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Social dynamics shaping women managers' work experiences

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Abstract: The study sought to explore social dynamics that shape women managers' work experiences within the context of male-dominated working environments. The qualitative study involved eight female managers working in male-dominated working environments in various industries. The sample consisted predominantly of black females between the ages of 24 and 43. Data was collected through one-on-one interviews, and it was analysed thematically. The findings of the study reveal that women managers need social support in order to function effectively, and that they are experiencing various social constraints, such as being regarded as the 'out-group' and gender stereotyping. Given the social constraints that the participants are experiencing, and the need that they have for social support, it is necessary that South African society develop a more active and authentic commitment to gender equality, in order to bring about gender transformation in workplaces.

Keywords: *women managers, male-dominated working environments, social constraints, social support, social dynamics, gender stereotyping*

Introduction

In South Africa, women participation in the workplace has increased rapidly. While women constituted only 23% of South Africa's economically active population in 1960, the figure had increased to 51% in the third quarter of 2016 (Statistics South Africa, 2016). This trend can mainly be attributed to the adoption of South Africa's first democratic constitution in 1996, followed by various labour-legislation directives (Barker 2015). Apart from legislative changes, women themselves have decided to move into the workplace, for various reasons, such as the need for financial stability, skills acquisition, and technological advancement (Murray & Peetz, 2009). Furthermore, women are currently more educated than men (Valerio, 2009). Nevertheless, the issue of under-representation of women at managerial level remains problematic (Ferrante, 2013).

Although women are entering the workplace to pursue managerial and professional careers (Koyuncu, Burke & Wolpin, 2012), the private sector remains male-dominated in terms of management, and it has made disappointing progress with regard to women advancement in order to ensure women representativeness in management positions (Sharma & Kaur, 2019). Although the latter is a global trend, The Businesswomen's Association of South Africa's Annual Women in Leadership Census has shown that despite continuous efforts to empower women, they are still a minority in the top positions of South African organisations (Business Connexion, 2015). Previous studies have argued that some of the reasons women do not become managers are a lack of

management education and training, being excluded during recruitment and selection, and the rejection of competitiveness (Maphunye, 2006).

The lack of women managers on managerial level, seems to be more noticeable in male-dominated working environments. This is mainly because the dynamics that exist in male-dominated working environments are significantly different from those that exist in more mixed-gender environments or women-dominated environments (Damaske, 2011). In male-dominated working environments, women are usually more vulnerable and challenged than men, and, as such, they experience more gender oppression, discrimination and stereotyping (Damaske, 2011; Mayer, 2016). This is mainly because ideas about the values and the culture of the organisation are formed by men (Hoobler, Lemmon & Wayne, 2011), which impedes women progression, and significantly reduces the length of time that women are prepared to stay with and develop their careers with a particular employer (Newcombe, 2013).

Sharma and Kaur (2019) state that the barriers preventing women advancing to management positions are universal and be divided between artificial barriers (i.e. personal, organisational and societal barriers) and natural barriers (i.e. level of education or career progression opportunities). Obstacles that women face in male-dominated working environments include less career success, fewer leadership opportunities, social isolation from male peers, and slower career advancement (Germain, Herzog & Hamilton, 2012). Furthermore, men usually have more resources, privileges and definitional power in male-dominated industries, which perpetuates discriminatory practices, policies and ideologies (Damaske, 2011). Thus, a male-dominated organisational culture would seem to promote stereotyping and discrimination of women in management, which is expected to negatively influence their well-being. This study therefore sought to investigate social barriers or dynamics that may pose constraints to women in the South African work context.

South African studies

Various scholars have conducted research regarding women managers in the South African context, but not necessarily in male-dominated environments. A study conducted by Van Wijk (2005) found that men in the South African Navy, which is male-dominated, showed resistance to women because of 'fear of deprivation', that is, they feared losing status, privileges, and opportunities to women. The study also found that sexual harassment is rife in this male-dominated working environment, particularly during the pre-integration phase (Van Wijk 2005). Singh (2012) investigated women in a male-dominated working environment (i.e. working with earthmoving equipment), with specific emphasis on stress management through self-awareness and reflection. She found that women in this environment face unique challenges and stressors, which act as barriers to their advancement (Singh 2012). In another South African study, Martin (2013) conducted a study into the experiences of women in male-dominated professions in South Africa, and the findings of the study suggest that women working in such professions are experiencing challenges such as discrimination and bias, physical and health-related difficulties, negative emotions, a lack of real transformation, and work-life balance problems. These studies confirm that women are still experiencing social and

other constraints, despite various transformation initiatives. For this reason, it is necessary to understand how social dynamics shape the work experiences of women, in particular women managers.

Method

Participants and setting

The participants were eight women managers from various professions working in male-dominated working environments. The participants were selected by means of purposive sampling, and the final sample consisted mainly of black women in the age group of 24–43 years. The sample included managers at various managerial levels within their respective organisations.

Procedure and data collection

Permission to conduct the study was granted by the research committee of a public university in South Africa. The participants provided individual written consent to participate in the study. They were informed that participation in the study was voluntary, and that, as such, they were free to withdraw from the study at any time. In addition, they were assured that their identity and personal information would be kept confidential at all times.

The interviews were conducted by a trained researcher at a venue which was agreed upon before the interviews commenced. It was requested that the interviews be conducted in the workplace that was the natural setting within which the women managers were working. The women managers completed semi-structured interviews which focused on work-life balance, partner support, perceived gender stereotyping, and success behaviours. Use of open-ended questions afforded the respondents the opportunity to tell their stories as they had experienced them. The interviews were recorded, with the permission of the participants. After the interviews, the recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. The researcher kept notes during the interviews and recorded the notes in a reflective journal after the interviews. The interviews took approximately 30 minutes to complete.

Data analysis

Data was thematically analysed by means of thematic content analysis. The following procedure was followed: first the researcher familiarised herself with the data, after which it was coded and themes were developed. This was done by following a process of using inductive reasoning to identify core meanings. The themes that emerged were checked and verified by a research psychologist and an industrial psychologist, for confirmation and/or criticism.

Findings

The following themes emerged from the qualitative data gathered: social support needed by women managers, and social constraints experienced by women managers.

Theme 1: Social support needed by women managers

The first theme that emerged was the need for social support by women managers. The respondents indicated that they needed support in order to function effectively as managers in male-dominated working environments. The need for family support was demonstrated by the following comments:

> *I have a very understanding family, so I have a great deal of support with regards to my work commitments […] it's much easier for me to be able to balance the two, because […] with the supportive structure that I have, it's much easier for me to be able to balance my personal and work commitments, and to make sure that it doesn't necessarily clash at any point. (Participant #5)*
>
> *Well, at the moment I will say I'm lucky, because I am still staying with my mom,*

so I'm balanced, because when I get home the kids are bathed, they have eaten […] so I don't have stress. (Participant #6)

I have the support of my family. (Participant #3)

Respondents also noted that spousal support is essential in order to function effectively as a women manager in male-dominated working environments. This was demonstrated by the following comments:

It's just me and my husband at home, and he supports me 100% in my job, so that makes it a lot easier for me. (Participant #1)

I talk to him about the problems, and he gives me the solutions. He understands that the job I'm in is very stressful, and he helps me with the homely duties, so he compensates for the other males at my job, because they do not understand. He supports me 100%. (Participant #2)

We have a lot of discussions, and especially because of the […] position that I have. (Participant #8)

The importance of having support while having young children was demonstrated as follows:

When I was younger and I had to go out, I had a good support system, with my parents being close by. You cannot be a female manager if you do not have a good support system, especially when you have smaller kids […] you just make it work because you want to. (Participant #1)

One respondent mentioned that

[*i]f you are a female, you have to do the whole dominant thing, the whole 'I do not care what your family life is; do the work!' (Participant #2).*

It is thus important that male-dominated workplaces become more aware of the importance of creating work-life balance. This will be particularly important in the case of women managers that have little or no social support.

Theme 2: Social constraints experienced by women managers

The second theme that emerged was social constraints experienced by women managers. This theme will be discussed in terms of two sub-themes, namely group identity and stereotyping.

- Group identity

The respondents reported that they were regarded as an 'out-group'. This was demonstrated by comments such as the following:

I will state my view, I will try to persuade them, but if males decide that that is what they want to do, they stick together, and they will enforce it […] there was a male clan that decided […] and, yes, they enforced it. (Participant #1)

One male can only listen to another male when decisions are made; a female can't necessarily get up to the standard of the males. (Participant #2)

Women can also influence certain things in the organisation, but it will always be challenged by the male counterparts. (Participant #3)

- Stereotyping

Two forms of stereotyping were reported, namely general gender stereotyping, and stereotyping of managerial positions.

- General gender stereotyping

In terms of general gender stereotyping, most of the respondents mentioned that general gender stereotyping still exists in the workplace. The existence of general gender

stereotyping with reference to women's sexuality and associated issues was demonstrated by the following comments:

> *After I was appointed as manager, I experienced sexual harassment in the workplace […] it was a form of somebody having sexual advancements towards me that I didn't like […] women are just taken as objects […] small things like 'It's that time of the month', 'You should be a mother by now', 'You should go home', 'A woman's place is in the kitchen', even when they are joking, it hits the spot. (Participant #2)*
>
> *Because you have a pair of breasts […] they think it's […] repellent for women to be part of this industry. (Participant #5)*
>
> *Whether you are a manager or you are just whoever, you are a mother, and you are a wife to somebody […] I am deemed to be emotional when it is that time of the month [when I have my menstrual period]. (Participant #7)*

Stereotyping in the workplace has led to women often being categorised according to four roles, namely the sex object (seductress), the mother (madonna), the child (pet), or the iron maiden (Kanter, cited in Neal, 2009). Each of the respondents mentioned that they had experienced one or more of these forms of gender stereotyping. The only type of stereotyping that was not experienced by any of the respondents was 'child' stereotyping.

In terms of 'sex-object' stereotyping, the respondents noted that women in the workplace are judged based on their appearance and actions, which causes men to make sexual advances, which often culminates in sexual harassment. Two of the respondents mentioned sexual harassment during the interviews. One of them mentioned that sexual harassment may hamper women advancement in the workplace. The other mentioned that she had been subjected to sexual harassment, and that a disciplinary hearing had taken place. However, no penalty had been imposed on the perpetrator, because

> *[t]hey didn't take my word for it; they said I was just being a woman, so that would be that (Participant #4).*

- Stereotyping of managerial positions

With regard to the managerial position itself, the women in the sample experienced stereotyping, which is evident from the following responses by the participants:

> *As a woman, you are expected to wear these suits, and to portray yourself basically as a man, and to minimise your womanhood as much as possible […] They [men] will always see you as a woman first, even though we should view each other as colleagues, and as equals. (Participant #8)*
>
> *Men think you don't have the necessary skills to be a manager in this field […] They still think you are unable to do the job. (Participant #2)*
>
> *Men don't believe that whatever we do will make it better […] it's like they will always know these things are heavy; you can't carry them […] Men think you can't do the job, and it's hard to be promoted, because men think women belong home with the kids. (Participant #3)*
>
> *They [men] think they know everything, especially in the manufacturing industry […] because they have been exposed to that before by their dads, and whatever […] by the time you start learning the ropes, then everybody thinks you are such a dumb somebody. (Participant #7)*
>
> *As women, we feel that we are not as good […] we can never really compare to men. (Participant #4)*

The respondents mentioned that as women managers, they had to display characteristics traditionally associated with men, as is evident from the following responses:

> *You have to take the not so pleasing characteristics of a man for the men there to take you seriously. They [men] still think you are unable to do the job. (Participant #2)*
>
> *Sometimes to be taken seriously, you have to be as aggressive as a man. (Participant #3)*
>
> *To be taken seriously, you have to behave like a man […] you have to be quite assertive and display such characteristics that are more inherent to men. (Participant #4)*

Discussion

The following themes that emerged from the qualitative data gathered are discussed under the following themes: social support needed by women managers, and social constraints experienced by women managers

Theme 1: Social support needed by women managers

The first theme that emerged was the need for social support by women managers. The respondents indicated the importance of family and spousal support in order to function effectively as women managers. This support becomes increasingly important in the case of women managers with young children. The findings in terms of social support are consistent with the findings of Mashupi (2013), who reported that support systems are a necessity to cope as a senior manager in a male-dominated industry (civil engineering, in the case of her study). However, while the respondents in the current study only referred to the support of family and the spouse, respondents in Mashupi's (2013) study indicated support in a variety of forms, namely mentors, the work environment, family, friends, domestic helpers, and au pairs.

From the responses of the participants, the general feeling was that it is almost impossible for women managers to cope with their managerial roles in male-dominated working environments without receiving social support, although the support can take different forms. This reliance on social support can be attributed to organisations glorifying employees that work as if they do not have any personal life requirements (Martin, 2013). One respondent mentioned that "if you are a female, you have to do the whole dominant thing, the whole 'I do not care what your family life is; do the work!'" (Participant 2). It is thus important that male-dominated workplaces become more aware of the importance of creating work-life balance. This will be particularly important in the case of women managers that have little or no social support.

Theme 2: Social constraints experienced by women managers

The second theme that emerged was social constraints that have shaped women managers' experiences in male-dominated working environments. The following social constraints were identified from the responses of the participants: group identity, and stereotyping.

- Group identity

In terms of group identity, respondents indicated that men are still regarded as the "in-group" in male-dominated working environments, while women are seen as an "out-group". This is not surprising, since men dominate male-dominated working environments. However, this group membership influences the way men perceive, feel, and behave towards women in various work settings. Furthermore, it can lead to gender

stereotyping, discrimination, and conflict in the workplace (Hewstone, Rubin & Willis, 2002), which was mentioned by some of the respondents.

At a more subtle level, in-group/out-group behaviour can lead to differential treatment, which was also mentioned by the respondents. Respondents indicated that men are inclined to act in a dominant manner towards the out-group (i.e. women), by forming male clans in the workplace, which leads to women feeling inferior and less capable than men of being successful in managerial positions. The respondents also noted that they are not fully accepted because of their gender.

The findings of the study in terms of "in-group"/"out-group" behaviour are consistent with the findings of Martin (2013), who found that gaining acceptance into the male "in-group" is a challenge for women once they enter a male-dominated working environment, and this can lead to discriminatory practices by their male counterparts. Mashupi (2013) found that most women do not have a sense of belonging, because of the "old-boys' network" that exists within the industry. This may lead to women isolating themselves and feeling inadequate to offer their opinions and make contributions during managerial decision making. This will not only have a negative impact on the well-being of women managers, but will also prevent women managers from functioning optimally, which, in turn, may influence organisational effectiveness.

- Stereotyping

Apart from the social constraint of gender identity, the women managers in the study also experienced stereotyping in the form of general gender stereotyping and stereotyping of managerial positions. In this regard, Mashupi (2013) found that gender-based stereotyping exists in male-dominated working environments, specifically in relation to the leadership styles of male managers versus women managers. In another study, Martin (2013) found that gender-based stereotyping is prevalent in male-dominated working environments, specifically in relation to how women are viewed as not being committed to their work, and to how they dress in the workplace, which can lead to behaviour manifestations such as sexual harassment.

Various forms of gender stereotyping were identified, namely "sex-object" stereotyping, "mother" stereotyping, "iron-maiden" stereotyping, and "sex-role" stereotyping. Each of the respondents mentioned that they have experienced one or more of these forms of gender stereotyping. The only type of stereotyping which was not experienced by any of the respondents was "child" stereotyping. In terms of "sex-object" stereotyping, the respondents noted that women in the workplace are judged based on their appearance and actions, which leads to men making sexual advances, which often ends up in sexual harassment.

Two of the respondents (Participant 2, Participant 5) mentioned sexual harassment during the interviews. One respondent (Participant 5) mentioned that sexual harassment may hamper women advancement in the workplace. The other respondent mentioned that she was subjected to sexual harassment, and that a disciplinary hearing took place. However, no penalty was imposed on the perpetrator, because "they didn't take my word for it; they said I was just being a woman, so that would be that" (Participant 2). This shows that although policies and procedures often exist in male-dominated workplaces, they are not always implemented as expected. This may cause women in male-dominated workplaces to keep silent about issues such as sexual harassment, which can be detrimental to their well-being and advancement in the workplace.

Respondents that have experienced "mother" stereotyping noted that they were viewed as less serious professionals when planning families, because they are perceived as being mothers and wives, and their "place" is regarded as being "in the kitchen", not in the workplace. This shows that many men have not changed in their perceptions regarding women and the role that they play in the workplace, in households, and in society in general. It will be difficult for organisations to change these deeply held stereotypes, which have been entertained since early childhood.

Respondents also noted that they have experienced "iron-maiden" stereotyping. According to this type of stereotyping, it is expected of women to display male characteristics before they can be taken seriously in the workplace. This form of stereotyping can also be referred to as sex-characteristic stereotyping, i.e. stereotyping based on the sex of the usual job holder. Sex-characteristic stereotyping refers to women being defined as manly, which reinforces the idea that society often holds that to be confident, ambitious, and competitive are masculine traits, and thus unfeminine.

Most of the respondents mentioned that they had to display male characteristics before they can be taken seriously in the workplace. Two of the respondents (Participant 2, Participant 7) mentioned that women managers need to display dominance, be a "tough cookie", and not be seen as a "softie". Other respondents mentioned that they have to be aggressive like a man, always act like a man, be a bully like men are, and that women are expected to wear a suit and portray themselves basically as a man, thus minimising their womanhood as much as possible.

As was mentioned, none of the respondents experienced "child" stereotyping. "Child" stereotyping refers to women being seen as children, thus not having their opinions respected. This is an unexpected finding, because it shows that although men still perceive their women counterparts as "mothers", and they expect them to act as such, they are respected as women. It is possible that this originates from the cultures and upbringing of men, where they were taught to respect their mothers and sisters. Nevertheless, the aforementioned findings regarding gender stereotyping confirm that many women managers working in male-dominated working environments are experiencing gender-based stereotyping, but that they are not necessarily disrespected because they are women.

With regard to stereotyping of the managerial role, role congruity theory (Eagly, 1987) explains that there is incongruence between the female gender role and the manager role (Stoker, Van der Velde & Lammers, 2012). This often leads to the manager role being stereotyped as being more appropriate to men. Mashupi (2013) also found that gender-based stereotyping exists in male-dominated working environments, specifically in relation to the leadership style of male managers versus that of women managers. In another study, Martin (2013) found that gender-based stereotyping is prevalent in male-dominated working environments, specifically in relation to how women are viewed as not being committed to their work, and to how they dress in the workplace, which can lead to behaviour manifestations such as sexual harassment.

The findings regarding the social dynamics that shape the experiences of women managers in male-dominated working environments confirm that not much social transformation has taken place since radical feminism emerged in the 1960s. In line with the thinking of radical feminists at the time, the findings of the study confirm that society

must be changed at its core in order to dissolve rigid gender roles.

Limitations

The following limitations should be taken into consideration when interpreting the findings of this study. Firstly, the sample was relatively small, and, as such, caution is advised when generalising the findings to a larger population. Because the research was only conducted in one geographical region, it is recommended that the study be replicated nationally. Secondly, the sample consisted mainly of Black females between the ages of 24 and 43 years. As a result, the findings are subject to cultural bias. Despite the aforementioned limitations, the study provides some valuable insights.

Conclusion

The study set out to explore whether social dynamics shape women managers' work experiences in male-dominated working environments. The study found that despite government interventions to advance gender equality in society in general, and in the work context, social constraints are still hampering the well-being and career progression of women in male-dominated working environments. This hinders women managers from thriving, and it lends substance to the need for a more active and genuine commitment to gender transformation.

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