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Polite Women at Work: Negotiating Professional Identity Through Strategic Assertiveness

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This study explores how women learn effective communication styles through socialization as well as the strategic choices that women make when performing face-threatening acts at work. We argue that communication style choices are gendered and learned primarily through trial and error. We also argue women learn to perform assertiveness in ways that manage the tension between their personal and professional identities, concluding that participants strategically enact assertiveness by consciously considering gender, relationship, context, and goals.

Keywords assertiveness, gender, organizing, paradox, politeness, professional, socialization, work, workplace communication

Because women are considered either "too female" to be professional or "too professional" to be feminine, their performance of assertiveness at work is an ongoing struggle. Popular press representations, including a plethora of women's self-help books, describe women's speech as impeding their professional success and suggest that women should simply be more assertive (e.g., Babcock & Laschever, 2007, 2009; Frankel, 2010; Solovic, 2003). However, assertiveness—defined as the act of directly, openly, honestly, and appropriately declaring one's thoughts and feelings (Gay, Hollandsworth, & Galassi, 1975)—challenges socially constructed notions that women ought to communicate politely (Rudman & Glick, 2001). Politeness, defined as any communication act that makes requests less infringing and/or establishes a positive relationship (Brown & Levinson, 1987), can undermine assertiveness (see Brown & Levinson, 1987; Locher & Watts, 2005; Jenkins & Dragojevic, 2013). In effect, expectations that professional women be both assertive and polite constitute a paradox, as the act of performing assertiveness undermines the success of polite communication (Martin, 2004; Putnam, 2004; Stohl & Cheney, 2001). Therefore, women's effective professional communication styles require more complex strategies than simply being more assertive.

We know that members develop patterned responses to organizational tensions (Tracy, 2004) and that responses vary according to the nature of the tension (Martin, 2004; Pfafman & Bochantin, 2012), so it seems likely that women also develop patterned responses to tension between female politeness and professional assertiveness. Yet we lack studies exploring the socialization experiences through which women

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learn these communication skills or the specific communication strategies used to deal with politeness/assertiveness expectations. This study explores how women learn about professional assertiveness through socialization and the strategies that they use to negotiate the tension between female politeness and professional assertiveness.

Literature Review

Politeness enables people to make requests or express ideas and opinions without threatening the other's face, which is one's chosen image (Goffman, 1967). Face is threatened when individuals intrude on others to pursue their own goals, and even minor face threats (such as asking for a file) can threaten the other's chosen image and damage the relationship (Brown & Levinson, 1987). However, face threats can be mitigated by politeness speech strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Brown and Levinson (1987) divided face threats and their corresponding politeness strategies into two types, referred to as *positive face* and *negative face*. Negative face threats are behaviors that impede the receiver's actions or cause the receiver to feel imposed upon. Negative politeness strategies include allowing speakers to avoid committing to the face-threatening action through strategies such as using indirect statements, tag questions (shortened questions at the end of declarative statements), or hedges (qualifications of utterances) (Kramer, 1978; Lakoff, 1975; McMillan, Clifton, McGrath, & Gale, 1977). Positive face threats are threats to one's self-esteem, or ability to be liked, admired, or viewed positively. Positive politeness strategies include paying attention to the relationship and expressing interest and concern for the other.

No utterance is inherently polite or impolite (Locher & Watts, 2005). Instead, politeness is a socially and contextually negotiated subset of appropriateness (Jenkins & Dragojevic, 2013) determined by the interplay between identity, context, and relationship (Blitvich, 2013; Jenkins & Dragojevic, 2013; Locher & Watts, 2005). Because face is maintained through ritual practices governed by social norms (Arundale, 2006), a socially appropriate *professional* identity can be at odds with a socially appropriate *gender* identity.

Western workplaces favor masculine communication characteristics (i.e., assertiveness) (Thimm, Koch, & Schey, 2003). Politeness can negatively impact a speaker's credibility and perception of message quality, thus undermining perceptions of assertiveness (Hosman & Siltanen, 2011). For example, positive politeness strategies can be perceived as the speaker's lack of independence or as hyperfocus on relational issues. Negative politeness strategies can be viewed as deferential and powerless (Lakoff, 1990; Liska, Mechling, & Stathas, 1981; Mulac, 1998).

Western gender norms favor polite females. Consequently, female managers who eschew this politeness in favor of assertive approaches encounter resistance (Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011), are evaluated more harshly (Von Hippel, Wiryakusuma, Bowden, & Shochet, 2011) and are more likely to be sabotaged (Rudman & Fairchild, 2004) and discriminated against (Phelan, Moss-Racusin, & Rudman, 2008). Bowles, Babcock, and McGinn (2005) found that women initiating salary negotiations (a face-threatening act) received negative evaluations regardless of the communication strategy used because simply initiating negotiations was perceived as too assertive for polite women. During job interviews, when the candidate is an agentic woman, social skills are perceived as the most important factor, but when

the candidate is a communal woman, leadership competence is perceived as the most important factor (Phelan et al., 2008). In other words, regardless of their choice of communication strategy, female professionals are likely to be perceived as deficient. Professional women are either "too female" to be professional or "too professional" to be feminine. Thus, telling women to simply use more masculine and assertive speech styles is problematic. Appropriate speech strategies for women at work must involve finding ways to maintain a perception of appropriateness by communicating competence without conveying dominance (Rudman & Glick, 2001).

Women do, however, successfully navigate organizational life. They do this despite the seemingly paradoxical demands set on them, which suggests they develop strategies for negotiating tension surrounding their professional identities. Individuals learn about organizing from parents, peers, and media, but the messages are often partial or distorted and rarely address the political nature of workplace communication (see Jablin, 2001). Thus we wonder (a) how women learn successful communication strategies for negotiating their professional identities and (b) how they successfully negotiate the tension between perceptions of professional assertiveness and gender appropriate politeness.

Method

Participants

To transcend single organizational or industrial experiences, we interviewed 18 women who represented 15 organizations. The participants came from organizations that varied in size, structure, and purpose. The various organizations were located in Indiana, Missouri, and Texas and included public schools and universities, large private financial firms, a midsized law firm, a major airline, an international manufacturing and technology company, medical clinics and centers, a real estate office, and small governmental agencies. These organizations range from small to very large. Participants were encouraged to include any of their prior work experiences whenever relevant, so their stories actually represent experiences from more than 15 companies.

Participants were selected using snowball sampling (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010). Initially, participants were invited to participate if they were at least 18 years of age and had work experience anytime within the prior five years to ensure recall of experiences. After these initial interviews, participants were asked if they would identify other potential participants who might consent to an interview. This snowball technique yielded additional participants resulting in a total of 18.

All participants were between the ages of 18 and 65 and were either currently employed within an organization or had worked in an organization sometime within the two years prior to their interview. The study included European American, African American, and Hispanic American participants. Participants' work experiences spanned hierarchical positions across a variety of professions including teacher, lawyer, corporate trainer, executive coach, ophthalmologist, mental health counselor, lab technician, administrative assistant, executive assistant, caterer and event planner, real estate agent, flight attendant, and human resources professional. All participants had at least some college education. Most held bachelor's degrees, and half held advanced degrees. Hierarchically, their jobs ranged from lower-level support staff to upper management and licensed, skilled professionals. All participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Data Collection

Semistructured interviews were conducted with all participants and were guided by open-ended questions to allow participants the best opportunity to express their experiences in their own words (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010). All of the interviews were done in person at locations of convenience and comfort to participants. The interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed by the first author.

While all interviews for this study were structured similarly, they occurred in two separate phases. The interview protocol for the first eight interviews was designed around the intention of exploring women's experiences of "being professionals." In phase one, open-ended framing questions asked participants to describe what it means to be professional and how they learned about professionalism from early role models. These questions were designed to elicit spontaneous, rich descriptions of the participants' own experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The interviewer then used follow-up, probing, and specifying questions to elicit greater depth and meaning (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Data from the first eight interviews indicated a perceived relationship between power and professionalism, so the interview protocol was revised to include additional introductory questions about powerful people. In these phase two interviews, participants were asked to describe powerful men and women at work. Follow-up questions probed for perceptions of a relationship between power and professionalism and the relationship between gender and organizational power. Data were collected until emerging themes were consistently repeated and no new themes emerged (Merriam, 2009). An additional 10 women were interviewed during phase two, resulting in a total of 18 interviews.

Verification was done throughout the data collection and analysis process. Investigator responsiveness and methodological coherence (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2008) were used throughout all stages of data collection and analysis. Methodological coherence ensures "congruence between the research question and the components of the method. The interdependence of qualitative research demands that the question match the method, which matches the data and the analytic procedures" (Morse et al., 2008, p. 18). The research process is not linear because the researcher must respond to data that demands modifying research questions or analytic procedures. This responsiveness to the data and methodological coherence ensured the veracity of the research (Morse et al., 2008). Finally, member checks and peer debriefing were also done to ensure the coherence and accuracy of analysis and interpretation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Analysis

Initial data analysis began by grouping like concepts that appeared during the interviewing and transcription stages. Early grouping enabled researcher responsiveness, resulting in the revision of the interview protocol and research questions (Merriam, 2009) and assisting in identifying the point of theoretical saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). The first round of formal coding used politeness theory and assertiveness as sensitizers to conceptualize the data. Rather than coding individual speech acts, we conceptualized that data based on the potential for an interaction to threaten either the participant's or the other's face. Because negative face threats stand to impede one's ability to accomplish tasks and therefore impact perceptions of

competence, we also marked each face threat as either positive or negative. Any portion of the data that described a face threat, a strategy mitigating face threat, or any concept associated with politeness or assertiveness was marked and labeled. This first round of coding resulted in 38 categories.

After conceptualizing the data, we reduced the data by sorting and grouping it into like categories based on communicative processes. The categories were then labeled and compared to determine relationships between categories. Because female professional identity is linked to organizational paradoxes, we analyzed the data with special attention to tensions and strategies for managing tensions. Finally, we mapped the categories to reveal relationships between categories. We then used gender and politeness theory to interpret the meaning of the data analysis.

Results

The analysis revealed how women learn about assertiveness and its limits, the politeness strategies professional women use to negotiate tensions between their feminine and professional identities, and how professional women embody assertiveness in ways that are productive and comfortable. These themes are developed in the sections that follow.

Learning Assertiveness and Quiet Control

Through a series of questions asking participants to describe their early female professional role models, we found participants consistently associated assertiveness and strength with professional identity. When asked to describe early female professional role models, particularly women they encountered prior to organizational entry, 16 of the 18 participants named their mothers or teachers. All went on to described their role models' communication behaviors as strong, assertive, and direct. Linda, a real estate agent in her late 50s, described her mother as a role model, stating, "She was very sure of her own decisions. She never ever wavered. She wasn't equivocal at all. She was very, ah, to the point.... And was pretty straightforward." Karla, a 31-year-old ophthalmologist, named a former teacher as her role model and described her as "very outgoing and, um, spoke her mind.... She was a very aggressive woman and very confident, and she knew exactly what she wanted. I respected the fact that she was willing to speak her mind." Similarly, Laura, a flight attendant in her early 40s, described her mother as her early role model, stating,

> She was a very strong woman. Ah, she, you know, whatever she wanted to do, she went for it. And, um, you know, wasn't afraid of a challenge. Determined, confident, um, you know, wasn't gonna let anyone tell her that she can't do that.

Gina, a sales director in charge of booking events for a commercial catering organization in her late 40s, described her role model as having "credibility. She's straightforward. She's um, is able to make decisions in her head; she's well-rehearsed; there's no, you know, wishy-washy. There's no confusion. There's no muckiness." Rachel, a 29-year-old human resources representative for a large

manufacturer in St. Louis, described one of her mother's friends as a role model, stating,

> She was always in control of the situation, but you never felt like she was overbearing. She had, I guess, quiet control. . . . She was always very calm and just very decisive and able to delegate things very quickly.

Each participant described role models who were strong and assertive mother/teacher figures. Participants expressed admiration for their role models' assertiveness and strength and consequently learned to value these qualities as parts of their professional identities.

While participants learned to value strength and assertiveness from their role models, when asked if they emulate their role models at work, their responses reveal a powerful tension between what participants learned to value and what they can actually do. Participants were asked to describe how their role models shaped their own expectations of organizational life and how well those expectations matched their experiences. Angie, a 33-year-old training manager in Dallas, stated,

> I went into an organization believing that what I had to say was valuable and that I should tell people what I had to say, because it might assist our organization, when in fact that's generally—gosh, I wish this wasn't true, but, generally, that is not particularly—if you're lower down the ranks, that is not looked upon favorably. They really don't want to hear what you have to say. And so I think that was a hard lesson for me to learn. . . . Even when they ask for your opinion, they often don't want to know what it is.

Rachel stated, "I thought it would be easy to get along with people and talk to people one on one, tell them what I think and whatever. But obviously that isn't the case in a lot of offices." The women all articulate disparity between what they saw in their role models and their own work experiences.

Participants also described how they learned the limits of assertiveness through trial and error. Rachel said,

> As a general rule, I don't think that I am [assertive]. And I think that that has been good. At least I've received feedback from different managers that that's good, that they like my style and that I relate well with the people that I'm representing and that I'm dealing with, because some people don't react well to people that are just upfront assertive.

Rachel's nonassertive (polite) strategies were positively reinforced through her performance reviews. However, Laura, in her early 40s, had a much more negative experience with assertiveness. She described working as a flight attendant for a major airline:

> A strong woman presents a threat. If you questioned anybody, you had more frequent random drug tests, random alcohol tests. I mean, they were supposed to be random, but it's like, I'm sarcastically saying random. I mean, all of a sudden, every time you came in you took a drug

> test. I got stronger. I started standing up for myself. And now I think it probably—if I had not gotten hurt and was forced to leave through an injury, I have no doubt that they were probably trying to fire me.

For Laura, the consequences of her assertive communication were direct and disciplinary.

Mona, a 30-year-old attorney in Dallas, described a previous job working as a retail store manager. After giving a directive to some of the sales clerks, she was taken aside and told, "You need to be careful because these are young girls. These are teenagers and you're hurting their feelings." Later, when Mona took her first job as legal counsel for a state education organization, she had a mentor who was "very straightforward, like I am, but much softer in her approach." She explained that being "softer" was one of the most important lessons Mona learned from her mentor.

Again, these women's experiences with assertiveness were not always consistent with what they valued in their early female role models. All of the participants encountered resistance if they adopted the assertive styles they saw in their mentors, but they received positive reinforcement for politeness. These encounters functioned as corrections to the lessons they learned from their early female role models.

In an attempt to identify the impact of early role models on the participants' professional identities, they were asked to describe what it means to be a professional woman. Charlotte, in her mid-30s and a marketing director for a chiropractic school in St. Louis, said,

> We see something that needs to be done and we take care of it. And we're assertive but, um, I don't think of myself as aggressive. I know the difference between those two terms, and I'm definitely not aggressive. But I am assertive when the situation warrants it.

Charlotte indicates that assertiveness is an important part of professional identity, yet she also expresses the need to temper her assertiveness. Similarly, Rachel stated, "I wouldn't characterize myself as being assertive. But in situations where I need to be, I can be." Karla, a 31-year-old ophthalmologist in St. Louis, stated,

> I think I know how I should be as far as, you know, what words and how to say things to show assertiveness. I don't think I always do. I think most of the time I just have to end up listening to a bunch of stuff that I don't want to hear about when I'm not assertive enough.

Participants clearly wanted the interviewer to see them as knowing how to be assertive and using assertiveness when necessary but strategically choosing alternative speech strategies. Their comments indicate that participants value assertiveness as a professional competency and a salient part of professional identity.

The participants all discussed learning about professionalism and assertiveness from their early female role models, viewing these strong and assertive role models positively, and internalizing assertiveness as an important part of their own professional identities. However, participants developed nuanced strategies for managing assertiveness only through their later professional experiences. Thus, assertiveness and managing assertiveness are part of these women's internalized professional identities.

The participants expressed harsh judgments of themselves and other women who do not effectively manage assertiveness. Consistently, the women noted that to be too assertive was to risk being labeled "a bitch." Linda said, "I think there's a point where a woman presents her viewpoint and if she pushes it too hard, ah, then she gets labeled a bitch and impossible to work with and inflexible." Angie, a 33-year-old training manager in Dallas, said, "Women that are aggressive are called bitches." Laura said, "I've known women in management positions. I've known some that take that position and, um, become just absolutely, you know, someone you'd call a bitch." Participants consistently described the same behaviors admired in their role models as negative aspects of powerful female colleagues or supervisors.

Jean, a large university's administrative assistant in her mid-40s, described her own behavior as bitchy, saying,

> I'm, again, very mouthy, ethnic, cultural—whatever you want to call it. You know, I'm just in-your-face loud. He told me—and I'll never forget this. I was bitching about something, and goes, he said something about my persuasion, meaning my [Jewish] religion. People of my persuasion do this all this time.

What is interesting here is that Jean describes herself as bitching, which reveals her own internalized beliefs about outspoken women. Note that Jean described examples from a variety of work experiences. This particular example was from her previous job at a bank in Michigan. The participants were aware of and embraced gendered limitations on assertiveness; they evaluated their own and others' communication styles in ways consistent with these gendered limitations.

Another interesting finding is how women have come to adopt the "bitchy woman" perspective. In some cases, warnings about avoiding the bitch factor were direct. Mona, an attorney in her early 30s for a large firm in Dallas, described learning this lesson in law school, stating,

> [A]ll female litigators are, or female lawyers have probably been told at one time or another that they need to watch the "bitch factor" in that what they might say, that would be perceived in a male as being aggressive and tenacious and, you know, being a great advocate for their client, won't be perceived that way from a woman.

For most of the others, however, the lessons about the gendered bounds of professional assertiveness were much more indirect. Jean described a time when another boss gave her a stuffed toy for Christmas. "He thought it would soften me. It was a stuffed sheep. He thought that would take away the sharp edges." Jean, having previously described her own assertiveness as bitchy, explained how others viewed her assertive style as rough around the edges and their desire to soften those rough edges. Thus, subtle messages, such as receiving a stuffed animal and hearing others labeled as bitches, not only instructed participants to limit and constrain their own behaviors but also continued to shape their evaluations of other assertive women.

In sum, the participants all described observing assertiveness in their early professional female role models and valuing assertiveness as an important part of their professional identities. However, once they entered their professional careers, participants learned through trial and error that their assertiveness is bounded.

Managing Gendered Assertiveness

Participants had a clear sense that the limits of assertiveness were gendered. April, in her late 40s and a personal business coach for a large financial planning corporation in St. Louis, said,

> In terms of managing, I think that my strength in terms of being a good listener, being able to read between the lines, put things into perspective—those are the strengths that I have that in the past, I didn't leverage them. Like, my ability to empathize and be compassionate. I had sacrificed that part of who I am because that was seen as a soft skill and this is, you know, a strong, no-emotion, bark-orders, kind of manly world.

However, April went on to describe the gendered limits of assertiveness:

> I really just think that women, future female leaders, or women of influence, have to be able to balance and understand the requirements and the skills of their male counterparts without sacrificing who they are, because it's a double-edged sword. You'll lose the respect of your peers in leadership if you become too much like them.

April's statement gets at the heart of the professional female paradox. She described having to minimize what she sees as her communication strengths (listening, empathy, compassion) to be taken seriously at work. However, she believed she would lose the respect of her peers if she was too much like them.

This statement highlights the need to mitigate assertiveness by using positive politeness (understanding the needs of male counterparts) regardless of the exact nature of the face threat. This use of positive politeness to mitigate both positive and negative face threats was common to all the participants.

Cheryl, a 48-year-old attorney in the Office of Minority Affairs for a midsized university in Missouri, described differences in how assertive male and female professors are evaluated by students. She stated,

> It's true that women faculty get lower evaluations, generally speaking, than men. Um, because, um, of that difference in professionalism. Women are not supposed to be strong, so it comes across differently. Women won't put up with, um, if a female is professional and won't put up with a student who's late, that's different than a male professor. Students perceive women professors, um, they're supposed to be more like Mom.

It is interesting to note that this was the choppiest part of Cheryl's interview. She used more speech disfluencies and changed direction midsentence here more than in other parts of her interview. Cheryl's disfluency might suggest discomfort talking about the topic or a continuing struggle to make sense of her experiences with assertiveness.

Linda, a real estate agent in her late 50s, described her male colleagues, saying, "Also, men can get away with being a little further in any direction. They can go a little further." Mona, the attorney from Dallas, said,

> I think that men can be more blunt than women can get away with and it be okay. Ah, I think that they don't have to step around as much stuff,

> um, to make it okay for them to say what they're about to say. And ah, I find myself working to do that better. To not be as blunt, to not be as direct, um, right off the bat. To lay a foundation for that directness.

All three participants indicate that gender is a factor in developing an effective professional communication strategy. The participants seem to understand that gender is a social and contextual factor that shapes the effectiveness of professional assertiveness.

Mona described the need to use negative politeness to mitigate negative threats as a gendered constraint. Referring to her male boss, she explained,

> He'll be very direct with a client, but when I am it makes him nervous, and it's because he thinks I'm wrong. And not necessarily about the information, but he doesn't trust, until I've laid the foundation and he's heard it, that I—that I know. So there is a lack of confidence in my response that I also don't see him do to my male peers. I think he expects that they have a foundation and, for me, he wants to hear it.... I think I have to give more reasoning more than they do.

Providing expert information appears to be a face threat. Negative politeness strategies, such as providing explanations and reasoning, are necessary for mitigating the threat.

Angie described needing to address face needs by using positive politeness strategies as well. When asked how she successfully makes requests, she stated,

> Whenever I see him or whenever he does something for me, I make sure that I tell him how much I appreciated it. You know, ask him questions about it, about his work, like, and how it's going. And make sure that he knows that, I guess the way to sum it up is, you know, you get more flies with honey.

Angie is also using positive politeness, attending to the relationship, to mitigate what she perceives as the masculine face need of the other. Like Mona and April, Angie described mitigating a negative face threat with a positive politeness strategy. It is noteworthy that Angie and Mona were the only participants who mentioned negative face threats (making a request and telling him no, respectively). Mona's job as legal counsel in a nonlegal agency made making negative face threats unavoidable. Angie, however, made requests or impositions (negative face threats) only when it was absolutely necessary for her to acquire resources to perform her job. Otherwise, it appears the politeness strategy for negative face threats was to avoid them altogether. Avoiding negative face threats means not asking others for anything.

Participants consistently described their male colleagues as being able to speak out assertively while they themselves had to strategically modify their own styles to accommodate their colleagues' face needs and protect the relationship. They all recognized that attending to gender is part of their professional communication strategy. At the same time, participants emphasized the need to protect their relationships with their male colleagues as a long-term goal. Mona described working with a man in her previous job as legal counsel for the state's education agency:

> It caused friction when I would, right off the bat, give him [a colleague who is not an attorney] the legal answer, because, he needed to go

> through the humanistic portion before we got there. And that was actually the thing that Katherine, the mentor I talked about earlier, first pointed out to me, was, you know, that I know you know the answer over here, and that you'd like to just go, "You know what, I'm sorry, this is the law, and you're not going to do it that way," but you need to let him tell you his portion.

Mona's example reveals the complexities of female assertiveness. She used negative politeness to mitigate negative face threats, but she also indicated that her goal was to protect the relationship by avoiding friction. Protecting the relationship is a positive politeness goal. Thus, using negative politeness to mitigate negative face threats serves a positive politeness goal. This strategy is particularly meaningful because it indicates that women must always protect the relationship before they can be productive, regardless of the exact nature of the face threat. Participants consistently described protecting relationships as their long-term goal.

Similarly, Angie, a 33-year-old training manager in Dallas, describes her complex strategy for productivity:

> I think what you have to do in any situation is—where you want to be productive is to take command. And I'm not talking about taking control. But you need to have some kind of presence so that when you are speaking to someone, you're articulate, you have a way to communicate your needs well, and you have conversations that you can, um, create action plans or create scenarios that what you're going to do is going to assist in their development of their department or their organization.... You have to be political in that situation. You have to, I like to think of it as grace.

Angie went on to say that to be effective you have to "be able to get your point across clearly, and concisely, and have information to back up your points, or data or support—evidence, I guess—to back up, um, what your statements are." Angie described using negative politeness strategies to be productive. Yet again, Angie's long-term goal was to protect the relationship by emphasizing how her productivity in the short term is intended to assist her colleague in the long term.

Embodying Polite Assertiveness

Angie's comment also reveals the complex and sophisticated strategies participants used to embody assertiveness in ways that do not threaten their own feminine identities. For example, Angie signals her feminine identity through grace and politeness (emphasizing what she can do to assist the other). This politeness strategy enables short-term productivity, allowing her to maintain her professional identity; in this way she embodies assertiveness while also comfortably accommodating her feminine identity.

Participants also embody professional and feminine identity by understanding and adapting their communication styles according to context, gender, and relationship. Rachel described her strategy: "You basically have to find out all different ways of communication with different people. Some people you have to be stronger with, or more blunt with them." Linda said, "One of my strongest aptitudes is my ability to read people and know how to work them." Attending to interests of others

allows participants to "work" the hearer by modifying communication styles to achieve desired goals.

Participants also articulated some of the specific strategies they use to work the situation. Rachel explained,

> Being in HR [human resources], I'll make recommendations or advise managers to do certain things. Sometimes they don't like those recommendations.... I think if you can show the person facts behind what you're saying, then there's not a lot that they can say to disagree with that, so what I really try to do is just know my stuff before I talk to the person. And really try to sit down and, you know, like, "Do you know the reasons and facts behind what I'm saying to you?" I just think that—I don't know. They may have just a bias against people in HR, or they may have a bias against just me. Like I said, being a woman and being young. I mean, be like, you know, "Who are you to tell me whatever." So I think I compensate a lot for that by trying to always have, you know, my facts behind me.

Charlotte, a 35-year-old marketing director for a chiropractic school in St. Louis, said, "I'm a relationship seller. That, and I really enjoy helping people and building a relationship with them.... It's done me very well to be a relationship type of communicator."

Angie also described the importance of attending to interests to better read and adapt to people:

> I think it's critical that you learn about the personal, or some personal aspect of the people that you work with.... It's important that you understand, you know, what are their hobbies? What do they like to do? How many kids do they have, if any? Um, what are their interests? Because if you can find those things out, you will know how to create situations which are going to be favorable.

Angie found it useful to learn about others' personal lives so she could evaluate situations and modify her own behaviors effectively. In each example the participant described the need not only to attend to interests but also to interpret and evaluate information to modify her own communication patterns accordingly.

Charlotte similarly described the need to understand the relationship and context for choosing appropriate communication strategies:

> There are some people that you need to just keep always on the positive, and there's other people that you can talk to about the struggles that you're having. That kind of a situation. But if you sit there and all you do is complain or you talk about this, you talk about that, it doesn't—it's not as effective as if you pick and pick your time.

Charlotte also said she had not always been positive in the past and that expressing negative ideas actually impaired her relationship with her boss. But after altering her communication strategy and staying positive, the relationship improved. Angie described her strategy by saying, "Listening is incredibly key... being able to read

between the lines and understand what their underlying needs or interests are.'' Mona also described noticing/attending to interests as

> almost a helping people come around to where you want them to be instead of giving them a stop sign. Does that make sense? To help people understand your position in their own terms and in their own time frame.

Charlotte said she tries to ''be interested in who they [colleagues] are and try to be supportive and positive of them verbally.'' In each example, the participants articulate the need to express interest in others to be effective. In fact, using in-group identity markers and exaggerating, noticing, or attending to interests were the strategies most frequently referenced by the participants. Each is a positive politeness strategy. All participants agree they need to be able to read relationships, the needs of the other, and the overall context to successfully choose a communication style and achieve their goals.

The participants revealed assertiveness strategies to be nuanced as well. Linda, a real estate agent in Dallas in her late 50s, said,

> Today, I'll tell you that I have a much stronger communication style than I did as a younger person, and it's more than just age. It's experience and it's education. It's a lot of those things, and also it's understanding the difference between what I'll call female discourse and male discourse and, ah, that gives you a lot of power when you have that knowledge. It doesn't mean you always are able to use it to your advantage, but you at least know what's going on. You're not in the dark. Um, and but I'm flexible in this way, and this would be more female behavior than male. So I think it's almost like women get to figure out how to be bilingual, if you will. Meaning that language is everything. Um, because they [women] can act like a man, but they can still act like a woman. And they get to where they know when to hide it. Where men only know one way and that's to act like a man. That is probably one of my strongest points, is being able to analyze a situation and knowing when to step in and when not to and when to pull back: when to push. And just exactly what I can get away with.

Embodying assertiveness, for Linda, is knowing when to highlight and when to hide aspects of her identity. Linda's statement suggests the two facets of her identity are dichotomous and that she alternates between them to manage her professional female identity. In this way she embodies both feminine and professional identities.

In all of these situations, participants find ways to modify behaviors and enact strategic assertiveness so they can embrace both aspects of their identity simultaneously. Having access to information and being involved is one of these strategies. Liz, the director of employee relations for a large Midwestern university in her late 30s, described using positive politeness strategies by making efforts to learn ''how does somebody work, how do I get their attention.'' However, she has also developed her own unique assertiveness strategy:

> I think there are things you can do to assert yourself: insert yourself. I very consciously position myself to be in conversations where important

> decisions are being made and information is being shared.... I consciously position myself so that I'm having those conversations with people so that I knew what was really going on.... I kinda just position myself to be able to be a part of those conversations, and that makes a big difference.

Being present for important conversations allows Liz to maintain professional identity without threatening her feminine identity.

Jean, on the other hand, seemed to know the difference between assertive and polite communication, and she clearly understood the different outcomes each produces. She stated, "If you let people take advantage of you, they will. You know and nobody's going to stick up for you and take care of you except you. And, but it does get you into trouble. People don't like that assertiveness." Jean recognizes that politeness comes at a cost and that the bottom line is protecting herself. Similarly, Laura, a flight attendant in her early 40s, also stresses the need to protect the self. Laura stated, "Respect those that are your superiors, but yet, you know, um, also don't be taken advantage of." Being taken advantage of is a negative threat to professional identity so the participants appear to recognize their politeness costs them some of their professional face. Jean and Laura express the need to protect professional face with assertiveness when they feel impinged upon or exploited and appear willing to accept negative consequences rather than feel exploited.

Dawn, a high school teacher in her mid-30s, described changing her college major from business to education to avoid uncomfortable tension between professional and feminine identity. She explained, "Some of it is the fear of being in the situation that I see other women in when they—it doesn't feel comfortable for me, what I see them going through. The trying to prove that a woman can do it as well." To avoid the female professional tension altogether, Dawn chose a more feminized career where she was not expected to be assertive with colleagues.

April, after noting that she had needed to minimize her feminine communication qualities and would lose the respect of her peers if she was too much like them, also decided to change careers. After working 10 years as a financial planner and broker, she became a trainer and personal business coach within the same company. She described her role as a personal business coach:

> I develop some pretty strong relationships with the people that I coach because sometimes it even turns into a psychology. I mean we'll laugh about the fact that, you know, they'll call and they'll say, "I'm calling in for my weekly couch visit. Is the doctor in?" You know, that type of thing. Because it's a very high stress, high responsibility position. And because I've done it in the past, I can empathize with their emotions. Many of their emotions that they've experienced, I've experienced on my own.... People will call me, you know, because I empathize with them. They feel comfortable that they can tell me what they're feeling and bounce things off of me and it stays confidential.

Being a personal business coach to other financial planners and brokers enabled April to more comfortably integrate female and professional aspects of her identity. Because the role itself is feminized, and her former colleagues are now her clients, it became culturally appropriate for her to have more nurturing professional

relationships. April not only took a significant pay cut when she moved to the new position but also continues to make less money and feels less organizationally valued than her male counterpart. She stated,

> The other subject-matter expert, we're equals but he makes about $18,000 more a year than I do. We've been in the industry exactly the same amount of years. We've both had the same career path. We both were highly successful in our sales careers. My focus is less technical than his, so I guess they place a higher value on that.

April had been successful as a financial broker but took a more nurturing job for much less pay because it allowed her to integrate the female and professional aspects of her identity. However, she recognized the company placed less value on her "less technical" skills.

In sum, analysis of the data reveals that (a) performing a female professional identity requires a balance between assertiveness and grace, (b) context and desired outcome determine whether an assertiveness/politeness strategy is appropriate and effective, and (c) performing assertiveness effectively requires women to know which aspects of their identities to highlight to meet goals. It is a particularly interesting find that meeting professional goals, regardless of the communication style used, helped women maintain their professional identities. Thus professional communication is not simply assertive but instead is strategic and productive of desired goals. In other words, professional assertiveness is strategic rather than stylistic. Strategic professional assertiveness allows women to embody assertiveness in ways that protect their feminine and professional identities, allowing them to maintain face as professional women.

Discussion

The data and analysis in our study suggest, contrary to what some of the literature and many self-help books recommend, telling women to be more assertive is counterproductive and shifts the onus of responsibility for structural/cultural problems onto the individual. The participants' lack of assertiveness is, in fact, a deliberate strategy to negotiate cultural expectations. Lack of assertiveness is therefore not a deficiency but a strategic choice. Further, we find that women reported first needing to be seen as appropriate females to have the opportunity to be seen as appropriate professionals. Otherwise, they risk their assertiveness being interpreted as aggressiveness or bitchiness. Thus, these women modified effective assertiveness to accommodate feminine identity. Feminine communication style is thus not a powerless deficiency but an effectively polite strategy. Popular discourse, which tells women to be assertive without recognizing the necessity of these modifications, is missing the mark.

In answer to our guiding research interests, we found that anticipatory socialization leads women to expect that directly assertive communication strategies will demonstrate competence and therefore be effective. As a component of anticipatory socialization, popular media advocating women's direct assertiveness reinforces the message that professional women are directly assertive. However, during organizational encounters, women's assertiveness caused friction in their relationships, job loss, gossip, and labeling as a bitch. Using traditionally assertive strategies actually served to impede the women's ability to meet their professional goals. Through a

series of organizational encounters, the participants eventually learned more nuanced strategies for accomplishing professional goals.

Bowles, Babcock, and Lai (2007) concluded that women's effectiveness at persuading males is contingent on signaling their subordinate status in the process. Our findings support this conclusion. Effectively assertive women select strategies that signal their feminine identity to accomplish long-term relational goals and short-term productivity goals, which then affirm their professional identities. When immediate productivity was the goal, women did tend to signal their femininity to be successful. At the same time, they recognize that this politeness strategy comes at a cost. At times, protecting their professional face was more important to the participants than protecting their feminine face, so they knowingly made assertiveness choices that risked the relationship instead. In answer to the second research question—"How do women negotiate the tension between perceptions of professional assertiveness and gender-appropriate politeness?"—we find that participants make deliberate choices about their communication styles based on socially constructed gender norms, contexts, and goals.

What constitutes appropriate communication behavior for women at work is that which protects the personal and professional image of another's face, such as signaling femininity and subordination. However, protecting another's face in this way jeopardizes their own face. Strategies such as expressing concern and interest for others, asking questions, and using tag questions and hedges undermine traditional notions of assertiveness. Considering the value placed on assertiveness as part of professional identity, saving face requires the women to reconcile assertiveness and femininity by renegotiating what it means to be assertive. Where traditionally we understood strong or assertive communication to be direct, bald on record, and authoritative, the participants articulate a notion of assertiveness as strategic and polite. Skill at reading situations and relationships and awareness of their desired outcome enable participants to select the most appropriate communication strategies. Thus, appropriate assertiveness is strategically making style choices that produce the desired outcome.

Blitvich (2013) and Locher and Watts (2005) presented theoretical arguments that politeness is a subset of appropriateness determined by contextual and relational factors and thus suggest politeness research should focus on the discursive struggle of interactants. Our study answers this call and illustrates the relational dimensions of communication appropriateness. We found a striking disparity in how participants viewed assertive female role models and assertive female colleagues. Role models were seen as having culturally appropriate gender roles of authority over the participants (mother and teacher), but assertive women at work (colleagues) violated culturally appropriate gender roles. A female teacher can be directly assertive with her student because the nature of the relationship makes it culturally appropriate. If the same teacher is similarly assertive with a peer, she is likely to experience negative consequences, thus the relationship between individuals and not just the role itself impacts the perceived appropriateness of the interaction.

Assertiveness is a performance interaction that is necessary to learn strategically. How women embody assertiveness reveals much about how they negotiate their professional identities. Through a more traditional lens, one might argue that the participants favor politeness over assertiveness. However, by renegotiating assertiveness, the participants linguistically transcend the politeness/assertiveness paradox and reconstruct a more performative and negotiated notion of assertiveness. Strategic assertiveness allows the women to maintain professional identities and enables them

to view themselves as successfully professional, which is then supported by the other's compliance. Assertiveness as strategy aligns gendered expectations of politeness with professional expectations by allowing women to have both the gendered and professional aspects of their identity confirmed.

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