

The Changing Nature of Female Power and its Impact on Male/Female Collaboration in AKRI Work

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“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”
--Carlos Santayana

What Is The Changing Nature Of Female Power?

The economic and political shift in the role of women has been possibly the greatest social change of the 20th century. Over the last 35 years we in the first world have been migrating from a male-dominated, patriarchal model of social relations where men are primary and women play supporting and enabling roles, to a more collaborative, egalitarian model where men and women are equal partners. While progress has been slower than some would like, today women command more authority (both formal and informal), more respect, make more decisions, make and spend more money, and control more resources than they did 35 years ago. (Catalyst, June 2003.) In short, they have more power. Although we all have first hand experience with this journey, there are aspects of its impact that are yet to be fully described or understood, particularly with regard to the complex arena of interpersonal relationships. To further explore this terrain, this paper asks how has the exercise of women's enhanced power impacted the working relationships between men and women in the A. K. Rice Institute.

In keeping with the title of this meeting, “From the personal to the collective,” this discussion will consist mostly of personal stories, others', and mine about the last 15 years in ARKI. Intertwined with the stories are a few reflections about male/female collaboration and some thoughts about what may generalize to the contemporary workplace.

There are several popularly held models for organizational or cultural change. Most of them follow a circular and repeating pattern that Lewin simply called freezing, unfreezing, and refreezing. The pattern essentially goes from a status quo, to one of disequilibria that people first try to manage through assimilation. When a change cannot be managed through assimilation, usually some kind of shake up or crisis occurs and a state of disorganization or even chaos ensues. Post-crisis, circumstances are reshuffled; an adaptation occurs in which the new way is accommodated and a new status quo is established.

Applying this model to the change in male/female working relationships, we have moved from a status quo of traditional patriarchy and male superiority, to increasing tension and competition between men and women as the women's empowerment gained momentum. In some cases this tension resulted in evolutionary change (there are those wonderful people and institutions out there that always wanted things to be fair and made the personal sacrifices to make it so), and in other cases it emerged into confrontation, a more revolutionary model. For example the legal battles that resulted in Title IX and the precedents set in high-profile divorces like the Wendts and the Welches.

Tracking Gender Relations in the A. K. Rice Institute

Because it has a well-delineated task, and it has a relatively stable technology or methodology (the group relations conference model) AKRI provides a laboratory of sorts to study the change in working relationships.

During the last 15 years the Boston Center sponsored 14 annual conferences. Since 1989 the Center has cancelled the annual conference only once, which I will tell you about in a minute. I attended the first Boston residential conference in 1989 and I was impressed enough to join.

The following summer I attended the 1990 National Conference. After that event, at least to my new eyes, the national organization seemed to explode into a huge conflict. Some of you have your own stories about what happened in 1990 and some of you were not around then and regard it as irrelevant. What is of particular interest for the purposes of this discussion is our ability to track where we were then with regard to the working relationships between men and women and where we are today.

Events Leading Up to the 1990 Crisis

Let me lay the foundation for what happened by quoting from the document written in 1995 as part of the AKRI History Project. Bear in mind that in group relations work we believe that the concepts of an autonomous self and individual action are inadequate to describe organizational process. For that reason I will not identify the two protagonists in this story by name and attempt to understand the events I'm describing as we do in conferences, by focusing at the level of the group and not the individual. I will call them Ms. X and Dr. Y even in the excerpts I quote from the CSGSS History Project document.

Here the author, Tim Mize, writes about the inception of the Boston Center.

The group's way of working was described as "conflictual from the beginning". ... This conflictual way of working seems to have taken its toll on the leaders of the group. To date, (1972-1995) every one of the elected presidents of the CSGSS Board has resigned before serving out their complete term of office.

The history document describes the initial conflicts to have been about a split between reflection and action, between interpretation and management, or, as the document refers to it between "thinking" and "doing." The historian tells us that these functions are split between the women as the doers and the men as the thinkers. This conflict, embedded in the Boston Center from the its inception in 1972, begins to be identified with and carried by a particular man and a particular woman, described as a "fighting pair," Dr. Y and Ms. X, a doctor and a nurse, a man mentored by AKRI's revered founder, Margaret Rioch, and a results-focused, practical, woman.

The history mentions,

...the CSGSS Board's inability to help resolve the tension between Ms. X and Dr. Y. When the two differed (which they often did), the CSGSS Board became polarized between them. Eventually, even when they were in a discussion and working well together, the Board would somehow get split and put them up in opposing positions.

Quoting from the history document again,

There was a generalized sense among the women of the Center that the administrative “scut” work was being loaded into the (female) president (Ms. X) because it was supposed to be done by women, and the consultative “glory” work was being reserved for the men.

Disgusted, Ms. X, the president of the Boston Center and who was evidently doing much of the administrative work, quit. She did however retain her role as representative to the national A.K.Rice Institute board of directors.

So here we see, in 1989, the emergence of the organizational competition between men and women as women begin to complain about their traditional social role. This is not an idealized description of the operations role, the domesticity of organizational life, the joy of administration and getting things done. No, this is “scut work”. This particular woman is expressing, on behalf of the CSGSS board of directors it seems, the disequilibria that drives change.

The 1990 Crisis

Let us move from the Boston Center to the events in the national A. K. Rice Institute in 1990. Now it just so happens that Ms. X and Dr. Y from the Boston Center described previously become two of the principals of the 1990 crisis. He was the director of the 1990 national conference and, as I just pointed out, she was no longer president of the Boston Center but had retained her position on the national board of directors. The national conference in 1990 was tempestuous and controversial and afterwards some attendees complained to the board of directors of AKRI. The national board decided to investigate the performance of the director. In order to represent the position of her local board of directors well, Ms. X attempted to consult with them. I quote again from the Boston Center history:

At this time, Ms X, the Representative to the National Board, brought the issue surrounding the directorship of the 1991 National Conference to the Boston Board at the regular meeting in August. She asked the Board to meet and give her their thoughts to take to the meeting of the National Board. The people didn't come to the meeting. Even the president arrived an hour late for the ninety

minute meeting. The style of the group's work at this time was to raise an issue and begin discussion, and then become sidetracked into another issue with no resolution to the first. The issue surrounding directorship of the National Conference was raised, but characteristically not resolved. Dr. Y. was not at that meeting. Ms X, unequipped with a clear perspective from the Boston Board, represented what she "understood the behavior of the Boston Board to mean."

From what I understand, because of her back-home alliance with the Boston Center, Ms X at first abstained from the vote on whether to terminate Dr. Y's contract as National Conference Director but then, when the vote was tied, she was forced to commit herself on the basis of her conscience and what she "understood the behavior of the Boston Board to mean." She cast the deciding vote – terminate the contract.

Obviously these events were co-constructed by all involved. To quote Margaret Rioch, "If responsibility is anywhere it is everywhere." Perhaps there were opportunities to talk things over or work things out, perhaps not. Looking back, this confrontation was a long time in the making; enacted, it created the conditions for organizational change.

After Dr. Y was terminated, AKRI members all across the country drew lines and took sides; some even resigned their memberships in protest and remain estranged, even today, from the organization. Many people defended the director's right to interpret the contract and hold his authorization as non-negotiable. Others applauded the AKRI Board of Director's decision to call for accountability.

As a new member of the Boston Center, I was absorbed and fascinated with the letters, phone calls, and arguments I received in a campaign that seemed to be part of a fight to define the future direction of our work. To quote a member at the time, "You can tell by the mail we get that we don't have small differences."

This conflict can be cast in different lights. Many people saw this conflict as one between task work and charisma and the dawning of the post-heroic era (Khurana, 2003). Some focus on the conflict between the ethic of care versus the ethic of rights that Carol Gilligan describes, the classic Kantian vs. Utilitarian struggle (1982). One might see it as a leading indicator, a raggedy edge in the shift from hierarchy to flatter, more

matrixed organizational structures. I see it as a male/female confrontation, one of those small personal revolutions reflecting the changing nature of female power that was happening in the larger culture at that time.

The 1991 Boston residential conference where Ms. X and Dr. Y were to have been on staff together was canceled, as mentioned before. This was the one and only cancellation of the Boston residential conference in its 15-year existence. Since the upheaval around the crisis, some reshuffling has occurred. The Boston Center continued its tradition of having women presidents and all three of them (of which I am one) completed their terms of office. In the first several years following 1990 there were more women than men on the board and the complaint was often heard, "Where are the men?" In the last five or six years, however, there have been more men than women on the board.

While the male/female relationships may be less conflicted and more collaborative the dynamics with regard to how the anxiety about task is managed are different as well. As women have become more powerful, they as a sub-group and as individuals are a less likely target or container for projections. Interestingly, the inevitable splitting, projection and competition of organizational life seems now to be lodged more among the women and between the generations. It appears that high-achieving, highly-successful women are less likely now than before to deny being competitive or to regard competitiveness as a negative trait. Recently the competition among the women in the Boston Center has been more overt and open to examination. This creates opportunity for dynamic interpretation leading to a more complex and sophisticated understanding of our organizational process and more importantly, to better quality work.

Have we weathered the storm and absorbed the impact of the 1990 crisis and accommodated the changes in women's empowerment in our organization? At least in some measure, I think we have. I offer the following two vignettes as examples to convey a sense of the color and texture of the emerging male/female collaboration. You will notice that in these examples, both involving a male/female consulting pair, I am one of the players in the pair. It is also interesting to know at this point that the first vignette is from a large group in a conference where the director and associate director were women and the second is from a large group in a conference where the director and associate director were men.

Two Recent Anecdotes from Conference Work

Vignette One:

The first vignette comes from the large group in last year's Boston Residential conference directed by Faith Gabelnick. In order to set this up you should know that a male consultant, someone I know quite well, and I were the two consultants to the large group of 36 members. I was the associate director and head of the large group team and the theme of the conference was about succession. It was public knowledge that I would direct the next conference.

Given that the director and director-elect of the conference were women, it was no surprise that throughout the large group the membership worked with the experience of female authority. During the first session there was a man in the first seat of the spiral that included all members of the conference. A young woman occupied seat #2. Early in the meeting she told him that she envied him his position and wished that she were sitting in his seat. Without hesitation he offered to exchange seats with her. At the encouragement of other members, she accepted his offer and they traded seats. She talked about how powerful it felt to sit in that particular seat at that particular conference. Members discussed later whether the act of his giving her the seat made him the more powerful of the two or if they represented a collaborative work pair.

In the fifth and last group, as my colleague and I entered the room, there were three empty seats. Two were in the middle row and a third in the outside row. I took one of the seats in the middle row and my colleague sat in the outside row. One member was temporarily absent to attend the funeral of her grandmother. At this last large group meeting, another of the young women in the conference sat in the first seat. She began the group by saying, "I took this seat deliberately. I feel powerful and excited to be sitting here." Another woman said, "I admire your guts." "I envy you," said another. My thoughts settled on her as an expression of the hopes of the membership and felt as though she had an informal authorization from the group to represent and perhaps to lead it.

A considerable amount of time went by, perhaps 20 minutes before she spoke again. She announced that she was going to move into the vacant seat in the second row because she found that sitting in the first seat was actually inhibiting her participation. Indeed, it seemed to me that the

group was ignoring her or somehow excluding her. She announced as she moved from seat #1 into the vacant seat in the second row that she was “moving into connection” with the group.

This move, of course, left the center seat empty. There was some discussion about that and certainly an air of tension filled the room. At that point my male co-consultant spoke directly to me. “Dr. Kennedy,” he said, “Do you want to take the seat that the membership has made available?” While I was thinking this over, a young Asian woman who had been sitting in the back row got up, moved quickly to take the center seat and announced that she wanted the seat of power, that the future belonged to her people and even if others would want to kill her for taking that seat, she was going to take it and hold it. Though soft-spoken, she was alive with energy. Her voice and body were quivering. It was one of those powerful moments in large group when we are all impressed, members and consultants alike, with what we together are enacting about the collective unconscious.

No sooner had we all had time to take in what she had just said when she had something else to say. She looked at me and said she was very frightened that Dr. Kennedy was going to “be mad at her” for taking her seat. I assume her Oedipal anxieties were beneath her fear. First she takes the hill announcing to all that they will have to kill her to take it away. Then she enters a frenzy of fear and worry about whether her mother will be mad at her! Of course, the unconscious drama is very serious and very important to everyone in the room. If mother and father are solidly connected then the competitive energy of the Oedipal situation can be channeled and used for exploration, growth and empowerment.

Then something happened that again made me think about collaboration between men and women. A man who was seated directly in front of me, who had been eating a pear during the session, got up to walk to the edge of the room to throw away the pit. On his way back into the spiral, he decided, seemingly on a whim, to take the empty seat in the outside row that the young Asian woman had vacated. He was now on the periphery of the spiral and the vacant seat was directly in front of me, so close in fact, that I had the feeling that I was sitting in the center circle of the spiral. The net effect of this was, due to two moves on the part of two men, my co-consultant and the male member who had seemingly haphazardly moved his seat, that two women, a young Asian member and

a director-elect were well positioned as powerful women in the large group Rorschach.

Here we see the work that arranges a next step in our progress as a culture toward the integration of the feminine and the masculine. These men were not only working “in” a female-headed temporary institution but “for” it as well. We can extend this to note that AKRI has just clarified its mission and renamed itself to emphasize its educational agenda. The organization exists not only to observe and understand organizational dynamics (the reflective, interpretive aspects of the work, “the glory” work as mentioned earlier in the Boston Center thinking/doing split) but also to teach and educate. It is not only an organization of reflection and interpretation (creating knowledge) but also one of education (promoting and disseminating knowledge).

Vignette Two

This second vignette is from the 2003 National Conference directed by Bob Baxter. It is also from a large group experience and also from a situation where I was paired with a man in a consulting twosome. In this conference the entire directorate was male and my consulting partner in the large group was the associate director and the director-elect. The “highest office,” in fact the only office held by a woman staff member was to be head of the small group team. The women members in the conference were having trouble finding their authority and their voice and were talking in the large group about enjoying themselves and being in touch with their vitality much more outside the formal events of the conference than inside.

Although my consulting partner and I had worked together before our relationship had not been a strong one. He had more consulting experience than I and I felt tentative as I pursued my groove and my voice in the role. We were speaking to this issue in the large group sessions and were working on it in our large group team meetings. We considered how my experience might be mirroring the experience of the women in the conference and vice-versa. How could I authorize myself to work in this environment where I felt marginal, or at least adjacent to the powers that be? How could my consulting partner and I find each other in a way that was mutually empowering rather than competitive or obligatory? I was thinking of myself as a journeyman consultant. I thought I’d come in

from Boston, do a good job, go back home. I felt little future in my connection to my consulting partner or the director.

Some time into the large group sessions, perhaps about four or five out of eight, something happened that ruffled me. I was seated in the inner circle, as I had been throughout the series of large group meetings. One of the women of the conference, a courageous first-timer whom I will call Ms. E, challenged me to meet her gaze and help her deal with her distress.

“Dr. Kennedy”, she said, “You have to help me. I have taken risks and I have paid the price. I am bruised. I am bloodied. (In fact, I had witnessed her asking for and then getting hit hard with painful projections. For example, she had been drawn into a role of soothing the group by explaining what was going on and once, as she was doing this, a member from across the room started mocking her by singing the Pink Floyd song, “We don’t need no education.”) I felt a connection with her as she continued, “Look at me. Speak to me. You have to give me some advice about how I’m supposed to behave.” It is not as though I was not looking at members, although I do often avert my eyes when I feel the need for some distance in order to “hold” my consulting role, but at that moment I chose not look at her and I made no comment.

Someone started talking about something else and I felt relieved. As the group moved to other topics, I puzzled about what was going on with Ms. E. What did she represent on behalf of the group and could I be helpful by consulting to it? How could I help without gratifying her obvious wish to draw me into the role of personal coach, which I felt was incompatible with my consultant stance?

Next I heard a man, a member behind me say,
“Let’s go back to what Ms. E. was saying to Dr. Kennedy.”
“Yes,” said someone else. I have a strong memory of feeling like a hunted animal.

Ms. E. resumed her entreaty, this time with the full authorization of the membership. Sitting directly across from me, she focused on me earnestly and repeated her request. “Please, give me something. I am lost. You are a woman. I want something from YOU.” I felt caught in the spotlight. What was going on? What should I do? A voice began in the back of my head whispering, “You know, Dannie, maybe you can’t do this

work after all. Perhaps the director's confidence in you has been misplaced." I felt very alone.

At that moment I heard another man's voice from another sector. It was my colleague. I don't remember exactly what he said but he made a statement about the difficulty of finding one's voice in an authority network that privileged one demographic group over another. He may have said something like, "You may hate it because it requires some work to understand it, but Dr. Kennedy is already giving you something." At that moment I was surprised to feel joined and held by my colleague. For me it was a turning point in our trust of each other.

The next thing spoken was a woman saying, "Dr. Kennedy is giving ME something. She is showing me that we can't make her talk. We can't make her be the mommy or the teacher. I see her holding onto her own view in the face of tremendous pressure. She is saying, you don't always get what you want; sometimes you have to figure things out for yourself." At that point, in this marvelously musical large group, someone else started singing the famous Rolling Stones tune, "You can't always get what you want."

The group then moved to voice envy of the intimacy in the working relationship of the consultants and began to identify its deep hunger to find connections and working partnerships. Someone said with great emotion, "I want to be in a partnership like that." The aloneness and self-doubt was now out of me and into the group where it could be engaged. The group began to consider what it meant to sacrifice individual strivings for glory and recognition in exchange for the satisfactions of collaboration.

As we left the room, I turned to my partner and said, "Thank you for sticking with me, I was really lost." I fully appreciated how vulnerable I was at that moment and how a competitive partner could have taken that opportunity to betray me and make me feel small. He smiled and said, "Of course, we go back and forth. While one of us is lost the other can see clearly. I could not have seen it if you had not been lost." His comment reminded me of my favorite definition of collaboration: when two minds create something that neither could have created alone. In this interaction I learned or relearned perhaps, that getting lost and getting found in a collaborative union is one of the most creative and thrilling aspects of this (or any) work. I began to see a future and think not about

doing a good job and then going home but about doing valuable work and learning more with this interesting man and the powerfully authorizing director.

Is This About Gender Or Is This About Power?

You may have noticed that my “before” and “after” comparison jumps from a situation in AKRI management, from the business side of running the local and the national organizations, to two vignettes, both from conference work. I had trouble coming up with a vignette from my own experience on conference staff in the “bad old days” that would show men and women competing to provide a parallel “before” experience for my recent “after” vignettes. I could definitely think of past conference staff experiences where I felt suppressed and pressured to accommodate and submit, but I could not say that it was because I was a woman or whether it was because I was a beginner, a learner, or in a subordinate role. This brings us to the obvious question: is this about gender or is this about power? Jean Baker Miller (1976) has written about the conflation of demographic variables with power. She believes the roles carried in the culture by dominants and subordinates have more impact than any hard-wired biological differences like sex or race. Subordinates or people of lesser power (children, students, wait staff, and people with limited rights, such as prisoners or slaves) tend to be attentive, vigilant of others and behave in ways that will win favor. Dominants-- adults, teachers, customers, prison personnel and slave holders -- tend to be inattentive, self-focused and behave in ways that are inconsiderate of subordinates.

Applying this idea to the workplace, it would follow that as women have gained power, they are being seen more along that dimension and less likely to be categorized as subordinate by their gender. In other words, it has become more important what KIND of woman she is rather than the fact that she IS a woman. At this transactional level, what I observe in the workplace is that men collaborate with women and vice versa when it makes sense in the context of mutual goals. Perhaps the improvement in collaboration in male/female relationships is not so much about altruism or doing what is ethically right but about being practical. Partnering with powerful others is always attractive in organizational life. It helps people accomplish their goals. Women are now more powerful, so now they get more cooperation.

In our theory, if gendered behavior can be seen as a social construction and not as a hard-wired, biologically based difference between people but as simply another demographic that invites us to simplify, in our language to split and project, then men and women are freed from the obligation to carry only one side of the whole. They no longer feel pressured to be traditionally feminine or masculine in the way they work and can pursue more robust, more authentic expressions within the range of human behaviors that emerge in organizational life.

Conclusion

The question of how the working relationships between men and women are evolving as we move toward gender equality is a fascinating one on both a personal and collective level. I have shared with you my impressions of how changes have occurred in the last 14 years in the A. K. Rice Institute. The Boston Center, even from its very inception, carried embedded camps with points of view that debated and enacted the relationship between two aspects of organizational life, whether cast as action and reflection, doing and thinking, management and interpretation, the scut work and the glory work; in short, what can be distorted to be the feminine and the masculine aspects of organizational life. By enacting this struggle in a confrontation in 1990 and by holding together through a period of recalibration and adaptation, the Boston Center and AKRI have created environments where women and men can work in ways that are freer than ever of traditional limitations based on sex role stereotypes.

Of course, this story is personal and very optimistic. Let me reassure you that I, like most of us, continue to have frustrating interactions with men and women who maintain traditional ideas about gender roles. I also wrestle with my internalizations and the unconscious sexist in me. In my consulting, I work everyday with female clients who continue to face real obstacles to the free exercise of their own competence, authority and power. Fortunately, the A. K. Rice Institute is a progressive institution. Although the mission does not specifically state an aim of social justice, it attracts people who have that aim. If women and men can feel free from public limitations about gender role stereotypes even for a little while here in AKRI, then it can happen elsewhere and it probably is.

In closing, I would like to leave you with some thoughts about our next adaptive challenge, one that rises from what I see as the present disequilibria, that is, tensions about power between and among women.

How do we surrender our cherished romantic ideas about the softer, gentler sex and acknowledge and become comfortable with the fact of human competition as a dynamic not only in survival but also in everyday human interaction for women as well as men? And what about the men? Are they on the sidelines, cheering women on? (Or worse, egging women on?) Are they picking up the care-taking agenda while women debate rights? Are they terrified, as feminist psychoanalytic theory suggests, that their too-powerful mothers of childhood will emerge and make them feel small? Perhaps our challenge in reconstructing masculinity is also to surrender our cherished romantic ideas of the harder, tougher sex and make more room for that all too rare and extremely satisfying experience of collaboration.

I would like to close with a passage I found just a few days ago, since the Scientific Meetings began, in my own journal. I wrote it on the trip home from the Leicester Conference in 1997.

“When women are strong, men leave – or they stay and snipe – or, when you find a good one – they stay – and work – and love. I carry that truth, and that pain, and that hope.”

References

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