nature. This porosity leads to any number of problems; for example, employees at Transco often conflated culture and nationality, creating far more cultural homogeneity among national citizens than actually existed. However, rather than attempt to jump into the debates over the meaning and applicability of *culture* in and of itself, my intention is to show the ways in which culture was drawn upon by employees at Transco to create meaning and determine action. Culture provided them, rightly or wrongly, with a way to assess both their work and their personal lives.<sup>5</sup> Culture was thus salient for people at Transco.

Although the meaning of *gender* may seem clearer, it, too, requires some explanation as an analytic category, particularly because its misapplication at Transco usually stemmed from equating *gender* with *sex differences*. This misapplication is not a problem particular to Transco alone; academic theorists in a variety of fields, sociologists among them, apply *gender* and *sex differences* in conflicting ways that make cross-dialogue difficult.<sup>6</sup>

For the purposes of this book, *sex differences* are physiological, while *gender* is a social category. Unlike physical differences, gender,

like culture, is learned behavior.<sup>7</sup> Our anatomy determines whether we will be socialized to behave like boys and men or girls and women as deemed appropriate by a given culture. Obviously, many of us stray from that socialization, but we continue to be judged on the basis of what is considered to be gender-appropriate behavior, most notably when we are either far inside or far outside the socially acceptable realm of appropriateness.

I agree wholeheartedly with Kimmel's (2000:4) assertion that "the differences between women and men are not to be nearly as great as are the differences among women or among men." He argues that gender difference is the result of gender inequality and not the other way around; to erase gender inequality is to make way for appreciation of individual qualities that are not rooted in gender. Culture works in much the same way: the differences among the Japanese or among the Americans at Transco were far greater than the differences between Japanese and Americans as a whole, but employees tended to focus on exaggerated differences between the two nationalized cultures in the same way that differences between genders were exaggerated.

Thus, in my research, *gender* and *culture* shared a number of usage patterns. All categories of people—men and women as well as Americans and Japanese—were imbued with seemingly immutable characteristics that were then used by both management and employees to justify a variety of decisions and behavioral strategies, including how authority was distributed both overtly and covertly. Misapplication of both *culture* and *gender* at Transco stemmed primarily from efforts to essentialize difference, to make sweeping claims about men, women, Americans, and Japanese, alone or in combination. Essentialisms then affected employee evaluations of themselves and others, both horizontally and vertically. However, because motivations for the use of these essentialisms differed from person to person, people counteracted one another on a regular basis without really knowing when or why, and chaos seemed to mark the corporate culture.

Cultural interaction served as both the cause and the effect of chaos. American and Japanese cultures came together to produce a new culture at Transco, but the new culture also superseded



elements of Transco's corporate culture that senior American management thought it was setting in place. The significance of culture was more confusing to Japanese men, while Japanese women thought they had mastered culture, only to become confused about gender as they moved up in rank. Confusion over culture and gender lent further confusion to the meaning and performance of authority.

Last, the concept of *authority* needs to be separated from similar concepts, such as *power* and *influence*. Lenski ([1966] 1984) refers to *authority* as an enforceable right to command others, while *influence* is a more subtle ability to manipulate people based on one's resources and rights. Both are forms of institutionalized power, based on the *rule of right* and distinct from force (the *rule of might*); they are more socially acceptable and thus less subject to challenge; and they are more impersonal, being vested in the office or role rather than in the person. This distinction may be more applicable to men than to women, who lack the full range of opportunities to command as well as the personal resources necessary to influence people.

Weber ([1968] 1978) defines three ideal types of authority in terms of their source of legitimacy: legal, traditional, and charismatic. *Legal authority* rests on a secular belief in and support for established rules and the rights of those given authority by virtue of those rules; one believes in obedience to the established order and those who maintain it. *Traditional authority* derives its legitimacy from time-honored traditions; one owes loyalty to tradition and its keepers. *Charismatic authority* is awarded to the individual who is somehow exceptional enough to warrant devotion; personal trust in the vision of the charismatic individual warrants obedience.

Of the three types, legal authority may be the most susceptible to the vagaries of gender. Valian's (1999) work concludes that the "gender schema" for femininity is at odds with the schema for professional authority. Thus it is possible that women need to establish some amount of charismatic authority (such as exceptional capability or a charming personality) to buttress their legal authority, while men need only a single type of authority because male gender is a type of authority unto itself.

Weber distinguishes *power* from *authority* (which he interchanges with the term *domination*) in terms of agency. *Power* is the probability that a given actor will be able to carry out her or his will despite resistance; *authority* is the probability that a given individual or group will obey a command. He notes that “every genuine form of domination (authority) implies a minimum of voluntary compliance, that is, an *interest* (based on ulterior motives or genuine acceptance) in obedience” (1968:212). Thus an element of legitimacy becomes central to the reliability of a given authority, but again, female authority is generally regarded as less legitimate than male authority.<sup>8</sup>

Martin (1977) goes one step further in his determination that legitimacy (as “consent” on the part of a subordinate) allows coercion to be (partially) transformed into authority.<sup>9</sup> This constant interplay of superior and subordinate forces means that hierarchical relations are distinctly two-directional. But as Aron has noted, power is intrinsically asymmetrical: “When one commands the other obeys. In this sense, power can never be shared as wealth can be. Instead of the image of a marketplace with its competitors, there arises that of a hierarchy, of relations between superiors and inferiors, masters and servants (1988:77).”

However, within the context of gender and authority, the concepts of asymmetrical power and two-directional hierarchy must be considered further because different types of hierarchies and power relations occur depending upon whether or not the human relationships contained within them cross gender lines. Men do not question the authority of other men because of their gender, but they may well challenge women on this basis in at least a non-conscious way, if not a conscious one. Perceptions of gender differences in authority as natural are built into the schemas of gender and create the potential for gender discrimination in the competition for positions of authority.<sup>10</sup> Competitive discrimination allows the illusion of meritocracy to prevail without the dismantling of gender-based privilege in access to the ultimate authority that is prized in an organization.

The illusion of meritocracy may undermine women’s workplace authority because it creates extended opportunities for culturally

subjective comparisons of male and female managers that invariably leave women with less acceptance of their authority relative to men. In the early 1900s, women were excluded from career management in part because of the presumption of a fundamental incompatibility between their work and home obligations. We are now at a point where the compatibility is questioned less and women are given more career management opportunities, but for some reason women are still excluded from the highest positions in large numbers. By contrast, for a foreign firm in Japan such as Transco, utilizing women as a source of competitive advantage may significantly alter the realm of allowable comparisons between Japanese male and female employees.

Organizational theorists traditionally assumed that organizations were, by definition, gender neutral; later theorists came to view organizations as particular producers of gender relations<sup>11</sup> that differentially determine acceptable modes of workplace behavior and participation, ranging from emotional management<sup>12</sup> to access to technology.<sup>13</sup> Assumptions that institutionalized forms of power are more impersonal, drawing strength from the occupation of an office rather than the personal attributes of the officeholder,<sup>14</sup> do not hold up under the scrutiny of gender. If women are slower than men in attaining positions above the level of middle management, then personal, gender-based attributes would seem to be a factor in access to such power.

One's authority position at work was also found to explain a large portion of the gender gap in job autonomy, much more so than that explained by the gender composition of occupations.<sup>15</sup> We have also to consider the effects of women's roles as secretaries in the workplace and housewives/mothers in the home upon workplace attitudes toward women in authority. Historically, women's entry into career management was impeded by the perception that woman should remain at home or only serve in those positions that would not interfere with home responsibilities. And the gender status of secretarial work strengthens the assumption that women's role is to assist rather than to lead. This creates the potential for an additional barrier for women who attempt to position themselves as authority figures equal to men in the workplace. In sum, a relationship between

gender and authority persists long after women have achieved the levels of education and experience necessary to occupy a place at the higher end of the occupational hierarchy.

Generally, women have been dismissed from earlier studies of power, perhaps because of the perception that they lacked any real form of either authority or power. This omission is problematic because of the amorphous massing of women into a single domain, but it also raises an interesting question concerning the effects of derived power (secondary power based on the power status of associated males) on the historical development of female authority in the workplace. As economic systems have been transformed from a more traditional, family-based form of capitalism to a more modern, managerial-based form, the avenues to authority changed for women, from family connections that often supersede gender to the false presumption of a meritocratic system that is gender blind.<sup>16</sup>

Though Transco's parent organization prides itself on being meritocratic along any number of vectors, the study of culture, gender, and authority patterns at Transco shows a picture of a transnational corporation roiling in a great deal of confusion and turmoil underneath a veneer of workplace precision and control. Confusion seemed to be most evident in Japanese efforts to negotiate the conflict between the American and Japanese cultures. Four cultural settings were reflected in the corporation: (1) the Americanized culture of the senior management and the mid-level expatriated management; (2) the Japanese culture representing the majority of the employees as well as the external national setting; (3) a mix of these two, within which individual employees negotiated personal solutions to their differential perspectives on the cultural conflict that arose between the first two; and (4) the corporate culture that was consciously designed through mission statements that outlined key principles and values, employee training programs, etc.

The confusion underneath the surface of smooth work relations also extended to gender. Some of the women who wanted to stay and build long-term careers were not doing well in the eyes of their expatriated superiors, while others who were deemed by senior

management to be likely candidates for promotion did not seem to have much career attachment to the company. In between were women who were also trying consciously to do their jobs well, but they felt unsure about their place in the organization.

Cultural confusion for Japanese men was primarily over the tension between one's sense of value as a Japanese national and the Americanized values that seemed to prevail in the corporate culture. This confusion was exacerbated by the initiation of the globalization campaign that will be outlined further in the next section. Confusion for Japanese women was marked by this same cultural tension but was magnified and outdistanced by additional confusion over issues related to gender. These issues ranged from corporate expectations regarding negotiation of the conflict between women's work and home lives to whether or not so-called appropriate gender roles existed to differentiate the qualities of good female versus good male managers.

Women's assessment of gender roles included not only the subject of Japanese female managers but also the wives of the expatriated management, many of whom filled the more traditional role of a stay-at-home mother. In addition to negotiating how to be effective employees within the cultural tension that arose at work, Japanese women had to do so within a gender tension that emanated from both within and outside of the organization. They had ideas about how women in management ought to behave, but their expectations regarding Japanese women in management were confused by the conflict between the American and Japanese cultures and the gender conflict that arose separately within each culture. It seemed that Japanese women had more to contend with than did Japanese men, but the latter certainly had their own set of conflicts.

To assess the relationship between gender, culture, and authority at Transco requires the creation of a *typology of confusion* that addresses the types of confusion that are attributable (1) to cross-cultural perceptions, (2) to misunderstanding of workplace authority, or (3) to the sorts of gender imbalances that generally characterize numerous corporations and the contexts in which these three types occur. These three types of confusion and their related subsets comprise the chapters that follow.

## Transco

Transco's parent corporation is a global heavyweight in market share for a number of its products, although it has had its ups and downs, particularly in the last several decades. It produces a wide variety of personal and household goods, many of which are recognized as global brands, and has operations in more than eighty countries. The net income of the corporation currently exceeds \$8 billion annually.

Transco is an organization that relies heavily on both female and male Japanese employees in all divisions of the company, but senior management still remains mostly white, American, and male. Although employment patterns in Japan are changing, male graduates of the best universities still largely prefer to work for native government institutions and top-ranked corporations.<sup>17</sup> Thus Transco sees the potential for utilization of university-educated Japanese women as a key source of competitive advantage, a view that is augmented by the fact that Transco is a player in the competition for the loyalty of the highly discerning Japanese female consumer.<sup>18</sup> Japanese women were first brought into management at Transco in the 1970s as an experimental strategy to increase market share of specific female-oriented products. The numbers of women in management have grown steadily over the years, but they are still significantly lower than the numbers of Japanese men in management.

**Table 1.1 PERCENTAGES OF WOMEN BY DEPARTMENT, 1997**

| Department | % of Women<br>Overall | % of Women<br>Managers | % Women not<br>Secretarial | % Women Managers<br>not Secretarial |
|------------|-----------------------|------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Marketing  | 56.9                  | 15.0                   | 47.7                       | 18.5                                |
| Human Res. | 54.3                  | 10.9                   | 40.6                       | 15.6                                |
| Finance    | 50.9                  | 03.8                   | 21.2                       | 06.1                                |
| Info. Sys. | 27.6                  | 02.3                   | 17.1                       | 02.9                                |
| Legal      | 63.6                  | 18.2                   | 46.7                       | 26.7                                |
| Mfg.       | 32.0                  | 01.4                   | 14.7                       | 01.7                                |
| R&D        | 50.3                  | 04.2                   | 41.8                       | 05.1                                |
| Sales      | 10.5                  | 00.4                   | 04.8                       | 00.4                                |
| Other      | 76.6                  | 12.8                   | 66.7                       | 18.2                                |
| Company    | 36.4                  | 03.8                   | 24.4                       | 04.6                                |

Source: Department of Human Resources, Transco

Table 1.1 shows the percentages of women in Transco's departments in 1997. A correlation exists between the number of women overall in a given category and the number in management within that same category. You will notice, however, that the correlation is weak and that certain departments were doing considerably better or worse than others in employing women. Even now, women managers at Transco are largely excluded from the more traditionally male domains of Finance, Information Systems, Manufacturing, Research and Development, and Sales.

Transco divides its data on the nationality of employees in Japan in multiple ways, with certain departments keeping much more comprehensive statistics than others. Overall, with the exception of Research and Development, which employs a significant number of non-Japanese at all levels, the employee population is overwhelmingly Japanese right up to the top of middle management, but there are multiple middle- and upper-level expatriated managers sent in and out of Japan for stints of two or more years.

At the time of my fieldwork, the top itself largely comprised white American males. Of the twenty-four most senior positions with direct ties to Japan (even if they have responsibilities for the Asian region), seventeen were white males, one was a white female, and one was a non-Japanese Asian male. Of the remaining five, four were Japanese males, and one was a Japanese female. Of these, two of the Japanese men and the sole Japanese woman, Ono-san, were targeted for removal from the organization. The men were considered "too traditionally Japanese" and Ono-san "too aggressive and immature" to continue serving in top positions.

Senior managers at Transco, however, viewed the company as very favorable toward both women and Japanese nationals. Transco claimed to hire capable Japanese men and women but saw the women as better performers overall, despite the fact that the women tended not to stay employed with the company as long as the men did. However, both men and women were thought to lack at least some of the qualities necessary to run the company at the top of the organization without help from the American side. The company was consciously looking for ways to redress two problems it viewed as inherent to the Japanese side of its managerial workforce:

(1) Japanese women's lack of commitment to long-term, upwardly mobile careers; and (2) an inability, on the part of both Japanese men and women, to develop the nontechnical skills, such as leadership style, deemed "appropriate" to senior levels of management as defined by the Americans.

Transco competes in Japan for sales of household and personal products marketed primarily to women. At the time of my initial fieldwork, several of Transco's products were experiencing a decline in market share. As part of its so-called lost decade, Japan took an economic downturn, and numerous product categories at Transco were struggling to make gains. Additionally, a corporate-wide drive, spearheaded by Transco's world headquarters in the United States, initiated a new campaign of globalization. A negative reaction to globalization reverberated especially loudly throughout the Japanese organization, with most of the Japanese employees feeling at least somewhat threatened by the campaign.

Exactly what the parent corporation meant by *globalization* was unclear to many employees at Transco, especially the Japanese. In being handed down from world headquarters as a new principle of operation, it was indeed vague. Implementation was intended to be large scale, encompassing standardization of everything from global packaging (to create greater economies of scale) and global brand recognition, to the creation of "global employees" marked by their common understanding of corporate principles and values no matter their geographic location. Local markets and local people were de-emphasized in favor of a new, seemingly "global" point of view that the parent organization viewed as a progressive step in its own development beyond multinational competition.

*Globalization*, or rather its precise definition and the implications for Japan, was often the source of conflict at meetings I observed. The perception of the unique character of the Japanese market was much stronger among Japanese at Transco than among their foreign counterparts, both in and outside of Japan. Decisions that were deemed good for global operations, such as global packaging, were feared to be bad for Japan because of a belief in the unique character of the Japanese market. Indeed, top American personnel at Transco often made the claim that to succeed in Japan



was to succeed anywhere. Those Japanese in charge of the domestic market commonly reported feelings of being misunderstood by those non-Japanese in charge of global operations, including people at world headquarters in the United States as well as the expatriated management located in Japan and East Asia, Transco's primary sphere of operation.

An important point of gender difference that emerged from the study is that Japanese men were much more inclined than their female counterparts to consider globalization a personal threat to their sense of self and place at Transco. For many of the Japanese men, *globalization* represented a nebulous, higher power that was out there rearranging things beyond the authority range of the individual employee. Japanese men viewed the ramifications, particularly the negative ones, of Transco's implementation of globalization as being rooted in American culture, and as a result, during interviews they engaged in numerous comparisons of Japanese and American cultures, with Japanese culture deemed the superior one.

Japanese women, as previously stated, were not as concerned about globalization as were Japanese men. Although they were quick to agree with the dominant sentiment that globalization was bad for Japan, it seemed more a reflexive belief—shared by many Japanese—in the uniqueness of Japan and was not, by and large, as personally unsettling to them as to the men. Of note is the fact that, when they engaged in cultural comparisons between Japan and the United States in terms of men at Transco, American men were the clear winners. Not one woman I interviewed felt that her work life would have progressed better at a native Japanese corporation. Thus Japanese women were predisposed, at least initially, to favor the corporation and its Americanized culture, while perhaps Japanese men considered what they might have missed by not working for a native company.

Japanese women in management at Transco viewed gender as a workplace issue; while both newer and more experienced female managers focused on the potential for conflicts between home and work, the women with more experience at Transco also engaged in gendered analyses of the company. However, because all Japanese

female managers believed that Transco treated them far better than any other option available to them in Japan, their perceptions of gender differences at Transco often were softened by this cultural comparison. Japanese women chose Transco, as an American company, in order to receive fair treatment relative to men. They came to the company with hopes for a promising career unfettered by the limited expectations of Japanese men and by the limiting views of Japanese culture toward women. As they advanced in the ranks, however, the tendency to frame perceptions of their work environment in gendered ways also increased, in large part because senior management itself was doing the same thing.

Beyond the expected discussion of conflicts between work and home lives that characterized interviews with newer women in management, more senior women often were acutely aware of how women in departments other than their own were doing, that is, which departments were considered to be woman-friendly and which were not. That women were aware of differences in how women were faring at the company makes it likely that gender mattered to individual success at Transco, and it was also a factor in individual commitment to a career trajectory in terms of both length of tenure and the type of work one wished to do. Women, for example, were more likely than men to request transfers to jobs with less strenuous career paths even when they were single and willing to devote long hours to work.

As mentioned previously, besides trying to get more women to commit to a career, Transco was also trying to develop its Japanese employees of both genders into an ideal type of leader, based on a variety of factors deemed by the senior expatriated management to be most essential. The ideal type was not considered to be particularly culture neutral because senior managers at both Transco and world headquarters (and elsewhere, presumably) saw many aspects of the American character as essential to the company's success, and these same people felt that the company overall had a history of strong success, though not without some bumps along the way.

What senior managers thought of as neutral was the application of the ideal; that once taught and knowledgeable, every employee

around the globe should be able to fit the ideal. The “ideal employee” also became synonymous with the “global employee” envisioned in the globalization campaign. One paradox was that the Americans seemed least able to see the inadequacy of their own efforts at cultural adaptation precisely because the model was so Americanized. In many ways they were judging transnational employees based on their ability to at least mimic American behavior, but the rhetoric of the ideal employee was based on what was “best” for the corporation given the assumption of its record of success.

Cultural considerations came strongly into view, with Transco’s senior American management dividing up desirable and undesirable traits along nationality lines. Desired traits such as creativity were considered more American, while undesirable traits such as a preference for rules were considered more Japanese. Over time it seemed that such distinctions were more likely to create additional blinders to assessment of individual achievement rather than promote understanding of the ideal employee.

Global standardization efforts accentuated these distinctions not only because of the sense of unease about the ramifications for the local Japanese market that the initiative fostered, but also because the emerging definition of the *global employee* seemed not much different from the American employee the Japanese had come to know. As such, to many Japanese, especially the men, it was highly suspect and laden with dangerous undertones regarding attitudes toward Japanese culture. The fact that globalization was just getting under way as a corporate directive renewed and intensified preexisting debates about the merits and shortcomings of the American and the Japanese cultures. Some debates were antagonistic, but many were not, and of course, all relied on stereotypes to varying degrees.

Transco is an excellent subject for the study of men and women at work in a transnational corporation. It offers a unique opportunity to look for the continued presence of and intersections between cultural and gender-based barriers to advancement into positions of authority. It is a company that at present is seeking to circumvent the vagaries of national cultures by actively creating a global corporate culture; and it is a company that has long touted

its favorable attitude toward women. In Japan there is further inducement to promote women as a competitive strategy. Therefore, we can look at the Japanese men and women who have made it to the middle and upper levels and see what they think and how they are doing; and we can look at the expatriated management's view of them.

As a company for career-oriented women in Japan, Transco falls somewhere in between the idealized, meritocratic corporation that it considers itself to be and its more traditional Japanese counterpart. On the whole, Japanese women at Transco moved farther and faster than their peers in a native Japanese corporation. As they moved up, however, they became dissatisfied with the assistance they received from their superiors, both Japanese and American. Japanese male employees had concerns about cultural discrepancies at the corporation, especially those related to evaluation of one's worth as a competent employee destined to rise up the corporate ladder. They became even more concerned when globalization appeared on the scene as the new strategic directive. Globalization complicated their assessments of their own value.

By tracing the patterns of interaction between employees that emerged from contests over gender, culture, and authority at Transco, it is possible to address the types of problems that prevent transnational corporations from realizing truly meritocratic forms at all levels of the organization. Even when considerable improvement occurs in the advancement of women and local employees, cultural and gender biases can still prevail, providing blocks to one's establishment of workplace authority.

## The Research Setting

Transco has a central administrative office along with several factories and scattered sales offices in Japan. Its corporate headquarters are housed in an impressive high-rise building that affords sweeping views of the area in its extensive use of glass. The ground floor entrance contains on one side a vast open space that is used for a variety of social and business functions; on the other side, a reception area that leads to a series of elevators; and beyond those,

a large auditorium. The building mostly is divided by work function (R&D, Finance, etc.); thus little hierarchy is demonstrated by floor with the express exception of the top floor. It houses the most senior executives, those who run the company rather than all or part of a floor.<sup>19</sup>

Single floors reflect corporate hierarchy by means of private offices and personal windows with a view. Upper-level managers have corner offices, whereas the more rank and file share the remaining open space. It is interesting to note that Transco headquarters used to divide open space with a greater number of private cubicles, but when the company was forced to relocate temporarily to a more open, Japanese-style office while its building was undergoing earthquake retrofitting, people noticed that the work atmosphere seemed to improve. Thus when the company returned to its own building, management created more open space.

Every day employees pass by one or two receptionists in the reception area, display their identification badges to the guard, and proceed to the elevators. This, too, became part of my daily routine. Even though the building was large, company growth put space at a premium. Nevertheless, the company generously provided me with a desk, computer, and phone (including voice messaging) at one end of a conference room on the top floor; in addition, I was often given access to an office/conference room down a few floors in one of my key observation areas. Secretaries on both floors provided assistance to ensure that these two rooms were at my disposal as much as possible. As a result, I had a quiet place to conduct interviews with people who did not have their own office and to write up my field notes on those rare occasions when I had free time during my ten-hour days at the company. I started each day by riding to the top floor and checking for messages before proceeding through the day's schedule.

Ethnographers of American and other companies sometimes note the deafening silence on the top executive floor in comparison to the other floors; although it was indeed quiet on Transco's top floor, I did not find the other floors to be markedly less so. What was more pronounced for me was the feeling of isolation from the rest of the company on the top floor. In addition, there was a sense

of loneliness to the floor itself. Unlike most of the rest of the floors where you opened the main glass door onto a large room full of visible people, on the top floor you simply walked along an oblong-shaped hallway that had private offices to the outside and conference rooms to the inside. Each of the top executives (all Western and male) had an executive, bilingual secretary (all Japanese and female) who was situated in her own office just outside his office. Except when the secretaries were away on an errand, their doors were usually open, but most of the other doors were closed, including those of the conference rooms. It was an odd feeling for me each day to take the long ride up the elevator and walk the seemingly deserted hall to my door. Though not an employee, I felt much more comfortable out on the open floors below.

## Methodology and Introduction to the Key Informants

This study is based on research conducted in Japan primarily between 1996 and 1999, with some shorter trips that followed. Tracing the undercurrents of gender and cultural differences at Transco involved extensive observations of meetings both large and small, from the strictly work-related to the more ceremonial. For these meetings, I focused on two main departments: Marketing, and Research and Development. Both have very different subcultures and numbers of women in management, with Marketing having by far the greater share. The nature of these two departments is such that, especially in the case of Marketing, meetings I observed regularly included people from a number of other departments throughout the company, such as Finance, Manufacturing, Sales, Human Resources, and General Management.

Included in these observations were training sessions for both newer and older employees from any department, self-development seminars targeted to women in general, one out-of-town trip to visit customers with a senior female executive, and numerous social gatherings. Meetings and training sessions tended to be conducted in Japanese when all of the attendees were Japanese nationals and in English whenever non-Japanese were present, but

there were some exceptions, as in the case of higher-level Japanese employees trying to advance their English language skills. Thus I was able to witness a great variety of people and undertakings and to compare people's behavior across languages.

To research questions on gender and authority, the case of Ono-san, mentioned previously as the most senior Japanese female, needed to be compared to other managerial employees. In consultation with Walter, the American at the helm of Transco, I chose six primary subjects, including Ono-san, for a total of two men and four women whose positions ranged from the first rung of middle management to Ono-san on the first rung of senior management. Following these six people around day after day afforded me unlimited access to all areas and levels of the company because, as stated previously, their two departments (Marketing, and Research and Development) have the most contact with other departments and personnel. I was exposed to countless meetings, a few ceremonies, a number of training programs, and contact with hundreds of employees, regularly including those at the top of the organization. Most of the time I was an observer, trying to make my (note-taking) presence felt as little as possible, but I became a participant observer for two training programs designed for various women in management.

The six primary subjects I chose were free to decline my request to observe them, but none of them did. Of the four in Marketing, three were women. Watanabe-san (brand manager) was a beginning manager of a single product; she led the only all-women team in Marketing. She was in her early thirties, single, had majored in American history at college, spent one year in Iowa as an undergraduate, and lived with her parents. She enjoyed her job but still had other career options outside of Transco on her mind, and she wanted to marry and raise a family. Her English language skills were excellent, and she displayed a confident but gentle style. Since her subordinates were newer to Transco, their team meetings were always held in Japanese and were among the most low-key that I witnessed at the company, but she herself also appeared low-key at meetings with her superiors. These meetings were held in English if a non-Japanese manager were present.

Igawa-san (marketing director) was a manager of multiple products and teams, including that of Watanabe-san. She was in her late thirties, single, majored in English in college, spent one year in Australia on a scholarship, and lived with her parents, though she, too, wanted to get married and have children. At all of her meetings I attended, no matter the language used or the size of the meeting, Igawa-san's style was quiet and gentle. In English, she also relied on humor at multiple points, taking opportunities for jokes as they occurred to her but delivering them in the same quiet manner. She appeared confident and relaxed, although I later came to learn from her that she did not like the intense pressures of Marketing and was considering a job change within the organization as part of her next performance review.

Ono-san (general manager), the first Japanese woman to enter senior management, had responsibility for an entire division. Both Igawa-san and Watanabe-san were her subordinates, and she thought highly of both of them. Ono-san was in her mid-forties, majored in English in college, and spent one year in England while an undergraduate. She had been married but did not have children; she was currently divorced and lived alone. She was, no doubt, the most forceful personality of the six, often speaking over her subordinates, gesticulating a great deal, and losing her temper on occasion. Of the six, she was the most stridently devoted to Transco. Because she was the one person marked for removal from the company and because she held an unprecedented location in the company hierarchy, additional attention will be paid to her case.

The fourth subject in Marketing, Abe-san (marketing manager), was a man in charge of multiple products and teams. He was in his late thirties, married, and had one child. Although he spoke English with a fair degree of accuracy, it was heavily accented to the point that his direct superior, a Canadian, remarked on it to me.<sup>20</sup> Abe-san's style was very quiet, quieter than either Igawa-san's or Watanabe-san's. He spoke in soft tones whether in English or Japanese and always seemed serious. Just prior to my first meeting Abe-san, this same superior described Abe-san as "very Japanese" in that, in addition to being quiet, he was reserved and careful, with a "Japanese sense of time" and too much of a "hands-off" attitude



with his subordinates. However, he also told me that Abe-san was tagged for promotion to General Management pending successful completion of an overseas assignment. Abe-san did not want to leave Japan for personal reasons but knew that further career mobility depended on it; he was hoping to be sent to China.

Subjects in Research and Development were one man, Nobu-san, and one woman, Okura-san, both associate directors in their early forties. Each had similar levels of responsibility in middle management on the nontechnical side but had an academic background in chemistry. (Research and Development also has a technical track for employees who wish to remain research-oriented with little or no management responsibilities.) Both were married, and both had children.

Nobu-san had been with the company for more than sixteen years, and he became an associate director in 1994. After working at Transco for three years, he was sent to the United States for six months of English language and cultural training, followed by eighteen months at corporate headquarters working on a Japan-related project. Upon his return to Transco, he changed product categories within Research and Development a number of times and steadily moved up in management responsibilities. Compared to Abe-san, who always wore a suit, Nobu-san dressed casually but in good taste. I mention this because when I asked him to describe his idea of life in a Japanese company, he said the *ningen kankei* (human relations) there involved “how to wear clothes” and “how to deal with people,” things that he feels are important but too restrictively defined in the traditional corporate context. Stylistically, Nobu-san seemed neither noisy nor quiet; either way, he gave the impression of being his own person and had a life outside of Transco involving his passion for music.

Okura-san described herself first and foremost as a “working mom”; her daughter lived with her because the husband/father’s job necessitated that he live in Tokyo. She claimed never to have possessed a strong attachment to a career at Transco, opting instead to take a more wait-and-see attitude. Even before the birth of her child, she ranked family over work, leaving the office at five o’clock despite the general practice of people staying far later than

that. In fact, she had a bit of company notoriety among the Japanese for her “early” departures from work; this was the subject of some amount of gossip. In my observations of her, I thought her personality was rather strong, not to the extent of Ono-san’s but strong nonetheless, and she was not hesitant to appear dissatisfied with subordinates who did not do things the way she thought they should have been done or who wasted time. She was regarded highly by senior management, especially by her direct superior, an American known to have a rather volatile personality, and she enjoyed working for him.

All six of the primary subjects were considered to be successful, upwardly mobile employees, with the important exception of Ono-san. Table 1.2 presents basic data about each of the six subjects.

I conducted personal interviews with fifty employees, ranging from secretaries to top management. Essentially I asked everyone with whom I had frequent contact if they would mind being interviewed. I interviewed half of them more than once. The time frames ranged from thirty minutes to two or more hours. I recorded the interviews and took notes. The format generally was semistructured, and the choice of English or Japanese (or both) was left to the discretion of the interviewee.

I always started with a few questions and then let the interview take what seemed to be its natural course. If the interviewee touched upon a topic that paralleled something raised by someone else, I made sure to return to the topic at an appropriate point. Often I asked interviewees to restate their ideas in the other language in order to check for consistency of meaning. No one turned down my request for an interview. On a couple of occasions, I received

**Table 1.2 THE SIX PRIMARY SUBJECTS**

| Name         | Title              | Division  | Gender | Age | Marital Status |
|--------------|--------------------|-----------|--------|-----|----------------|
| Ono-san      | General Manager    | Marketing | Female | 40s | Divorced       |
| Igawa-san    | Marketing Director | Marketing | Female | 30s | Single         |
| Abe-san      | Marketing Manager  | Marketing | Male   | 30s | Married        |
| Watanabe-san | Brand Manager      | Marketing | Female | 30s | Single         |
| Okura-san    | Associate Director | R&D       | Female | 40s | Married        |
| Nobu-san     | Associate Director | R&D       | Male   | 40s | Married        |

phone calls from people who asked to be interviewed. They were concerned that I was getting a picture of the company that was “too positive” and thought I needed to hear their particular perspective on things.

## American Issues in Gender, Culture, and Authority: Ono-san as a Special Case

In an article written for a major magazine, McDonald (2001) claimed that Linda Wachner, chief executive officer (CEO) of apparel-maker Warnaco, was dubbed the “iron maiden of lingerie.”<sup>21</sup> The piece ostensibly was about the meteoric rise and fall of male as well as female CEOs in the difficult economy of the time, and the marked increase—up to 45 percent—in the personal reputation of a CEO as a factor in the overall reputation of the corporation that he or she guides.

Of the several examples of struggling CEOs given, all were women, with the “iron maiden” leading the pack. According to the article, Wachner’s “aggressive management style” had once been considered a key component of Warnaco’s return to manufacturing prominence, despite recognition of her seemingly volatile personality; but five years later as Warnaco struggled financially, “the very qualities that once won her kudos came under fire.” At one time the “nation’s highest paid female executive,” Wachner had responded to critics of her compensation package by saying, “I get paid to be tough.” From there, the article stated that “at the time, Wachner had reason for feeling smug.” *The Economist* ended its own article on Wachner’s downfall by saying that the collapse of her “empire” and subsequent loss of her own as well as shareholder investment “would, perhaps, be a fitting end to such a tale—but one that, unfortunately, will only hinder the cause of those female executives whose brightest role model she once was” (“The Wrong Trousers,” June 16–22, 2001, p. 68).

A certain teleological approach is evident in these articles. Wachner’s recent failure explains everything that came before, and it is intimated that her job failure is attributable partly to her personal failure to stay within the acceptable bounds of her gender.

The articles displayed a poorly hidden tone of delight over her fall from grace, with the assumption that her “tough” and “smug” style led to her comeuppance. Her story seemed to be presented as a warning to all women executives and represents a pattern that continues to this day. Though more sympathetic in tone, the *New York Times* report on the firing of Zoe Cruz from Morgan Stanley in late November 2007 bears many parallels to the stories provided on Wachner.<sup>22</sup>

The case of Ono-san also parallels the stories about Wachner and other top women executives. She had the longest tenure (twenty years) of any woman at the company and had been remarkably successful in the Marketing Department, achieving notoriety even in Japan at large for some of her earlier marketing campaigns. She was the highest-ranked and highest-paid Japanese female executive, not only at Transco but also, for a time, in Japan as a whole. Nevertheless, like Linda Wachner, she was in the process of being shown the proverbial door, her “large” ego and “tough” temperament no longer acceptable to the American senior managers with whom she was now working directly.

As in the Wachner case, Ono-san’s temper did not go unnoticed by those working around her but was largely ignored over the years by her American superiors until she appeared to struggle at the higher levels of the job, meaning that profits in her division were down. As long as her job performance was seen as clearly profitable to the company and as long as the upper echelons of senior management were sheltered from constant contact with her, she was not only allowed to continue working but was regularly promoted into jobs of increasing responsibility over both people and products. Her performance, as it related to corporate profitability, was stellar until shortly before the time of my fieldwork. Her personality, however, had always been the same. By her own account of her history at the company, she had received occasional guidance in “proper” leadership behavior, yet she was not considered unsuitable to lead until her division saw a strong decline in market share and she had moved up in rank high enough to have regular contact with senior management in both Japan and the United States.

Since market share was itself never characterized by continual gain without any hint of decline and since other divisions were also struggling in the difficult Japanese economy of the time, there seemed to be more to the story of Ono-san's impending exit from the company than these factors. I thought that the best place to start an inquiry would be her relationships with senior management, particularly since I was interested in exploring, as one part of the fieldwork, whether or not the authority of managerial Japanese women translated fully to the top levels of a transnational corporation. From the very first day on site, I was presented with the case of a Japanese woman who had achieved more than any other Japanese, male or female, at the company, but one who was now subject to negative evaluation on virtually all fronts—most notably from those with the power to decide her fate.

No one in senior management complained about her negotiation of the dual culture in evidence at the transnational company; she was not criticized for being “too Japanese” as was the case for some of the senior Japanese men who were also going to be moved out of the company. Neither Ono-san nor these Japanese men were considered “good leaders” by the American management—the difference was that the men seemed to have cultural problems while Ono-san had gender problems. Thus their respective situations needed to be compared to other Japanese employees, both female and male, along the vectors of both gender and culture.

The corporation at large had an established set of operating principles that had been developed at parent headquarters in the United States and distributed to all its subsidiaries. These constituted the necessary values for effective on-the-job performance and were intended to be the basis of the corporate culture worldwide. Although everyone operated as if they understood the ground rules for employee excellence in both workplace performance and relationships with coworkers, in reality the rules were laden with mixed messages, and they were interpreted differently from person to person.

Ono-san's case is important precisely because she appeared to have lost her status as an excellent employee, a status she had clearly enjoyed until quite recently. I wanted to know whether her

current problems could be attributed (1) to her role as a pioneer woman at Transco who was now considered somewhat outmoded, (2) to her own personality and nothing more, or (3) to “predictable” changes in senior management’s opinion of her. Her case represents a microcosmic portrayal of the relationship between gender, culture, and authority, but one that reflects inconsistencies in the management of human resources at Transco.

Chapter 2 describes the key groups of employees at Transco and what they chose to share with me during open-ended interviews about Transco as a place to work, with comparisons to employment and organizational issues in Japan and the United States. Chapter 3 details the ways in which employees tried to define their selves within the context of the organization. Chapter 4 looks at the ways in which both culture and gender confused people’s perceptions of themselves and others, and how culture and gender could be used as evaluative weapons in a variety of ways. Chapter 5 provides data on confusion in communication of authority across both culture and gender divides. Chapter 6 offers some conclusions.

All names and certain nonessential data have been changed or omitted to protect the privacy of the organization and the individuals who work there. I am, however, following the custom at Transco in regard to people’s names. The Japanese employees are referred to in the standard Japanese way, by last name with *-san* (our equivalent of Miss, Mr., Mrs., and Ms. rolled into one) attached to the end, while the foreigners in general and the Americans in particular were referred to by their first names only, reflecting the preference for informality that Transco inherits from its American origins. This was accepted by both sides as the best way to handle the cultural difference.

For ease of reader recognition of my six key subjects, I will use their last names in full (for example, Watanabe-san) while providing only the first initial of a last name (for example, K-san) to denote other Japanese employees discussed in the text. All Americans will be noted by their first names.

All Japanese terms that appear in this work follow the modified Hepburn system for romanization, with macrons denoting long vowels, except for commonly recognized terms, such as place names, and citations in which the author uses a different system.