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Transformative gender interventions

Linking theory and practice using the “bifocal approach”

Transformative
gender
interventions

429

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Abstract

Purpose – Translating the well-established theory of the gendered organization into strategic interventions that build more gender equitable organizations has proven to be difficult. The authors introduce the emergence of the “bifocal approach” and its subsequent development and examine the potential of the “bifocal approach” as a feminist intervention strategy and an alternative means of countering gender inequalities in organizations. While pre-existing transformative interventions focus on more immediately apparent structural change, the focus begins with the development of individuals. The paper aims to discuss these issues.

Design/methodology/approach – Developed through iterative cycling between theory and practice, the “bifocal approach” links the existing focus on women’s development with a focus on transformative organizational change. The bifocal approach deliberately begins with the organization’s current way of understanding gender in order to build towards frame-breaking transformative change.

Findings – The authors show how the bifocal is able to overcome some of the main difficulties of earlier transformative approaches, maintaining organizational access, partnership building, sustaining a gender focus and ultimately sustaining the change effort itself. The bifocal approach seeks structural change, however, the change effort rests with individuals. The development of individuals, as conceived within the bifocal approach was designed to create a “small wins” ripple effect, linking individual (agency) and organizational change (structure).

Practical implications – The bifocal approach offers a comprehensive re-modelling of traditional interventions for other scholars and practitioners to build on. Organizational interventions previously categorized as “fixing women” could be re-examined for their capacity to provide the foundation for transformative change.

Originality/value – The contribution of this paper lies in proposing and examining the bifocal approach as a feminist intervention strategy that overcomes the dualism between the existing frames of organizations and the transformative frame of scholars, in order to move practice and theory forward.

Keywords Gender, Change agency, Gender equality, Organizational change, Transformative interventions, Women-only programmes

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

For more than two decades, scholars have been questioning how to challenge the gendered organization through effective gender interventions (Ainsworth *et al.*, 2010; Connell, 2006; Evans, 2014). There is a scholarly conviction that effective interventions should transform gender as a structure, “changing everyday organizational routines and interaction so that they stop (re)producing gender inequalities” (Benschop *et al.*, 2012, p. 3), rather than “fixing women” (Ainsworth *et al.*, 2010; Eriksson-Zetterquist and Styhre, 2008;



Gherardi and Poggio, 2001; Glastra *et al.*, 2000). Despite this agreement between scholars, little empirical work has been published on transformative interventions (Benschop and Verloo, 2011; Charlesworth and Baird, 2007; Nentwich, 2006) and knowledge on how to transform organizations is still lacking. The few studies that report on transformative interventions prove that their implementation is problematic (Evans, 2014; Kolb, 2003; Kolb *et al.*, 1998). Transformative interventions in organizations are viewed as “unattractive to policy-makers and practitioners because they are bereft of practical instruments and strong in ‘scary radicalism’, thus prompting fear and resistance” (Benschop and Verloo, 2011, p. 285). Therefore, the large majority of interventions within organizations remain focussed on fixing women (European Commission, 2010; Leimon *et al.*, 2011; Nentwich, 2006; Zahidi and Ibarra, 2010), which is considered not effective by gender scholars to create transformative change. For example, women’s networks, forums, leadership development and mentoring programs, are all enjoying renewed popularity (Ely *et al.*, 2011; Hutchinson and Eveline, 2006).

As a consequence, we notice a divide between what occurs in practice but is considered theoretically misguided by gender scholars, and what is theoretically sound but does not easily translate into practice. This divide has become a stumbling block, impeding the development of both theory and practice and contributing to slow progress in building more gender equitable organizations. Although we embrace the underpinning epistemological theory of transformative interventions, we are concerned at the difficulties experienced in moving the gendered change agenda forward and argue that possibilities for alternative strategies should be explored.

We aim to address this theory-practice divide by examining how a commonly adopted “traditional” gender intervention could serve as the platform for transformative change. We both introduce the emergence of the bifocal approach and its subsequent development and examine the potential of the “bifocal approach” as a feminist intervention strategy and an alternative means of countering gender inequalities in organizations. We contribute to the literature on gender interventions in organizations by showing how the bifocal is able to overcome some of the main difficulties of earlier transformative approaches: maintaining organizational access, partnership building, sustaining a gender focus and ultimately sustaining the change effort itself.

Gender interventions in organizations

Change efforts to build more gender equitable workplaces have a long history. In the literature, a distinction is often made between traditional approaches, and non-traditional, structural or transformative approaches. Traditional approaches mainly focus on (individual) women as the problem, and have an epistemology that defines gender as a characteristic. Women-only (WO) training, mentoring, leadership and management development programs are considered the hallmark of this approach and are designed to teach women the “appropriate” traits and skills so they are better equipped to compete with men. These interventions have long been criticized for their remedial focus on (middle-class white) women (Ely and Meyerson, 2000; Liff and Cameron, 1997; Reavley, 1989) and for operating as a “salve to the organization conscience” (Knight and Pritchard, 1994, p. 57) while leaving organizational gendering processes undisturbed (Betters-Reed and Moore, 1995). Overall, gender scholars agree that interventions within this approach have a limited effect as they aim to increase women’s inclusion in the existing social order without unsettling the masculine, white, elitist, hetero-normative assumptions that underlie it (Ely and Meyerson, 2000; Healy *et al.*, 2010; Liff and Cameron, 1997; Nentwich, 2006; Zanoni *et al.*, 2010).

To challenge the gendered power structures, scholars turn to transformative interventions. In this approach, gender is no longer seen as the property of individuals; instead organizations are viewed as maintaining a gendered social order (Acker, 1990, 1992). A transformative intervention would therefore be one that “continuously identifies and disrupts that social order and revises the structural, interactive and interpretive practices in organizations accordingly” (Ely and Meyerson, 2000). A group of US scholars from the Center for Gender in Organizations (CGO) in Boston developed the equity (or fourth frame) approach to gender and organizational change (e.g. Ely and Meyerson, 2000; Meyerson and Kolb, 2000; Meyerson and Fletcher, 2000). According to this approach, making the workplace more inclusive entails changing core organizational processes, beliefs, cultures, routines and/or structures (Ely and Meyerson, 2010). In a series of papers (*Organization*, Vol.7 No. 4), the CGO scholars described an empirical study in which an academic research team used a collaborative action research approach to work with organizational “change agents” to further gender equity.

The work of the CGO scholars was in line with a growing group of gender in organizations scholars arguing that transformative change was the most effective way to change the gendered organization (Cockburn, 1991; Ely and Meyerson, 2000; Liff and Cameron, 1997; Nentwich, 2006). A number of Scandinavian scholars have developed transformative action research methodologies (Amundsdotter, 2010; Andersson *et al.*, 2009; for an overview see De Vries, 2013). Key elements of this Scandinavian body of work are a strong focus on developing pedagogical tools for building gender knowledge/understanding among organizational constituents, extended timeframes and intensive engagement with selected organizational insiders. Another example of transformational interventions is gender mainstreaming, a strategy for making women’s as well as men’s concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies so that women and men benefit equally (Eveline *et al.*, 2009; Benschop and Verloo, 2006). Gender mainstreaming can be seen as a policy-based approach to transformative change, which despite early promise has proven to be difficult to implement (see Sainsbury and Bergqvist, 2009; Evans, 2014).

All these studies have highlighted difficulties and none can claim widespread or popular adoption. In the next section, we explore why transformative interventions have been unattractive for organizations and the difficulties scholars and practitioners encounter when working with transformative interventions.

Critical issues for transformative interventions

We distinguish four critical issues from the literature for transformative interventions. First, we distinguish problems associated with the transformative intent. Transformative interventions aim to disrupt the gendered status quo, calling into question the power, privilege and status of the dominant group, primarily white men. As Benschop and Verloo (2011) argue, transformative approaches are high in “scary radicalism”. It should come as no surprise then when organizational change efforts experience resistance and backlash (Eriksson-Zetterquist and Renemark, 2016; Benschop and van den Brink, 2014). Negotiating access and maintaining the approval of senior executives is problematic because of the unsettling (to them) nature of the proposed changes.

Second, there is no shared understanding of the way gender works in organizations. The ontological approach of the researchers implementing transformative interventions is often at odds with that of the vast majority of individuals and the organization where the intervention is taking place. There is a considerable gap between the local gender

knowledge (Verloo, 2013) of organizational insiders, where gender tends to be understood as the property of individuals, and the approach of scholars building on the foundation of gender as socially constructed and organizations as gendered. This gap also exists between the prevailing discourse of gender neutrality that renders gender invisible, and transformative gender interventions which aim to make gendering processes visible and open to scrutiny, experimentation and change. The overwhelming organizational need “to disappear gender,” situating it “below the horizon” of what matters’ (Eveline and Bacchi, 2009, p. 566) creates antagonism between feminist and organizational goals. Transformative approaches, lacking ready-made solutions, have been described as “blue sky” interventions, having vague goals and lacking practical guidelines (Benschop and Verloo, 2011). Organizations, as a result of this ontological gap, have difficulty grasping the need for more far-reaching change, inclining them towards more traditional gender interventions that target women and leave existing structures and practices intact.

Third, this gap between researchers and organizational members in understanding gender and the gender problem has implications for the partnership building needed to develop “in-house” gender expertise (Coleman and Rippin, 2000). In the case of the CGO, despite negotiated support at CEO level, organizational insiders were wary of involvement and struggled to grasp the gender focus and experimental methodology of the intervention (Meyerson and Kolb, 2000). Coleman and Rippin (2000, p. 85) describe their experience as trying to “find a way to work with people on something they preferred to overlook,” leading them to conclude that the partner relationships were insufficiently robust for the challenges presented by the approach. CGO researchers, in common with those implementing gender mainstreaming initiatives (Bacchi *et al.*, 2005; Benschop and Verloo, 2006; Eveline and Bacchi, 2009), noted the difficulty in holding their ground for fear of losing their project or the co-operation of organizational partners. Benschop and Verloo (2006, p. 30) regard this as a more generic problem, stating that the “risks of conflict avoidance and even self-censorship are not specific for this project, but are inherent to gender mainstreaming.” In gender mainstreaming projects, partnership building faltered as potential organizational partners came to see the project as risky, or unimportant, or to fear the consequences of being seen as “gender champions” (Evans, 2014; Eveline and Bacchi, 2009).

Fourth, the difficulty in maintaining organizational access, bridging the gap in gender knowledge, and building partnerships all have implications for the sustainability of the gender change intervention. The finite nature of action research and gender mainstreaming interventions is antithetical to the long-term nature of gender change (Acker, 2000). The generative, experimental and open-ended nature of transformative approaches, necessary because of the context specific, dynamic and shifting nature of gendering processes, means that change is entirely dependent on organizational insiders maintaining the impetus for change. It is often not possible to secure organizational engagement needed for building internal gender change expertise and commitment. The culmination of these difficulties is that the transformative intent is compromised, a process described as “losing gender” (Coleman and Rippin, 2000). In the case of the CGO, the pairing of the business case with gender – the dual agenda – was not successful because organizational insiders prioritized the more understandable and achievable business goals, sidelining and forgetting their original gender change intent. Also Eriksson-Zetterquist and Renemark (2016) reported that the risk that the gender agenda “fades away” in day to day organizing. Even in organizations where gender

equality was a formal policy, “gender issues seem to vanish when women and men were assessed for promotion or when gender-neutral job descriptions were being sought” (p. 375). The sustainability of gender equality programs and anchoring of gender awareness in day-to-day practices, therefore, is one of the main challenges scholars and practitioners currently face.

Introducing the bifocal approach

We introduce a strategy to engage organizations in moving towards a transformative approach, using a traditional intervention, a WO program, as a vehicle for transformative change. Women only programs include any training or development activity that is only open to women. The question we now pose is what (if any) intervention strategy can resolve these difficulties and enhance the capacity of the intervention to move towards and hold onto transformative intent?

The bifocal approach is a feminist intervention strategy designed to focus on both individual development and organizational change. The term the “bifocal approach” plays with the idea of bifocal spectacles which provide, with practice, the capacity to almost simultaneously focus on the near (individual women and men) and the distant (the organization), linking the two. It acknowledges the critical role of developing individuals’ gender insight and change agency in order to bring about organizational change. It sought to turn the inevitable focus on the development of individual women inherent in women’s programs from a weakness (fixing the women) to a strength, through the additional concurrent focus on gendered organizational change. The use of a “bifocal approach,” much like bifocal spectacles, would provide adeptness in switching focal length, enabling the intervention to focus almost simultaneously on both individual development and organizational change.

The bifocal approach is inspired by the work of Cynthia Cockburn (1989). Cockburn creates a distinction between the long and short agendas’ for change, where the short agenda is one of “equality for individual women” while the longer agenda is a “project of transformation for organizations” (Cockburn, 1989, p. 218). Implied in this approach is a continuum, between the shorter and longer agendas. The bifocal approach proposed here builds on and extends this work by beginning within the current organizational reality (a traditional intervention) in order to build movement towards the transformative ideal. It proposes a traditional intervention as a viable and potentially advantageous platform or foundation for building a transformative intervention.

The bifocal approach is a strategy to move individuals and the organization from the epistemological position of traditional approaches (gender inequality is understood to be a result of socialized sex differences) towards a transformational one (gender as a “system of oppressive relations reproduced through social practices” (Ely and Meyerson, 2000, p. 107). Acknowledging that the organization, organizational members and the intervention itself are primarily positioned within a traditional gender epistemology, highlights this as our point of departure. The antithetical nature of sex/gender that differentiates a traditional gender epistemology (where we are starting) from a transformative epistemology (where we are moving towards) is what requires our attention. Building this movement towards the transformative is dependent on building individual’s critical gender insight. We define gender insight as the capacity to see gender in action (socially constructed and performative; West and Zimmerman, 1987) and to understand gender as personal and interpersonal, systemic and structural (Acker, 1990). The development of gender insight that is contextual to the organization will ultimately enable individuals to act as change agents that disrupt and change

workplace practices. In other words, the bifocal approach proposes to use individual development (gender insight and change agency) as a fulcrum to tip organizations towards transformative change in gender relations.

The first step was drawing on gender scholarship to strengthen the gender focus of the curriculum around three main themes: leadership as gendered, the development of gender insight and the development of gender change agency. Leadership as a gendered construct and the need for women to re-define leadership drew on the work of Sinclair (1998) and a model of leadership that incorporated gender, power and identity within a gendered organizational culture. This in turn provided the foundation for the development of gender insight. Tools and strategies including gendered cultural analysis (Meyerson and Fletcher, 2000) were used to explicate the link between individual gendered practices and organizational gender change. Finally the “small wins” approach to cultural change (Ely and Meyerson, 2000) together with the concept of “tempered radicals” as a model of change agency (Meyerson, 2003; Meyerson and Scully, 1995) were used to support the development of change agency.

Second, the need to escape the “women’s problem, women’s work” dilemma prompted us to take a broader view of the program within the institution, and to think of the mentors and executive champions as participants. More deliberate engagement with executive-level leaders/program champions and mentors was designed into the program in order to develop their gender insight and change agency. We drew on gender scholarship to provide frameworks for mentors, however, their training was much more time constrained and varied across the years of the program. Our work with executives relied on documents such as speech notes, program reporting documents, meetings and informal conversations.

Individual development also required further support. Peer learning groups (PLGs), based on a collegial model of action and reflection, were introduced to support and enhance transfer of individual learning back into the workplace (where organizational change can occur). The group structure encouraged participants to apply their program learning within their workplaces. At the same time, end of year PLG presentations were introduced in order to build in accountability for the women and provide a feedback loop to the organization, especially to develop the gender knowledge of executive champions and mentors.

This description of the emerging bifocal approach of necessity simplifies an extended and “messy” process. The key point we wish to emphasize here is that developing the bifocal approach was a process of continually seeking and refining ways to develop women’s and men’s understanding of the gendering processes of their own organization and the part that they could play in creating change.

Case and methods: developing the bifocal approach

Context and case selection

A feminist qualitative research methodology (Sprague, 2005) was used, with the aim of making gender visible and asking if, how and why social processes, standards and opportunities differ systematically for women and men in the research organizations. The research has a longitudinal character, which is fruitful for studying change in organizations (Van de Ven and Poole, 2005).

We selected two Australian organizations because they both had leadership development for women (LDW) programs that had been in place for a number of years. Australian universities have a history of gender interventions such as women’s leadership and mentoring programs (Eveline, 2004; Tessens, 2008), however, this was the first of its kind in policing (Harwood, 2007). The university program, which pre-dated policing, was

based around a yearly cohort of 30 women from academic and professional (administrative) areas. The first author was involved in the design and delivery of both programs, and was an organizational insider in the university but not in policing. The program in police began in 2004 and replicated the university program design, duration, curriculum and facilitation process, and was tailored to the policing context. Normal ethical processes were adhered to preserve the anonymity of individuals and organizations. Both organizations provided unfettered access for the research and neither organization provided funds or resources, nor shaped the research scope or agenda.

Data collection and analysis

The study was designed as a research study to examine the effectiveness of the bifocal approach in the university and police organization. Semi-structured individual and group interviews were conducted during 2007 and 2008 with a total of 43 research participants, 12 of whom were men. Individual interviews were conducted with executive “champions” and mentors, and group interviews with program participants. The interviews were conducted and analyzed in three distinct stages: first, executive champions, then mentors, then participants, with each subsequent stage informed by the previous interviews (Table I).

The selection of the three groups was determined by the design of the bifocal approach, where these three groups had emerged as the key players. Interviewees included six executive-level “champions,” chosen because they played a public role in endorsing and supporting the program, three in each organization (one male, two female in the university and two male, one female in policing). Totally, 14 mentors, randomly chosen from the pool of those who had mentored twice or more, were interviewed, comprising eight professors (four men, four women) and six police officers (four men, two women) at the rank of inspector or superintendent. Only two women in policing had mentored twice thus meeting this criterion.

Group interviews were conducted with six “successful” PLGs, defined as those which continued to meet beyond the formal close of their program, three in each organization. Focus group participants also completed data sheets which captured changes that had occurred as a result of the program, key learnings about their topic, examples of seeing and doing things differently, changes observed for themselves and other group members, and words that evoke what the group meant to them. While primarily relying on individual and group interview data, the first author’s role as a participant observer and extensive documentary sources provided additional data.

To examine the transformative potential of the bifocal approach, we analyzed the data using a qualitative content analysis (Lieblich *et al.*, 1998). The content analysis was carried out by splitting the text into relatively small units of content on the basis of areas of interest. Initially we began by scanning the text and isolating the words and phrases connected to four central themes: interviewees’ assessment of gender progress in their organizations, their engagement with and perception of the WO program, interviewees’ understanding of gender processes in organizations, and their contributions towards gender change. The process of data analysis involved multiple iterations and cross-checking of coding in order to identify data around these themes. This first descriptive coding revealed the common patterns and themes of learning in the three groups. We then shifted to a more holistic method of content analysis, interpreting parts or categories of the text in the light of the rest of the text (Ollerenshaw and Creswell, 2002). From these steps, we could identify the development of gender insight in the organizations, and the learning and changes in behavior that had occurred during the program.

	University	Police	Topics
Champions	2 women executive level 1 man executive level	1 woman executive level 2 men executive level	Engagement with and attitudes to the program The definition of championing and applicability to LDW and gender equality Examples of championing behaviors Development as champions Challenges faced and skills required Relevance of seniority and gender to championing gender Similarities and differences in championing of other causes The role of the program in enabling and developing champions
Mentors	4 male professors 4 female professors	4 male superintendents/inspectors 2 female superintendents/inspectors (no other senior women fit criteria)	Experiences as a mentor with the program Understanding of the role and what they brought to this role Description of a typical mentoring session Outcomes for the mentee Impact of their gender on the relationship The situation for women in the organization Changes in their understanding, attitudes and behaviors they might attribute to their program involvement Relationship to and involvement with the program Reflections on the role of women's programs for the organization
Peer learning groups	3 groups 13 women in total	3 groups 10 women in total	Group formation Content/process meetings Experiences during the program Learning experiences Reflections on changes in working live Reflections on peer group presentations Changes in awareness and behavior

Table I.
Overview
interviewees
and topics

Role as participant researcher

As feminist researchers, we do not claim (an unachievable) objectivity (Acker *et al.*, 1983). The first author's multiple positioning as researcher and practitioner/participant observer is made visible and explicit in this account. As the designer and deliverer of the LDW program, her familiarity with both organizations brought with it the significant advantages of "working at the intersection of scholarship and practice" (Rapoport *et al.*, 2002, p. 196). Her dual role facilitated the iterative cycling between theory and practice and inspired the study. In addition, the sense of familiarity between researcher and interviewee, allowed for more open conversations, and at times deeper probing, during the individual and group interview process.

However, the dual role also produced tensions, especially as the first author was an integral part of the success narrative of both LDW programs. While this facilitated organizational access for the research it also made it difficult to be publicly critical.

There was also the risk that her quite different experiences in delivering the LDW program in the two organizations would color her analysis (not that we can ever be uninfluenced by our life experiences). For example, as an accepted insider at the university, the first author may have been inclined to an overly positive reading of the data. The converse could be the case at policing where she was always positioned as an outsider.

Recognizing the risks associated with her dual role, the first author used a reflexive practice of questioning and looking again and again at the interactions, the transcripts, the analyses, her assumptions, the research findings and conclusions reached. Collaborating with a co-author who was uninvolved in the data collection also helped to make explicit and deal with the experiences and assumptions that the first author brought to the table. Together, we have been rethinking and rewriting the contribution of the bifocal approach and its consequences for gender in organization theory.

Examining the potential of the bifocal approach

In the following analysis, we explore the transformative potential of the “bifocal approach” by presenting how executive-level champions, mentors and women participants were able to develop gender insight in order to facilitate transformative change. Each group is discussed separately to emphasize their differences in roles, program engagement and learning processes, which influence their capacity to act as change agents.

Executive-level champions

Seeking engagement and endorsement from executives, who often hold the purse strings, has always been an integral part of gender equality interventions from a practitioner perspective (Desvaux *et al.*, 2010). The development of the bifocal approach strengthened this engagement; the program design deliberately engaged with these executives in order to build their own gender insight, ultimately re-positioning executives as “participants” in the LDW program. Therefore in examining the executives’ accounts, we are looking for evidence of personal movement towards an acceptance and understanding of the need for transformative organizational change. The accounts of the two most powerful champions, the Vice-Chancellor (VC), “Andrew,” and the Commissioner of Police, “Mark” are examined in detail below, because they, respectively, demonstrate movement towards the transformative (the “long agenda”) and resolutely holding onto a “short agenda” (Cockburn, 1989).

The VC proved to be an active and visible champion who endorsed LDW and positioned it as an organizational change program. Andrew was well respected and recognized by the university community for his support of gender equity and at the time of interview had championed the LDW program for more than a decade. He welcomed the opportunity to mentor, attended and spoke at many events and, while he confessed to occasionally squirming uncomfortably in his seat at the PLG presentations, was willing to hear critical messages from the women. It was Andrew’s public comments about his mentoring experiences that indicated he had, through repeat mentoring, developed greater insight into systemic gendering:

I have discovered that all my mentees over the years have shared the same problem. They all have difficulty getting heard in meetings. I began to think about meetings and what made it so difficult for women to make their contribution (Andrew, VC).

In recognizing the pattern of difficulties shared by his mentees, Andrew began to focus on the culture of meetings as the cause, rather than any lack on the part of the women.

He reflected on his own chairing of meetings and sponsored an institution wide project to develop chairing skills and inclusive meeting practices. In doing so he exemplified the bifocal approach, switching his focus between the development of individual mentees and challenging gendered organizational practices, demonstrating the link between individual development and organizational change. Andrew's movement beyond seeing the women as deficit and recognizing the need for change was evident in the way he positioned the program. In his column in *University News* (May 17, 2004) he wrote that: "Very few things happen in an institution that could be said to transform that institution, but LDW has transformed this university." Andrew made the critical link between individual development and organizational change, developing a systemic understanding of gender. He legitimized gender equity as an organizational issue, enabled LDW to pursue a transformative agenda and ensured its longevity.

At the start of the LDW program at policing, Police Commissioner (COP) Mark was a high-profile champion but progressively became disconnected and invisible. Following the high-profile launch of the first program he failed to attend successive launches, never attended PLG presentations and mentored only once. All championing duties were delegated to the first ever senior (executive) woman he recruited into this policing jurisdiction, just after the first LDW program began. During the interview Mark repeatedly referred to LDW as a training program, a solution to the problem of too few senior women, and part of his vision of building a more modern policing organization. "[A]dding diversity whether it is gender equity or other types of diversity" would assist the work of cultural reform, he said. The Commissioner resisted engagement. His absence from events designed to showcase the program and its achievements had the unintended effect of highlighting the lack of visible senior executive endorsement, he failed to position the program strategically, and ultimately left the program vulnerable to the decisions of senior men who were unsupportive and even hostile.

Mark's view of LDW as a training program (traditional epistemology) and his positioning of women as having special feminine qualities undermined the program's transformative potential. Despite being initially chosen because of its culture change focus, LDW progressively lost status. Finally, at the end of the fifth year, and despite an extremely favorable evaluation of the program that was never circulated, the contract to deliver the program was not renewed.

The effectiveness of the bifocal approach must in part be judged on the development of gender insight by these chief executives. However, these accounts have underlined the importance of executives to the very existence of LDW. The contrast in the longevity of the program at the university and much shorter duration at Police confirmed the critical role of executive champions in regard to organizational access, as gatekeepers, protectors and positioners of the program. At the most basic level it is the sustainability of the program over time that is fundamental to the effectiveness of the "bifocal approach."

Mentors

The bifocal approach sought to reposition LDW mentors from peripheral contributors to program "participants" engaged in the gendered change effort. In this way, their development becomes critical to the transformative agenda. Trevor, a Police Inspector, provided the exemplar of what we call "bifocal" mentoring. He was practised in turning a critical eye on his organization, following his involvement in several Royal Commissions into Police Corruption. He could be described, to use Meyerson and Scully's (1995)

term, as a “tempered radical.” Trevor had mentored three times, adopting a two-way developmental approach. He observed each of his mentees being overlooked for opportunities they deserved, and began to notice the systemic gendering of opportunity, which was depriving women of the experience and confidence to progress. He turned his existing skills as a tempered radical to good use, challenging and changing the ways in which opportunities were distributed within his own managerial sphere of influence. He discussed his developing gender insight with his mentees, assisting them to do the same, and role modelled ways to challenge the status quo without, as he commented, “cutting my own throat and basically being treated like a leper”:

I am actually able to intervene and go “No, I am going to suggest Pamela”. So you actually cause people like Superintendents to stop dead in their tracks and go “This is not a fait accompli anymore” [...] So you actually are able, at the management table, to say, you need to stop, have a think about this. “Oh, look, it is the male again”.

This developed into a whole new awareness for Trevor:

[...] I was able to sit and actually actively look for opportunities to intervene whereas I would have been unconscious of it before. I would have been “Oh, yeah, RJ’s a great operator. I understand why he has got that project”. But I wouldn’t have sat there prior to that going “Hang on, what’s going on here?”

Trevor also looked out for his own female staff, explaining that “I now actively go out and champion opportunities for them.” By advocating on behalf of women more broadly, Trevor was challenging the gendering of opportunity. Trevor’s development of gender insight and change agency occurred as a consequence of his mentoring relationships and demonstrates movement to the transformative. His approach is bifocal – he focussed on the development of his mentees, assisting them to thrive within the current gendered order, while he (and they) acted to challenge and change the gendered status quo.

Participants in PLGs

The LDW program works most intensively with the original group of women “participants,” and the gender informed curriculum was designed to support the development of women leaders with a capacity to contribute to gender change in organizations. Although the women participants in LDW are at the heart of the WO program mandate, they are not the sole focus of the bifocal approach to gender change. This would relegate gendered change to being women’s problem and women’s work, a return to Frame 1 thinking. Nonetheless women’s capacity to move towards the transformative is important in gauging the effectiveness of the bifocal approach.

What is evident in women’s accounts is that the process of tackling issues participants identified as problematic for themselves and other women in the workplace became a means of disrupting the gendered status quo in their organizations. In particular, as the women rejected more masculine styles and norms around leadership and stepped into leadership more confidently as women, they became agents of transformative change.

PLGs were introduced to LDW to strengthen the bifocal approach in two main ways. The primary goal of PLGs was to support and encourage individual women to experiment and do things differently in the workplace. The secondary goal was for PLGs to contribute to the development of gender insight of executive champions and mentors through presentations at the end of the program. Presentations were designed

to creatively “hold up the mirror” (Rao *et al.*, 1999, p. 18) to the organization to highlight systemic gender issues. The groups formed around topics generated by the women, and met regularly between workshops. Women, using their group members as “critical friends,” were encouraged to engage in an iterative reflection and action learning cycle akin to the “small wins” cycle of diagnosis, dialogue and experimentation used to uncover gendering processes in the workplace (Meyerson and Fletcher, 2000).

At the university the How do we define ourselves as leaders? group of mostly academic women worked with different metaphors to explore leadership which, as group member Vera explained, became “a shift of paradigm which was quite fruitful.” It grew out of their disenchantment with current masculine leadership theories and a dearth of alternative role models. The group members began a process of seeing and labelling the leadership of each other, claiming aspects of their leadership that had been “disappeared” by the male model of leadership (Fletcher, 2001). This collective naming of their leadership acted as an antidote to the lack of recognition of their leadership within their workplaces and legitimized alternative ways of doing organizational leadership. In their public presentation at the end of the program, primary values that emerged included the notion of generosity in academic leadership, a negotiation of self in relation to place, and bringing the whole self to the tasks and values of leadership. Importantly, the presentation publicly challenged the heroic, masculine, competitive and less generous leadership styles common in the university. These PLGs presentations were effective in highlighting gendered norms and practices to a wider audience.

The topic of a PLG in policing, Are flexible staff committed staff? effectively challenged gendered norms that devalued part-time and flexible workers. This group’s issue was not just accessing flexible work options but, as Anne highlighted, challenging “how that was interpreted as far as commitment in the workplace, the fact we were marginalized [...]” Natasha described how she challenged such marginalization through advocating for colleagues: “I now have the confidence to campaign for my own flexible work practices and am able to approach senior management on flexible practices for others.” She described her own transformation:

Pre LDW I used to just take a lot of what was said, know it was wrong in my own mind, but not I suppose push the boundaries, whereas now [...] if someone says something to me now and I don’t think it is right, then I will say it [...] I think it is a combination of LDW and the peer learning group that has given me that confidence to go, “No, hang on. Let’s stop and think about this” [...] Yeah, I suppose I was like this little mouse before and now I am sort of like the troublemaker (Laughter).

Other group members supported each other to access flexible provisions available in policy but not in practice, to challenge managers and co-workers attitudes, and to positively claim their capacity to contribute when others devalued them. Developing gender insight and change agency, they questioned organizational norms and instigated a discussion around flexible work practices. This group used the board game of Snakes and Ladders, as a visually striking and accessible way of presenting the message to their audience that while the policies were there to support them (ladders), their success in negotiating flexible work practices was subject to the symbolic throw of a loaded dice. Policies, without accompanying changes in gendered attitudes on the part of managers could result in progress that quickly become eroded (snakes) often resulting in a return to square one.

In the “Stand your ground” university group, members bonded easily around their shared experiences. As Siti explained “I thought I was the only one with this

problem [lack of confidence], but when I got there [LDW], everyone has the same problem.” While some women entered the program with what could be described as a feminist consciousness (Colgan and Ledwith, 1996), and saw their shared experiences as systemic, others remained focussed on the individual. Yet, most women started to challenge several gendered norms in their workplaces. Using the symbol of the “cairn” (a pile of rocks that mark the path forward) in their end of program presentation reflections they demonstrated how their sense of self and their actions had undergone change as they learnt to “stand their ground.” Examples included learning not to yield to others based purely on their hierarchical position, having the confidence to respectfully disagree, working to quietly uphold their own interests, and staying true to their core values. A year later their work continued: Georgia was setting boundaries with her male boss and co-workers, saying no, speaking up about problems or issues, and becoming a role model for her female colleagues in doing so; Siti was learning to “exercise leadership in lots of little things everyday”; Jenny was now “seeing myself as a leader” and developing her own style where she could lead without being “hard” or “unkind”; and Wilma now understood that she could lead and offer guidance from within the group, without a “strong fist on the table.” Group members actively re-defined leadership, saw themselves as leaders and worked out ways to lead that suited them, in each instance challenging gendered leadership norms. The cairn visually represented how small changes, individually and collectively piled up to become significant change. This was accompanied by major changes in their working lives, including several secondments, reclassifications and a new job, giving them larger arenas for exercising leadership and more recognition for what they were contributing.

These accounts demonstrate that the PLG process has been effective in supporting the transformative goals of the bifocal approach. Women’s accounts show that the process of tackling issues participants identified as problematic for themselves and other women in the workplace became a means of disrupting the gendered status quo in their organizations. Groups formed around women’s shared experiences and challenges, quickly developed trust and the topics themselves effectively channelled women’s efforts into challenging gendered norms as is evidenced by the group titles. In particular, as the women rejected more masculine styles and norms around leadership and stepped into leadership more confidently as women, they became agents of change. Group support has proven effective in supporting women to “do things differently” in the workplace, effectively recreating a “small wins” process. The participants’ leadership journeys, with women stepping forward with increased confidence and visibility, and in ways that transgress gendered norms, are shown in these accounts. Importantly the women’s development has continued, with the group interviews, undertaken between one and three years post program, capturing changes lasting well beyond the formal duration of the LDW program.

Discussion

We explored how the gendered organization can be countered by a new feminist intervention strategy to contribute to theory and practice on gender interventions based on a transformative approach (Ainsworth *et al.*, 2010; Connell, 2006; Evans, 2014). We have developed a bifocal approach that links the existing focus on women’s development with a focus on transformative change. It sought to turn the inevitable focus on the development of individual women inherent in women’s programs from a weakness (fixing women) to a strength, through the additional concurrent focus on gendered organizational change. We have argued that it has potential to bridge the

theory-practice divide and offers a palatable, tangible intervention strategy. Reflecting on our empirical results, we first explore how the bifocal approach has the potential to progress transformative change of the gendered organization. Second, we discuss the bifocal approach in relation to existing transformative approaches.

The transformative potential of the bifocal approach

To counter inequalities in organizations, interventions should transform gender as a structure, “changing everyday organizational routines and interaction so that they stop (re)producing gender inequalities” (Benschop *et al.*, 2012, p. 3). Transformative interventions encourage a focus on identifying organizational change as a measure of success. This is, however, difficult to measure and difficult to claim. Therefore, we propose a much more modest measure of success for the bifocal approach. The theory of the bifocal approach suggests the building of gender insight – the capacity to see relational and systemic gendering, and the capacity to act – is key to any movement towards the transformative on the part of the individual. The development of change agents, as conceived within the bifocal approach was designed to create the capacity to disrupt structures, norms and relations of gender (Nentwich *et al.*, 2015), linking individual (agency) and organizational change (structure).

This is in clear opposition to the denial of organizational gendering processes characteristic of traditional “equip the women” initiatives (Healy *et al.*, 2010; Nentwich, 2006) that place the responsibility of advancing within the current (gendered) system by the individual (Ozbilgin and Tatli, 2011). In addition, our focus on individuals serves as a counterpoint to existing transformative gender interventions that, because they wish to transcend the individual level, sometimes neglect the individual altogether (Benschop and Verloo, 2011). At the heart of the bifocal approach was the individual’s development of gender insight and change agency, explored through the program’s engagement with executive-level champions, senior male and female mentors and the female participants of the program. The bifocal approach created a link between women stepping more strongly into leadership and the “ripple effect” capacity of this to transform the gendered organization. Women participants saw and claimed themselves as leaders in new ways, thereby challenging the gendered status quo, and using the small wins approach to achieve change. As their leadership identity strengthened they told stories about pushing back against dominant cultures and structures; they highlighted gaps between policy and practice, pushed back against the devaluing of part-time staff, implemented flexible work practices, refused to accept traditional masculinity and the men who embodied it as leadership role models, adopted practices of generosity rather than competitiveness, and stood their ground in the face of unreasonable demands.

Design advantages of the bifocal approach

We argue that the bifocal approach can serve as a palatable vehicle moderating problems identified by studies on transformative intervention strategies. We use the analogy of learning to swim to demonstrate that, despite their shared goals, there are fundamental differences in approach between the “starting at the shallow end” bifocal approach and existing “dive in the deep end” transformational interventions. The analogy serves to highlight; first, how the bifocal approach is overcoming some of the difficulties of current transformational interventions indicated in the theoretical framework; second, to emphasize our view that traditional and transformative can be more usefully thought of

as departure and destination epistemologies, that require a focus on movement; and third, to emphasize people's capacity to move towards the transformative end.

The bifocal approach joins organizational insiders at the shallow end of the pool, gradually developing individuals' capacity to swim, with the aim of coaxing people towards the deep end. Current transformative interventions on the other hand could be characterized as inviting organizational insiders to jump in at the deep end of the pool and learn to (sink or) swim. The intention of the bifocal approach is to move individuals and the organization towards deeper "transformative" waters, a feat that is often initially beyond the current capacity or understanding of the individual or the organization. This "beginning where people are" approach moderates problems associated with the radical transformative intent, the local gender knowledge gap, difficulties in partnership building and subsequent problems with sustainability experienced within the "dual agenda" (Kolb and Merrill-Sands, 1999) and gender mainstreaming approaches to transformative interventions.

Problems associated with the transformative intent. Beginning in the shallows, that is the current frame of individuals and organizations, has the advantage of minimizing the fear and resistance associated with jumping in at the deep end, with all its "scary radicalism" (Benschop and Verloo, 2011). The program focus on the women fits with the existing gender discourse and gender knowledge, therefore is less threatening to the current status quo, and encounters less overt resistance and backlash than current transformative interventions. This "playing around" with gender discourses (Nentwich, 2006) enables a transformation of something that is known, safe and acceptable (WO-programs) to something that is unknown and risky (transformative intent) to move the radical change agenda forward.

Gap between feminist and local gender knowledge. The deep end may seem unattractive to someone who is not able to swim and may have little desire to learn. The gap in gender knowledge between an intervention informed by gender scholarship (transformative epistemology) and an organization and individuals where gender is traditionally understood (traditional epistemology) is at its greatest at the beginning of any gender intervention, resulting in the resistance that many scholars observed (Coleman and Rippin, 2000; Benschop and Verloo, 2006; Eriksson-Zetterquist and Renemark, 2016). It is this gap in the ontological positioning that must be tackled by any intervention with transformative intent. The problem with purist transformative approaches is that the gap has to be tackled before any real foundations have been built on which to do this challenging work. The bifocal approach by beginning with a pre-existing or palatable intervention provides a foundation on which to build. The short agenda of the program, with its focus on individual women provides a stable base and a structure for engaging with a wide range and number of organizational insiders, sometimes over multiple years, providing multiple opportunities to move out of the shallows.

Building partnership and holding onto gender. The calmer safer shallows provide greater opportunity to build trust and relationship and a sense of possibility for a different way of doing things, in effect to create "constituencies for change" (Kolb and Merrill-Sands, 1999). The development of gender insight and change agency is analogous to learning to swim, over time enabling striking out into deeper waters. LDW programs in the case organizations were seen as "good news" stories, where organizational insiders engaged positively as participants, mentors and champions – in effect providing hundreds of potential swimmers. However, the temptation will always exist to stick with the known shallows. The difficulties of building gender insight and

change agency remain, however, the program as the platform provided greater opportunity for productive engagement with a large group of individuals. Evidence of movement, which represents a change in ontological thinking has been noted, suggesting that gender has not been entirely “lost.”

Sustainability. Refusing to jump in at the deep end or clambering out prematurely thus terminating the intervention are both difficulties experienced by current transformative interventions. Many scholars have noted the difficulties of holding onto the transformative gender agenda themselves when fearful that the project might be discontinued or relationships be compromised by pushing gender too hard (Benschop and Verloo, 2006; Charlesworth and Baird, 2007; Coleman and Rippin, 2000). This tussle between maintaining the intervention and maintaining the transformative intent of the intervention can be seen as the logical consequence of difficulties with the location of the intervention (the deep end), the gap in knowledges (needing to learn to swim) and the difficulties in partnership building (developing safety and trust over time). Transformative interventions suffer from a cascading effect where each difficulty leads to another, leading ultimately to “losing gender” or the “fading out” of the intervention (Eriksson-Zetterquist and Renemark, 2016). The bifocal “start where people are” approach, ameliorates this cascade effect. A less confronting intervention, more engaged insiders, a larger participant group and a longer timeframe provides more opportunity to do the transformative work, creating a more sustainable approach.

Practical implications

Our findings suggest, that the bifocal approach offers a re-modelling of traditional interventions for other scholars and practitioners to build on. We suggest that feminist theory, through the too easy dismissal of traditional interventions, has been constraining the engagement of scholars with practice. This absence of scholarly engagement has left a vacuum that continues to be filled by a-theoretical interventions resulting in slow progress at best and harm at worst (Janssens and Zanoni, 2014). Organizational interventions previously categorized as traditional “fix the women” interventions could be re-examined for their capacity to provide the foundation for transformative change (see also Benschop *et al.*, 2015). The current plethora of gender and diversity programs, networks and initiatives can be seen as providing opportunities for developing the gender insight and change agency of individuals, and thus ultimately contributing to transformative gender change.

Our contribution to practice is therefore to provide some design principles to apply the bifocal approach to other interventions with a traditional epistemology. The learning to swim analogy provides an overarching metaphor that we believe can be usefully applied to other existing interventions. Begin within the existing frame and continually re-design and refine the intervention to become a platform to develop women’s and men’s understanding of the gendering processes of their own organization and the part that they could play in creating change. This is an effortful process requiring skill, time, support, facilitation and a stable long-term platform. The bifocal approach has four key design principles. First, dispensing with “scary radical blue sky” interventions based on current transformative approaches that are out of step with the ontological position of people and organizations while at the same time being guided by the need for transformative change. Second, beginning with local gendered knowledges (Verloo, 2013) and the existing interventions that have arisen from these understandings, and working with them. Third, focus on creating

movement towards the transformative. Engage with men and women in building gender insight and capacity to act for change. Fourth, maintaining a focus on both individual development and organizational change. Building gender insight and change agency is always contextual – it is linked to the structures and cultures of their organization. This is the essence of the bifocal – linking their individual development to their organizational change.

Finally, we argue that it is time for the pendulum to swing towards a focus on practice in order to develop new theory. This paper constitutes an invitation, not just to join institutions in their current practice, but to do so with the intention of developing theory from practice. The development of the bifocal approach as a feminist intervention approach that has grown out of a practitioner grappling with theory constitutes the opening steps in developing theory based on greater engagement between scholars, practitioners and organizations.

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