Relational Theory in the Workplace

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About the Author
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Abstract
This paper overviews a study that applied the principles of relational theory to workplace interactions. Based on a study of female design engineers, it describes a way of working—Relational Practice—that springs from a relational belief system and model of growth-in-connection. It details four categories of Relational Practice and identifies the way—and the implications of the process—through which this practice “gets disappeared” from the organizational definition of work.

Introduction
This paper will overview the findings of a research project that used a relational model of growth and development (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, Surrey, 1991) to explore women’s experience in the workplace. As Jean Baker Miller noted in Toward A New Psychology of Women (1986) work organizations are likely to be hostile environments in which to seek growth-in-connection. This is true because organizations, like most of society’s structures, are based on masculine models of growth that are antithetical to connection, models that privilege separation and independence rather than interdependence and collectivity. The study overviewed here started from the premise that if women truly were operating from a different belief system about what leads to growth and effectiveness, this belief system would be evident in the way they worked, even though organizations might not support or encourage this way of working and might even, in their practices and reward systems, actually discourage it. So one goal of the study was to observe women as they worked to see if there was any evidence of work practice that reflected a relational belief system about what leads to growth, organizational effectiveness and success. The intent was not only to describe the behavior, but also to link it to a motivational belief system, a way of thinking that might challenge—and offer an alternative to—masculine norms about how organizations need to be structured in order to be successful.

The second goal of the study was to explore the gender/power implications of relational ways of working. That is, rather than simply describe a different way of working, the study sought to explore what effects this way of working might be having on women and their ability to get ahead in
organizations. If, as Jean Baker Miller (1986) suggests, women are expected to shoulder relational work invisibly in personal relationships so that the “myth of independence” remains unchallenged, might this also be happening in organizations? If women were doing “invisible work” in organizations, what effect was this having on them and their career progress? So, the goal of the study was twofold. The first was to make visible, give language to and build theory about relational activity as practice in organizations. The second was to explore the power implications of the findings through understanding what happens to people, particularly women, who work this way.

**Method**

The research design reflects the exploratory nature of the research questions. Qualitative data were gathered using a method of structured observation, as well as individual and group interviews, to capture the everyday work experience of six female design engineers. Structured observation is a data gathering process characterized by the systematic unselective recording of events in their natural setting (Mintzberg, 1973; Jacques, 1992; Weick, 1968). The advantage of this method over more common self-report diary techniques is that it generates data about how people actually work as distinct from how they talk about how they work. However, in order to explore issues of gender and power, it was also important to understand how the engineers and others in the work environment talked and thought about their work, the language they used to describe it and the sense they made of it and its effect on their tasks. In order to collect both types of data I devised a protocol in which I shadowed each engineer for a full day, closely observing and recording her behavior and interactions not only with people, but with all aspects of the environment. The day after the shadowing I held a long interview with each engineer; I walked her through the day’s events asking for comments and explanations of what I had observed. I also interviewed other members of the worksite and held a focus group of all the participants, in which I fed back some of my early findings and gathered further input and reactions from them.

**Findings**

**Part one: Relational practice**

Analysis of the shadowing data revealed four types of Relational Practice:

- **Preserving**: This is behavior associated with tasks. It includes relational activities intended to preserve the life and well-being of the project.

- **Mutual Empowering**: This is behavior associated with enabling others’ achievement and contribution to the project.

- **Achieving**: This is behavior that uses relational skills to increase one’s own effectiveness and professional growth.

- **“Creating Team”**: This behavior has to do with teamwork. It includes activities intended to create an atmosphere of collegiality, where the positive outcomes of group life—things like collaboration, trust, mutual respect—can occur.

Tables detailing the many specific behaviors associated with each type of Relational Practice, the skills and belief system underlying the practice and its intended effect on the project can be found in the Appendix. To capture the essence of Relational Practice in the engineers’ own words, selected examples of each type are presented below.

**Preserving**

This practice had to do with preserving the life and well-being of the project. It included things such as taking responsibility for the whole, and doing whatever needed to be done to keep the project connected to the people and resources it needed to survive. People who acted this way had an attitude of “doing whatever it takes” or “if I don’t do it nobody will”. Sometimes preserving meant taking on jobs that were technically beneath them—like soldering a board themselves if a technician were busy—and sometimes it meant going the extra mile by coming in on a weekend to prevent what they considered “substandard” products from going out the door. And sometimes it meant scanning the environment for information that needed to be passed on and then taking the initiative to pass it along. For those who did it, this type of behavior was considered an essential part of the job and they were hard on those who refused to work this way. As one engineer put it: “What’s wrong with picking up a soldering iron?