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Gendered Networking in a Thai State Enterprise

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Introduction

Over the past 40 years, the position of women in organisations has improved in some countries, as new generations of women enter the workforce. Often this is the consequence of carefully designed strategies and specialist coaching to improve their chances of obtaining positions as organisational leaders, but with no certainty of success (Flippin, 2017). Central to securing organizational success is an ability to network both within and outside work organizations. In mainstream management writing, networking is presented as a neutral technical skill that individuals should develop to enable career success. However, research which draws on Acker's (1990) theory of gendered organization (e.g. Benschop, 2009, 2015) suggests that networking is not a neutral technical activity, rather it is a gendered organizational practice which has significant consequences for the career outcomes of men and women.

This paper explores the gendered contours of networking within a large state organisation in Thailand. The research is focused on "Thai Utility" (a pseudonym) which the first author has in-depth knowledge of through her own personal and professional networks. The main aim of this paper will be to explore the gendered nature of networking within Thai Utility, making visible the influence of cultural norms on this activity.

Understanding Networking

Networking is defined by Forret and Dougherty (2004, p. 420) as
> "individuals' attempts to develop and maintain relationships with others, who have the potential to assist them in their work or career".

Networking behaviours include maintaining contacts, socialising, engaging in professional activities, participating in community activities and increasing personal visibility within the organization; these activities can be achieved by physical or virtual means, for instance by using email and professional social networks (Forret and Dougherty, 2001). However, women, minorities, and individuals with low socio-economic status are disadvantaged by this trend. In the organisational context Acker (2006) asserts that men rely on the 'old boy's network; to make connections and advance to higher management positions, whereas women receive less support, particularly in male dominated organisations because managers tend to promote those with traits that reflect themselves (Williams, Muller and Kilanski, 2012). When lower social status is combined with the female gender, the gendered organisation effect is doubled (Schipani et al. 2009). Although women form their own networks, they are not considered to be particularly powerful and do not create social capital and opportunities for career advancement, as they do for men (Williams, Muller and Kilanski, 2012); networking can have a negative effect on women's promotional prospects, according to Forret and Dougherty (2004).

A recent study conducted into gender differences connected to networking activities in the public sector by, Rho and Lee (2016), revealed that individuals often networked with people who were similar to them, referred to as homophily (Lazarsfeld and Merton,1954) and was the dominant factor in perpetuating the male orientated networking system. In addition, homophily shaped the entire public networking system, in other words, gender was the dominant issue within networking, with the consequence that the organisational environment was characterised by an entrenched gender based form of social and organisational exclusivity. The position of women in

Thailand is presented positively in the research findings of Szell and Thurner (2012) because they have been able to proactively and effectively improve their career prospects, despite taking a cautious approach to doing so. Thai women engaging in networking processes and practices are less exposed to risk compared to their male counterparts according to Szell and Thurner (2012). However, this positive picture of female progression within the Thai context requires further investigation. To advance considerations of Thai women's work experiences, this paper draws on Acker's theory of gendered organization to explore the gendered nature of networking, how gendered networking manifests within the Thai context and the consequences of this for women's career progression.

Methodology

The data for this study derives from interviews with 76 employees, located at junior, middle and senior levels of management, across five different parts of the organisation which we call Headquarters, North, South, East and West. For the purposes of this paper we will focus on interviews with 16 junior managers – eight women and eight men - who are working in the four regions outside of the Headquarters. Prior to the interviews, all respondents were asked to complete a networking map outlining their professional and personal network of contacts. These maps are used to represent the networking activities of participants in the study (Wyatt, 2018). There are five steps to help them create their personal networking map by identifying people's role and relationship to them and drawing their own map step by step following the instructions given to them by the researcher (first author). Step 1 is used to identify people who provide career information network to participants. Step 2 is used to identify people who provide psychosocial support network. The third step is used to identify people who provide powerful contact (or "connection" in a Thai context). The fourth step entails participants having to define which relationship are weak ties (people who you are not close to them and are largely unfamiliar) and strong ties (people who you know well and are familiar to you). The final step, participants have to define the gender of people in their personal networking map. Network maps drawn manually by the respondents were transferred into a computer format. Thus, the data drawn on in this paper is a combination of interviews and network maps. Data analysis concentrated on the narratives articulated by the respondents in relation to their work experiences and networking activities. This approach was adopted as according to Benwell & Stokoe (2006), it is through narration that individuals build an understanding of their experiences. We treat these narratives not as individualised stories but rather as social accounts which derive from the cultural context thereby creating a linkage between a broader cultural narrative and the personal stories people tell about themselves (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; Somers, 1994).

Findings

Analysis of the networking activity of the 16 junior managers, interpreted through the lens of Acker's theory of gendered organizations will be a central part of the presentation at BAM 2019. In her seminal 1990 article Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations, Acker presents the first articulation of a theory of gendered organization. She argues that gender is '…a constitutive element of organizations and by this she means that gender is inherent to the way organizations are constructed. She breaks this down into five different dimensions – organizational divisions along lines of gender e.g. job segregation; the construction of symbols and images that

reinforce these divisions; gendered interactions between men and women; gendered identity and finally gendered organizational logic as the underlying assumptions around which an organization is created. In reading the networking activities of the 16 junior managers, we begin with the notion of organizational logic. For Thai Utility, the organizational logic is one of "Family" where family networks and relationships determine an individual's positioning within the organization as the following illustrates:

> "I am lucky because my uncle used to be the ex-CEO here and also my aunt used to be a middle manager too. I do not have to take any test. I just come to talk to HR staff and then HR staff just ask me what I want to do or what kind of job that I am really interested in the HR field. Then, I got my job here. Anyway, I don't care what people talk about me because I graduated both bachelor and master degree from top 5 university in Thailand. So I think I have quite good qualification". (Junior Female Manager, HR, West Region)

> "Actually I don't want to work here because I know it is so hard to get the job here but my mom need me to have a stable job and good welfare. So, my aunt helped me to get the job here. She can help me because she is the middle manager and her husband is also CEO here!!! I have heard HR staff always call me "VIP candidate". I am really surprise because I don't have to take any test. I am only talk to one guy in IT department and tell him about my study field and which job I am looking for. That's why many people in IT department gossip me a lot!!". (Junior Male Manager, IT, West Region)

Here, we can see that both interviewees have benefitted from their family networks which have provided them with employment in Thai Utility without any formal assessment. What is also notable is that this organizational logic of "Family" benefits both male and female managers.

However, we argue that while family networks are crucial for all respondents, this organizational logic operates in a gendered way and the other four dimensions of Acker's theory emerge from and feedback into this gendered family substructure. This can be clearly illustrated if we look at a female networking organization within Thai Utility called the Housewives Association. This includes not only women who work within Thai Utility but also the (non-working) spouses of men who work within the organization. Their engagement in this association can act as a support for their husband's career. This female network is normally controlled by the wife of the Thai Utility CEO and she has the official title of "President". The association engages in CSR activities which are beneficial to the organization with women being perceived as the most appropriate individuals to engage in this work. Participation in this network allows women working in Thai Utility to communicate with senior managers via their wives as the following illustrates:

> "All of my female bosses join the housewives association. So I have chance to do many CSR activities with them. I also have chance to know the wives of my male boss such as middle manager and senior manager too. This is the advantage from joining this club because normally I am not close to my male boss but this club help me to know their wives and get quite close to them. So they always help me to talk to their husband when I have a

> problem or need some help for my job or even for my promotion" (Junior Female Manager, West Region)

The Housewives Association illustrates very clearly the gendered Family substructure which underpins the organizational structure of Thai Utility. As a woman only network it is required to engage in the "feminine" activity of CSR which is illustrative of gendered divisions of labour within the organization. Additionally, women's "path to power" is one which must be taken through "Family" by engaging a senior manager's spouse in acting as an advocate for their promotion or helping them with work issues. Thus, the Housewife's Association is a manifestation of all four dimensions of Acker's theory. The location of CSR activities in this group is an example of the gendered division of labour, the name is symbolic of the organizational logic of "Family", the gendered identity of "wife" is emphasised and gendered interactions between senior male and junior female employees are manages and overseen by the former's wife.

Conclusion

This paper aims to demonstrates the gendered practice of networking within Thai Utility. Drawing on Acker's (1990) theory of gendered organization we will make visible the Family organizational logic which acts as a gendered substructure informing the way in which the organization is run and how individuals interact with each other. We argue that this Family organizational logic gives rise to the other four dimensions Acker identifies which include divisions of labour, gender identity, gendered interactions and gendered symbols within Thai Utility.

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