

Intersectionality and Women in Male-dominated Fields

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COML 598 International & Intercultural Communications

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April 11, 2020

Abstract

This literature review defines and examines intersectionality and specifically explores how intersectionality plays a role with females in male-dominated professions. Intersectionality was introduced by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989 as a term to focus attention on the dynamics of difference and solidarities of sameness in the context of social movement policies (Cho, Crenshaw & McCall, 2013). As women entered into the workforce and progressed through the years, gender gaps and barriers remain. The barriers and gaps are particularly apparent in male-dominated professions such as law, information technology, construction, engineering, science and math.

Introduction

Women's rights and social movements have been progressively shifting forward throughout the twentieth century, but many would argue that the gender gap and women's inability to rise into top executive positions has been non-existent. Throughout the 1900's, women have made tremendous historical strides including the right to vote, equality in education, and rights regarding sexual matters including birth control and reproduction (Allen, 2011). This literature focuses on where women are today in male dominated professions, what barriers they face through intersectionality and what attributes to women's success in these particular fields.

Intersectionality & Barriers in the Workplace

The theory of intersectionality was originally coined from Columbia University Law professor, Kimberle Crenshaw. Crenshaw introduced the term to originally address the marginalization of black women within anti-discrimination, but also in feminist and anti-racist theories and politics (Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays & Tomlinson, 2013). She illustrated the ways

in which race and class intersect with gender as a type of crossroads or intersection where different types of dominations meet (Foss, 2009). Intersectionality is the notion that one social category cannot be understood in isolation from another social category (Foss, 2009). Nearly 28 years later, Crenshaw was interviewed at the African American Policy Forum where she stated, “Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It’s not simply that there’s a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LBGTQ problem there. Many times that framework erases what happens to people who are subject to all of these things (Crenshaw, 2017).” Women in the work place and specifically in male-dominated professions face structural barriers. The theory of intersectionality helps define categorical structure and barriers that women face in the workplace.

Women in Male-Dominated Career Fields

Women’s presence in the workplace has been a slow and arduous process. Historically, women gain greater presence in the workforce during wars. During the Civil War in the 1800’s women worked as nurses, abolitionists and activists. During World War I, women continued to serve as nurses, but also worked in factories sewing bandages. They also sold war bonds and served as spies. During the second world war from 1939-1945, women were seen working as waitresses, drivers of fire engines, and they continued factory work building ships and war planes. At the end of World War II in 1945, many women lost these jobs when soldiers returned to home.

While women have been in the workforce for nearly two centuries, women still often experience unique barriers that hinder career development (Whitley & Kite, 2010; Yang, 2010). Barriers and specific intersectional markers may include, but are not limited to: *sexism, symbolic power and discrimination*. Male-dominated fields for this literature review include professions such as law, information technology, ROTC, engineering, science and mathematics.

Sexism

Jobs in male-dominated fields were created for men by men and in essence have masculine structure (Demaiter & Adams, 2009). Characteristics for professionals in the fields of engineering, science, law, and IT include being authoritative, rational and self-controlled, masculine, unemotional and aggressive (Demaiter, et. al). Women often entering these fields face a double standard or level of hypocrisy. If they are too feminine, they are viewed as incapable of performing the work (Demaiter, et. al). Many women in various studies would often withhold emotion in the workplace and mask their femininity through dress and demeanor (Demaiter, et. al). Furthermore, literature suggests that women who assimilate and de-emphasize the significance of gender in male-dominated workplaces may obtain praise or reward, but not necessarily in the long term (Demaiter, et. al). Research also found that women in male-dominated fields were excluded from outings such as golf or from internal meetings (Demaiter, et. al). These levels of exclusion through sexism prevent women from progressing in their career.

Symbolic Power

When one thinks of power, they often think of “domination” (Allen, 2003). Power is not necessarily negative. Power can be productive and positive. It can institute positive change, productivity and leadership. Michel Foucault, a French philosopher, studied the use of power. Past research indicated that power occurs occasionally, however, Foucault argued that, “power resides in every perception, every judgement, every act (Allen, p.25).” Women in male-dominated professions have men that are their colleagues and the superiors. Power is constant and continuous and shapes the environment, communication processes and employment outcomes. Power and knowledge operate concurrently: “the exercise of power perpetually

creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power” (Allen, p. 27).

Pierre Bourdieu was a renowned theorist and argued that ‘symbolic violence’ is means through which gender inequality is reproduced (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992 & Powell and Sang, 2015). Symbolic violence is not physical and is described as limiting one’s resources, being treated as inferior, being limited in aspirations or exclusion (Powell, et. al). Exclusion from meetings may occur or exclusion from networking opportunities (Powell, et. al). Gender relations in male-dominated workplaces have denied women equal opportunities as men (Powell, et. al).

Discrimination

In 1973, of all scientists and engineers with doctorate degrees in the United States, only 8.7% were women (Markovits & Albertson, 2012). In 2003, women with the same criteria reached 29.3% (Markovits et. al). While the growth of these statistics are promising, the reality continues to be somewhat discouraging. The majority of these women will not be placed in managerial or executive positions and statistics show that women continue to make far less money than men in the same positions with the same experience. Formalizing entry requirements and hiring processes represents the first and most ‘elementary’ step in inclusion of women, however, one’s professional career doesn’t end upon entry into the corporation (Markovits, et. al). Through the use of power, male superiors in male-dominated fields are able to create ambiguous standards and subjective and murky criteria in evaluations of their female counterparts (Markovits, et. al). Such criteria included lack of confidence, achievement-motivation, independence and androgyny (Markovits, et. al). By creating ambiguous criteria, women are being discriminated against by not being promoted.

Conclusion

Many researchers found that women who had mentors in these male-dominated fields, were able to succeed, grow and progress in their careers (Markovits, et. al and Demaiter, et. al). Mentorship, regardless of gender dynamics, was easily measured to appear important to women in male-dominated fields (Demaiter, et. al).

While many of these corporations in male-dominated fields aspire to hire women, the environment is established by men for men and do not support gender differences. This is apparent in the promotion of women in these fields. In addition, these environments support the early departure and resignation of women (Demaiter, et. al). Oftentimes, gender gaps or ‘gendered treatment’ occurs and is justified by both women and the overall corporate environment is because men are not familiar with having women around (Powell, et. al). This implies that if more women were present, the behavior would cease (Powell, et. al). Bourdieu noted that while women may have some power in the workplace as the minority, ‘the weapons of the weak are weak weapons’ (Bourdieu, 2001 & Powell, et. al).

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