

Negotiating Power Paradoxes: Contradictions in Women's Constructions of Organizational Power

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This study explores women's constructions of organizational power and the ways women negotiate tensions when their own constructions of power conflict with organizational norms. Through interviews, participants were asked to define organizational power and to provide examples of more and less powerful individuals based on their own organizational experiences. Findings suggest that women not only experience tension between their own constructions of power and organizational norms but that they actually construct their own contradictory meanings of power. Employing contradictory meanings suggests participants employ gendered code-switching as a response to a gendered power paradox. The following reviews the various contradictions in women's definitions of organizational power and develops a theory of gendered code-switching as a response to gendered organizational paradoxes.

Keywords: Code-Switching; Double Bind; Gender; Organizing; Paradox; Power

Women hold positions at many levels within organizations and find themselves faced with many of the same kind of responsibilities that, not very long ago, were reserved for men. Yet, while women in the United States have increasingly moved into the public sphere over the last half-century, their presence there has not yet equaled that of men, either hierarchically or in terms of perceived status and ability (Belkin, 2009; Porter, 2006; Wood, 1997). Women's employment peaked at 60% in 1999 and has

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since begun to decline (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010). Women continue to earn less than men for the same work (Belkin, 2009). Women are disproportionately placed in support positions (Bochantin & Cowan, 2008; Cowan & Bochantin, 2009). Despite inequalities, many continue to struggle to fit into a patriarchal professional world.

Feminist standpoint theory suggests women experience organizing differently than men (Allen, 1996; Bullis & Stout, 2000; Dougherty & Krone, 2000) and thus also experience organizational power in unique ways (Dougherty, 2001a; Fine, 1993; Marshall, 1993; Parker, 2001). We know that women actively seek strategies for negotiating gendered organizational tensions (Putnam & Bochantin, 2009) and ultimately develop a variety of strategies for negotiating organizational tensions (Martin, 2004; Putnam, 2004; Tracy, 2004). In order to advance our understanding of gendered power dynamics, we must continue to examine gendered organizational power relationships. This research extends our understanding of power and gendered organizational paradoxes by exploring how women construct and experience power in organizations and how they negotiate organizational tensions surrounding power. First, we review the multiple definitions that frame various conceptions of power. Next, we describe themes in constructions of power revealed through interviews. Finally, we discuss the implications of these various power constructions on women's experiences in organizations.

The Nature of Power

There is little agreement between scholars as to what power is and how it functions. Traditional approaches to power embrace power as an attribute of an individual or group (Banks, 1995) where power is understood through the various bases through which it is obtained. According to French and Raven's (1959) classic model of social power, there are five bases of power. Reward and coercive power are based on one's ability to control and distribute that which is perceived as rewards and punishments. Referent power is based on identification where one party identifies with and desires to be like the other. Referent power enables its bearer to influence the other. Expert power is based on specialized knowledge or skill where one party desires access to the other's specialized knowledge or skill. Legitimate power is based on the perception of one's authority, often recognized as hierarchical status. Each of these power bases assumes power is a property of its bearer and that one party has power while the other does not. Here power is often articulated as a simple exchange of resources (Aguinis, Simonsen, & Pierce, 1998; Pfeffer & Cialdini, 1998; Vredenburg & Brender, 1998). These traditional power bases (French & Raven, 1959) are largely forms of hierarchical/power-as-domination and tend to be prominent in Western organizations (Pierce & Dougherty, 2002).

Contemporary approaches to power embrace a more relationally negotiated meaning where power is not an attribute of an individual but is a relationship negotiated between individuals. An interpretive paradigm grounds power in the symbolic where power is a social construction with multiple alternative possible outcomes. Here it is a condition of both people and social arrangements (Banks, 1995; Conrad, 1983) that

is rooted in both material and social structures (Brenner & Laslett, 1996). Alternatively, postmodern constructions of power examine the intersection of power, knowledge, and discourse as the discursive structures that serve to marginalize particular members of society (Foucault, 1984; Huspek, 1993; Rabinow, 1984; Tracy, 2000). In both approaches, power-as-domination is not a natural or neutral feature of contemporary society. Constructions of power-as-domination both privilege and marginalize individuals or entire groups, which necessarily create social inequalities and serve organizational interests (Pierce & Dougherty, 2002).

Power-as-domination is also a primarily masculine construction of power (Dougherty, 2001a). According to research, women conceptualize power as a relationally negotiated experience (i.e., power with) as opposed to the hierarchy and domination described by their male counterparts (Dougherty, 2001a; Fine, 1993; Marshall, 1993; Parker, 2001). Marshall notes that men tend to value both boundaries and hierarchy while women, on the other hand, tend to value networking and more personalized, flowing communities. Further, men tend to view power productively as hierarchical authority (Dougherty, 2001a). Women, on the other hand, experience power as a negotiated process where “power was not something that people had; it was something people negotiated through a complex interaction of perceptions” (Dougherty, 2001a, p. 15).

Moreover, the differences in male and female organizational experiences, and consequently definitions of power, become problematic for women in organizations in that organizations tend to embrace the masculine characteristics (hierarchies and boundaries) as productive and efficient (Bullis & Stout, 2000). Indeed, within the organizational context, masculine definitions of power dominate (Mumby, 1988) thus infusing themselves to the idea of professionalism (see Pfafman, 2001). Putnam and Bochantin (2009) explore these “second generation gendered issues,” which refer to practices that appear neutral and normal in a workplace but continue to favor masculine as opposed to feminine values (see Sturm, 2001). Putnam and Bochantin found that women negotiate and experience power in the workplace through their bodies and the process of aging. Such an experience causes tension between the public and the private self. These subtle and often invisible concerns about the body and physical problems at work are rooted in the traditional image of an ideal worker and in the separation between private and public spheres that perpetuate gendered organizational contexts (Putnam & Bochantin, 2009). However, seeking methods of social support through the use of an online discussion board, which caters to aging and working women, participants were able to get advice on ways to “reframe personal concerns as organizational matters, how to uncover underlying needs, how to rename issues as potential discrimination, gain advice on ways to exert leverage in negotiations in the workplace, and get assistance in recognizing themselves as agents capable of negotiating their own problems” (Putnam & Bochantin, 2009, p. 70). These findings suggest women not only recognize the tension between their personal and professional selves but that they also actively seek ways to negotiate this tension.

Tension between the personal and professional self contributes to a gendered professional paradox and has been of particular interest to feminist scholars (Buzzanell,

1995; Dougherty, 2001a, 2001b; Dougherty & Krone, 2000). Research on women's perceptions of power indicates that women experience paradoxes in organizations (Dougherty, 2001b; Marshall, 1993; Sheppard, 1989; Wood & Conrad, 1983). While inconsistencies and contradictions are everywhere, the gendered paradoxes of organizing are particularly problematic for women in the public sphere and are linked by a fundamental paradox at play within organizations. This paradox of professional women (Martin, 2004; Wood & Conrad, 1983) pits the notion of professional, which is highly charged with masculine characteristics, against the socially constructed notion of what it means to be female (Martin, 2004). The result is a situation where women are either feminine or professional, but the tension between the two concepts constructs a paradox precluding one from being both. Within the professional paradox, professional women are either *too female* to be professional or *too professional* to be feminine (Nadesan & Trethewey, 2000; Trethewey, 1999; Wood & Conrad, 1983). Dougherty argues that inconsistencies might serve to marginalize women in organizations by creating "untenable and uncomfortable situations" and "reinforcing the professional paradox" (2001b, p. 7).

In addition to the fundamental professional paradox, Wood and Conrad's (1983) foundational study identifies several specifically gendered paradoxes at work including the paradox of powerlessness that defines feminine as submissive and unassertive, among other things, which contradicts the notion of powerful and assertive leaders; the paradox of marginality, which is a condition of women's token status within organizations; and the paradox of self-definition which assumes women must choose between femininity and professionalism because the two cannot coexist. Throughout their careers, women must grapple with the question of whether they are, for example, a female scholar or a scholar who is female. Organizational paradoxes make finding an appropriate female professional identity challenging at best (Trethewey, 1999).

Further, the glass ceiling, which is borne out of the professional paradox, is grounded in power imbalances that are maintained through gender (Buzzanell, 1995). Professional and other organizational paradoxes are believed to construct a hurdle for women seeking professional careers, and responses to these paradoxes can further perpetuate or transcend these paradoxes (Buzzanell, 1995; Martin, 2004; Wood & Conrad, 1983). While in some instances the appropriate response might be both clear and available, albeit threatening, in many other cases, a viable response is deeply hidden. In these cases, women not only bump into gendered paradoxes but also confront "the double bind," which exists when all readily available responses simply perpetuate the paradox (Stohl & Cheney, 2001; Wendt, 1998; Wood & Conrad, 1983). Double binds only exist when there is a power relationship between two or more parties, when the discourse involved is paradoxical, and when the responses of the subordinated individual or group reinforce the paradox (Stohl & Cheney, 2001).

Responses to gendered paradoxes can either perpetuate, redefine or transcend the situation (Martin, 2004; Wood & Conrad, 1983, p. 313). A response that perpetuates the paradox might include behaviors such as adopting antifemale attitudes, cutting ties with other women, being overly critical of women's work and work styles, and perpetuating sexist stereotypes (Ashcraft & Pacanowsky, 1996; Wood & Conrad,

1983). For example, sexual harassment literature finds women perpetuate gender paradoxes surrounding sexual harassment when victims of harassment express an unwillingness to report it for fear of not being believed yet also express the belief that most sexual harassment complaints are false (Dougherty, 2001b) and simultaneously perpetuate and normalize their own harassment (Bochantin & Cowan, 2008). Reframing paradoxes shifts assumptions of male dominance and professionalism by discursively reconstructing inconsistencies so that the paradox is no longer seen as normative (Buzzanell, 1995). Transcending involves reframing the specific context of the paradox but also the larger gender context that allows the paradox to exist in the first place (Buzzanell, 1995; Wood & Conrad, 1983).

In sum, research indicates women and men tend to define power differently (Marshall, 1993; Pierce & Dougherty, 2002), and organizations tend to embrace more masculine definitions of power and success (Dougherty, 2001a; Pfafman, 2007). Masculine definitions of power and success contribute to a gendered professional paradox. Women actively seek ways to negotiate gendered tensions at work (Putnam & Bochantin, 2009). Response to the professional paradox can perpetuate, reframe or transcend the paradox. Yet, further exploration into the ways women negotiate these tensions is warranted to illuminate a clearer picture of the ways women actively seek to negotiate gendered tensions and organizational power paradoxes. Thus, the following questions guide this research:

- RQ₁: How do women communicatively construct, experience, and negotiate paradoxical constructions of power in the workplace?
- RQ₂: How do women negotiate tensions between constructions of power and gender?
- RQ₃: How do women's descriptions of power serve to disrupt or maintain paradoxes of women as professionals?

Method

This study seeks to identify patterns or themes in women's constructions of and experiences with power in the workplace across a variety of organizations in an effort to describe how women negotiate contradictions and paradoxes of power in the workplace. This study explores individual experiences of organizational power through interviews with 18 women. Participants came from a variety of organizations across three different states in an effort to transcend individual organizational boundaries (Fiebig & Kramer, 1998). The first 8 participants were asked to describe what it means to be professional. However, power was such a prevalent and consistent theme in these responses that the interview protocol was revised for the last 10 participants to include more direct questions regarding the nature of power itself. The following section will describe the participants in this study and the procedures used for gathering and analyzing the data.

Participants

To transcend single organizational or industrial experiences, the participants for this study came from 15 different companies that vary in size, structure, and purpose. The

companies were located in Indiana, Missouri, and Texas and included a public junior high school, a public high school, a Fortune 500 financial firm, a midsize law firm, a major airline, an international manufacturer, a midsize university, a small college, a large technology company, a chiropractic clinic, a real estate office, a mental health clinic, a state agency, a drug and alcohol counseling center, and an independent optometrist's office. These companies range from small to very large. Participants were encouraged to include any of their prior work experiences whenever relevant so their stories might actually represent experiences from more than 15 companies.

Participants were selected using convenience and snowball sampling. Initial participants were invited to participate if they were at least 18 years of age and had work experience anytime within the prior 5 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 the additional participants for the study resulting in a total of 18 participants.

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 2 years prior to their interview. The study included European American, African American, and Hispanic American participants. The participants' various professions included teaching, law, corporate training, executive coaching, administrative assistants, executive assistant, and various skilled professions such as catering and event planning, real estate agent, and human resources professionals. With the exception of one part-time adjunct instructor, participants from the college and university were administrative, support staff, and an attorney. All participants had at least some college education. Most held bachelors 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 pseudonymous to protect their identities.

Data Collection

Semi-structured 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, 2011). All of the interviews were done in person at locations of convenience and comfort to participants. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

While all interviews for this study were structured similarly, they actually occurred in two separate phases. First, an initial eight interviews were conducted with the intention of exploring women's experiences of "being professionals." Phase 1 interview questions asked participants to describe what it means to be professional as well as how they learned about professionalism (see Appendix A). The responses from these first eight interviews indicated a perceived relationship between power and professionalism such that power was constructed as an element of professional. At the same time, participant responses also revealed seemingly contradictory constructions of power in the workplace.

Based on the initial eight responses from Phase 1 interviews, the Phase 2 interview questions were revised to further probe the relationship between power and professionalism. Thus, an additional 10 women were interviewed during Phase 2 and these questions focused more closely on the relationship between gender and power and asked participants to describe individuals they perceived as more and less powerful than themselves (see Appendix B). Both sets of data were analyzed to produce the current study results. The interviews for this project were conducted until theoretical saturation was reached (Kvale, 1996) and yielded 143 single-spaced pages of transcribed data.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for Phase 1 was done immediately after these interviews were transcribed. Here, thematic analysis was done to reduce 28 articulated elements of professionalism into six general categories or themes describing professionalism. This reduction was done to help explain the data. Reduction occurred through a process of multiple readings of the transcripts. Physical and conceptual reduction, which includes sorting, categorizing, and grouping data according to common themes (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011), occurred during the first reading. Specifically each unique element of professionalism was recorded resulting in 28 different elements. These 28 elements were then grouped together according to like images, revealing five common themes among the responses. Two of these themes were games and power. The games theme was explored in an earlier study and other than supporting a connection between power and professional, those findings are not discussed within the current study.

Phase 2 data were also physically and conceptually reduced through a process of multiple reads, recording images of power, then grouping emerging themes conceptually. Thus, as occurred in Phase 1, the process started with an initial reading of the transcripts, which revealed 34 different images of power. Subsequently, the 34 images were reduced conceptually into groups of four unique definitions of power. These four themes included “relational power,” “hierarchical power,” “competency power,” and “illusive power.” Relational power and hierarchical power are discussed in this study. The results indicate participants’ descriptions of power shifted such that participants always described themselves as powerless, regardless of the framework, during interviews.

The next step in data analysis was to make sense of the concepts within the context of the theory chosen for the study. Because initial analysis of all interviews revealed unique constructions of power as an underlying theme, the authors read the data again to identify particular examples of power. During this process, examples of hierarchical power, relational power, and illusive power were identified and coded. Finally the authors re-read the transcripts to ensure each theme was supported by the participants’ own words. Member checks were conducted and peer review was utilized to verify the findings (Creswell, 1997).

Results

The literature suggests women experience organizational power differently than men (Doughty, 2001a; Fine, 1993; Marshall, 1993; Parker, 2001). However, evidence from

this study also suggests women describe power differently according to the context. As the results will show, participant's definitions of power and descriptions of powerful people varied in patterned ways according to the context of the question. These variations reveal contradictions between descriptions of power and identification of powerful people. Contradictions refer to times when one idea is in direct opposition to another (Stohl & Cheney, 2001). The following describes the patterns of contradiction in how participants discuss power.

The data reveal that during interviews women described power as both relationally negotiated (not a property of an individual) and hierarchical (a property of an individual). Hierarchy refers to legitimate authority (French & Raven, 1959) and has clear boundaries. Negotiated power is a more personalized and flowing process without clear boundaries (Marshall, 1993). The belief that power both has and does not have clear boundaries and is a property of individuals but is not a property of individuals represents a contradiction.

While answering abstract questions about the nature of power, many participants consistently described power as something shared, relational, and/or negotiated. For example, Karen was a personal business coach for a large financial investments firm in St. Louis, Missouri. She was in her early 50s and had been with the company for more than 10 years. She coached executives earning between \$250,000–\$500,000 per year. When asked about power, Karen stated:

It [power] means to be able to give something of yourself to others that helps them become better than they were before they had known you—so influence, the respect of others and leading by example, having followers . . . if you have a vision and you can lead effectively and connect with people, that type of power you can achieve on an exponential basis versus what you can achieve individually . . . you're willing to stand shoulder to shoulder in good times and bad.

Here Karen described power as having no clear boundaries and as something negotiated through a relationship with others. She described power as collaborative and shared. She stated power means to “stand shoulder to shoulder,” which explicitly contradicts any notion of power as hierarchy.

Stacy also described power as negotiated. Stacy worked in Minority Affairs and Faculty Development for a midsize university in the Midwest. She had only been in this position for 3 months but also had 3 years of experience working in retail sales from which she drew during her interview. Stacy stated, “You have to command respect, I think, if you're powerful.” Commanding respect suggests power is negotiated in the relationship between individuals and not a property of an individual. Power exists apart from hierarchical status and has no clear boundaries, which is consistent with Dougherty's (2001a) findings that power is in part based on perceptions of self and others. This pattern was consistent throughout all of the interviews. None of the participants described power as hierarchical when they referred to power in an abstract context.

When the participants were asked to describe concrete examples of powerful people, their descriptions highlighted hierarchical status instead of relationships as

a necessary condition of power. For example, Karen's (above) role as an executive coach was consistent with her definition of power as "standing shoulder to shoulder in good times and bad." She described the mentoring and support she provided to the executives she coached. Yet, in the same interview, Karen identified her CEO as a powerful person. When the author asked why he was powerful, Karen replied, "he's like the CEO, um, he's a very strong leader in the sense of really having a clear vision for our future." While Karen's earlier definition of power suggested power was negotiated between individuals, her example of a powerful person privileged the clear boundaries of hierarchical status. When asked to describe her *relationship* with this powerful person, Karen admitted she had never actually met him, suggesting her perception of him as powerful was based only on his hierarchical status and not her relationship with him. Throughout this interview, the participant switched between contradictory definitions of power so that she never named herself as powerful.

Brenda was in her early 40s and was an executive staff assistant who reported directly to the Vice Provost for Minority Affairs for a large, Midwestern university. Previously, Brenda worked as an administrative assistant in the mayor's office of a large Midwestern city and at times she drew from this experience in her responses. She stated:

I think someone can be, can have the authority to do things without necessarily having the power. Um, in my position, I certainly have the authority to tell my office support staff how I'd like things done. I don't think I have, I don't view that as a powerful role.

Brenda described herself as having authority but not having power because she described power as something more than authority. However, when asked to name a powerful person she worked with, she named her previous employer, the mayor. Brenda described her own hierarchical authority but reverted to a more relational and shared definition of power, which undermined her own potential power, while simultaneously naming somebody else with hierarchical authority as powerful. Again, Brenda shifted between contradictory definitions of power according to the context so that she never named herself as powerful.

In another interview, Liz described herself as someone who had "influence" in the organization. Liz had been the Director of Employer Relations for Career Services at a midsize, Midwestern university for the past three years and was in her early 30s. At one point, she described how she would strategically

position myself to be in conversations where important decisions are being made and information is being shared. . . . I think there's power in just having information about what's going on, and so, you know, I kinda just position myself to be able to be a part of those conversations.

Here, power had something to do with how you position yourself and the access you have to information. In this sense, power was negotiated through relationships and access to others but had no clear boundaries. Liz negotiated her own power through her relationship and proximity to others.

As a director, Liz also had employees under her hierarchically. She acknowledged she had influence and access to information, both of which she included in her various descriptions of power. Yet, when asked to describe somebody powerful in her organization, she described her boss; when asked to describe somebody with less power than herself, she struggled. Liz stated, "I think children really don't necessarily have a voice. I think that those and a million other folks that probably have less voice, representation, power in that sense." Liz did not work with children; rather her response was a generalization. Liz only described people with less power than herself in the abstract. She went on to describe people who were underprivileged or systematically marginalized socially; however, she would never, even when prodded, describe a real person within her organization as less powerful than herself.

Like the other participants, Liz described power as negotiated through relationships and having no clear boundaries. She then named her boss as a powerful person (hierarchical status). Yet, while Liz had both influence and hierarchical status, she would not name anyone within the organization with less power. Like other studies finding women might participate in the devaluing of women at work (Ashcraft & Pacanowsky, 1996), Liz appeared to devalue her own role within the organization. She shifted between contradictory definitions of power according to the context so that she never named herself as powerful.

Likewise, Debbie was a high school teacher in her late 20s and had been teaching at the same high school in Indiana for 5 years. When asked to describe a person who was powerful, she said, "she's a bitch." When asked to explain, Debbie went on to describe the source of this woman's power as "her personality. She's a very strong personality type. She's not afraid to speak her mind about anything." This woman did not have any hierarchical authority though. Yet, when asked to describe a relationship with a coworker who is less powerful than herself, Debbie responded: "[long pause] Almost everybody on my team would have been beside me rather than above me or below me. Um, the only thing I can think of is maybe the copy room people [laughs]." Here Debbie began her response with a metaphor for power as physical location, that is, beside, above, and below, which indicates power has clear boundaries and is a property of an individual. Debbie switched from her earlier definition of power as relational to a metaphor and an example that illustrates power as hierarchical. As she first pondered the question, Debbie searched for individuals who might be hierarchically less powerful, which was difficult because the people on her team were "beside" her not "above or below" her. At this point, she thought of the copy room people who might be considered hierarchically less powerful. Yet, when probed further, she denied any privilege of her position saying, "I don't feel like I have any more power than anyone else, no." Like Liz and the others above, Debbie shifted between conflicting definitions of power so that she described herself as having no power either hierarchically or relationally.

A similar tension appeared when participants discussed sources of power. Consistent with more functionalist definitions of power as resources, power can stem from legitimate authority or expertise/skill (French & Raven, 1959). While the two bases of power are not necessarily mutually exclusive—one can have both legitimate authority

and expertise—participants prioritized authority and expertise in contradictory ways throughout their interviews. When participants attempted to define power in the abstract, they prioritized knowledge, experience, and skill as the primary bases of power. For example, Stacy (above) said, “Number one, you have to be knowledgeable.” Another participant, Leslie, was in her late 50s, had a master’s degree and worked as an interior decorator, a consultant, and a real estate agent for a broker in Dallas, Texas. Leslie said of power:

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.

In both statements, power is relationally negotiated and rooted in knowledge and experience.

Simultaneously, when participants discussed more concrete examples, they deferred to authority as the primary base of power. For instance, Holly, who was in her mid-30s, has been an attorney in Dallas, Texas, for 5 years and had been talking about differences in how men and women in her office express emotions, stated:

Almost all of our support staff—so people who I would consider, I mean they are professionals, they do a really go job but they’re not people who are degreed and have mobility within our organization—our legal secretaries, our paralegals, our file clerks, this group of people who are administrative in nature and are very successful people in their own right but aren’t, um, don’t have a career path. I mean this is their job.

Here Holly marginalized the knowledge, expertise, and contributions of the “support staff” because of their hierarchical status and limited mobility within the organization. However, when Holly described the nature of power she stated that it was “helping people come around to where you want them to be.” In fact, at one point Holly said she needed to learn to be less assertive and learn to make others believe her ideas were their own in order to be more influential. Again, there is a tension between how the participant privileged authority and persuasion skills.

Similarly, participants described power as control of valuable resources such as expertise. Kris, who defined power as “the ability to influence people and having a final say,” was an attorney and the Senior Legal Research Associate for her company’s affirmative action department. She was in her late 40s and worked in Missouri. She described the power of her own expertise stating, “If hiring paperwork comes through, he [the boss] won’t sign off on it until I’ve signed off on it. If I’ve signed off on it and if there’s no problem, he lets it go. I don’t have the authority, but it’s my judgment.” Yet, despite recognition of her own expertise and her valuable role in hiring decisions, Kris still described her boss as more powerful and was unable or unwilling to identify anybody in the organization with less power than herself. She failed to express her

own expertise as power despite defining power as influence and expertise. Like each of the participants, Kris appeared to recognize her own knowledge, expertise, and contributions to the organization, yet failed to describe herself as powerful and therefore minimized her own knowledge contributions. Kris, like the others, downplayed her contributions (Buzzanell, 2002) by switching between contradictory sources of power.

Other participants demonstrated this same tension between their own definitions and examples of power. Kim was a drug and alcohol counselor in a midsize town in Missouri. She was in her late 20s. Kim stated, “Hmm, well, right now everybody is more or less on the same plane. I mean, I’m the newest person there. I’ve been there a year and everybody else is older than me.” Yet, she went on to describe how the office support staff was powerful because they influenced others’ work with their knowledge and skill. She stated:

I mean, technically, like right now, like we have an office manager and technically she should probably have less power in the organization than I do but she’s been there for eleven years so it doesn’t really come out that way. Well, because she pretty much runs the show as far as she does all of our scheduling. She does, you know, a lot of things that we really depend upon.

Here the participant began by minimizing her own position as, at best, parallel to those around her (hierarchy), yet contradicted her own definition by identifying others with less hierarchical status as more powerful than herself in terms of resources. This is particularly meaningful when contrasted to the individual she described as more powerful, which was based on hierarchical status, and further exemplifies the way participants consistently marginalized their own organizational role by shifting back and forth between which resources of power they privileged. In essence, the participants consistently denied their own organizational power by switching between contradictory definitions.

In sum, many contradictions were revealed throughout the data analysis. Some participants defined power as something that was negotiated within relationships, based on knowledge and skill, and operationalized by managing perceptions of credibility and respect. Others defined power as something based on skills, perceptions, and relational influence. When participants described power in the abstract, they consistently described it as shared. When they gave concrete examples of people with more power, the examples were almost always hierarchical. In fact, all but one participant named an individual with hierarchical power as more powerful. This one exception described the powerful person as “a bitch.” Yet, the women never described concrete examples of anybody with less relationally negotiated or hierarchical organizational power. Occasionally participants incorporated hierarchical status and relationships into their descriptions of power, yet regardless of their descriptions of power and whether or not they themselves fit within the description, the women never named themselves in the interviews as having power. The women all switched between varying and often contradictory definitions of power so that they never named themselves as powerful.

Discussion and Implications

This study addresses three research questions regarding women's constructions of organizational power, responses to organizational tensions and gendered paradoxes, and roles in maintaining or disturbing gendered paradoxes. The following interprets the data analysis described above and draws some conclusions to answer the research questions.

Constructing and Experiencing Power

With regard to the first research question (How do women communicatively construct, experience and negotiate paradoxical constructions of power in the workplace?), our analysis reveals that participants constructed and experienced power in fluid and contradictory ways. The women (re)defined power as shared but also hierarchical. When participants were asked to define power in the abstract, they described it as a complex mixture of knowledge, skills, perceptions, self-confidence, communication skills, and persuasive abilities. When asked to provide a concrete example by describing a powerful person at work, that person was always, and sometimes only, hierarchically more powerful regardless of other competencies. These tensions between the abstract and the concrete and between status and competence constructed a contradiction between what power is and who is powerful.

Participants articulated contradictory meanings of power, examples of power, and sources of power so that power was different things in different contexts. This finding extends previous studies that suggest individuals construct and experience power differently than men (Dougherty, 2001a; Fine, 1993; Marshall, 1993; Parker, 2001). The data reveal a single participant's descriptions and articulated experiences of power varied across context even within the same interview. Each participant constructed power as relationally negotiated but hierarchical and legitimate but expert. For these participants, power was fluid indicating individuals experience power differently across contexts.

Additionally, participants described in interviews powerful people as those at the top of the hierarchy (i.e., legitimate power) (French & Raven, 1959) while simultaneously defining power as relationally negotiated. This indicates that these women pull from dominant, functionalist business models to reframe their more relational definitions of power. Management rhetoric functions as an ideological state apparatus (Althusser, 1971/2001) by privileging and thus perpetuating functionalist definitions of power (see Pfafman, 2007). Relational power definitions might be trendy in the workplace yet have been co-opted and controlled by dominant ideology and perpetuated by ideological state apparatuses so that employees embrace and value relationally negotiated power within a functionalist framework.

Negotiating Tensions Between Power and Gender

With regard to the second research question (How do women negotiate tensions between constructions of power and gender?), our analysis reveals women use gendered code-switching to negotiate organizational paradoxes. Because gendered power

dynamics are linked to organizational paradoxes (Stohl & Cheney, 2001) and specifically the paradox of professional women (Wood & Conrad, 1983), the fluid construction of power has implications for understanding responses to gendered paradoxes. Organizational members respond to organizational tensions in a variety of ways that serve to frame tensions as contradictions, complimentary dialectics, or paradoxes (Tracy, 2004). Paradoxes are typically seen as situations where in pursuing one goal, another competing goal enters the situation and works to undermine the first goal (Martin, 2004; Putnam, 2004; Stohl & Cheney, 2001). When framed as contradictions, responses to organizational tensions include selecting (attending to one pole over the other), splitting (dividing among organizational members), or vacillating (switching between various organizational norms depending on context) (Tracy, 2004). Paradoxes point to times when, through interaction, two contradictory views cannot be reconciled. The contradictions expressed by the participants of this study suggest a form of vacillating that resembles, but is distinct from, Tracy's model because vacillating is done in response to a paradox not a dialectic. Here, vacillation appears to be more like gendered code-switching that functions as a productive response to the professional paradox.

Vacillating between meanings of power appears to be a form of gendered code-switching. Code-switching has traditionally been used to discuss linguistic changes, but Huspek (1993) suggests more cultural code-switching occurs as a means of negotiating tension between dueling structures of meaning. In regards to the second research question (how do women negotiate tensions between constructions of power and gender), the women in these interviews use cultural or gendered code-switching to negotiate organizational tensions that appear in different contexts. This supports Sheppard's (1989) finding that women fear being sanctioned when they enact more masculine organizational roles. This study shows that depending on how the communication was framed, participants marked some models of power within certain contexts as good or right and others as bad or wrong. If the frame was professional or business, the power was marked differently than if the frame was a gendered model of self. What results is a fluid shifting between two conflicting codes of gendered personhood.

Our analysis suggests that participants respond to gendered professional paradox by embracing contradictory definitions of power. When participants were confronted with questions that might lead them into paradoxical situations, they simply redefined the terms by code-switching. Therefore, gendered code-switching was a functional way to negotiate gendered organizational tensions.

Disrupting and Maintaining Paradoxes

In regards to RQ₃ (How do women's constructions of power serve to disrupt or maintain paradoxes of women as professional?), this study reveals women's constructions of power both disrupt and maintain gendered organizational paradoxes. Responses to gendered organizational paradoxes can either disrupt or maintain the paradoxes (Buzzanell, 1995; Martin, 2004; Wood & Conrad, 1983). In some instances, the

appropriate response to a paradox might be both clear and available, albeit threatening; in many other cases, a viable response is deeply hidden. In these cases, women not only confront gendered paradoxes but also confront “the double bind,” which exists when all readily available responses simply perpetuate the paradox (Stohl & Cheney, 2001; Wendt, 1998; Wood & Conrad, 1983). Gendered code-switching reframes the double bind while maintaining other aspects of the gendered professional paradox.

Gendered code-switching is not only a practical way to negotiate gendered organizational paradoxes but is also a functional way of redefining what might otherwise become a double bind. When participants were confronted with questions that might lead them into paradoxical situations, they simply reframed the terms. By embracing contradictory meanings of power and redefining power according to context, participants employ gendered code-switching that empowers but also distances the participant from appearing to adopt a masculine organizational role. This code-switch is a seemingly logical response that enables their feminine and professional identities. In this sense, gendered code-switching transcends the double bind borne out of gendered organizational paradoxes.

While, on one hand, gendered code-switching can be understood as reframing the double bind, it can also be understood in the context of prior research showing women fear being found out as impostors (Marshall, 1993) and downplay their abilities and accomplishments (Buzzanell, 2002). When participants were asked to define power in the abstract, they described it as a complex mix of knowledge, skills, perceptions, self-confidence, communication skills, and persuasive abilities. When asked to provide a concrete example by describing a powerful person at work, that person was always, and sometimes only, hierarchically more powerful regardless of other competencies. If the participant could have been considered relationally more powerful, she used her hierarchical position to downplay that influence. On the other hand, if she could be perceived as hierarchically more powerful, she emphasized a relationally negotiated meaning to again downplay her own role. Participants’ definitions of power fluctuated to justify and support the power of others in the organization and to downplay their own organizational roles. In other words, participants consistently downplayed their own organizational power by code-switching. By employing gendered code-switching, the women marginalize their own organizational roles while privileging others’ roles.

Tensions between the abstract and the concrete and between status and competence reinforce a gendered power paradox between what power is and who gets to be powerful. By embracing multiple and often inconsistent perceptions of power, participants reinforced a power paradox that both enables multiple aspects of their identities but simultaneously undermined their own organizational worth. In this sense, gendered code-switching is a functional way to negotiate organizational tension but simultaneously and somewhat ironically hegemonically reproduces gender-biased notions of power and professionalism. This finding supports Dougherty’s (2001b) argument that inconsistencies might serve to marginalize women in organizations by creating “untenable and uncomfortable situations” and “reinforcing the professional paradox” (p. 7).

At the same time, by perpetuating the dominant construction of power, the paradox of professional women remains deeply hidden. In fact, the participants themselves never recognized any contradictions in their statements, and even in analyzing the data the contradictions were difficult to articulate clearly indicating their deeply rooted nature. This hidden nature of the gendered professional paradox is indicative of its deeply rooted nature, and the inconsistencies seem so natural that without close scrutiny, they remain invisible.

Finally, the participants' inconsistent definitions of power minimized resistance and obscured gendered struggles for control. Shifting definitions of power minimize the tension between dominance and subordination making the lines blurry if not invisible. Sexual harassment literature finds women perpetuate gender paradoxes surrounding sexual harassment when victims of harassment express an unwillingness to report it for fear of not being believed yet also express the belief that most sexual harassment complaints are false (Dougherty, 2001b). Other research suggests women simultaneously perpetuate and normalize their own harassment (Bochantin & Cowan, 2008). Likewise, this study supports the finding that women reinforce gendered power paradoxes even as they find functional ways to negotiate them.

Limitation and Future Research

Although this study provides an empirical examination regarding how women actually articulate and conceptualize power within the workplace, this study is not without its limitations. First, with all interpretive research, the results are not generalizable beyond the sample presented in this study. Second, although the focus here was on the experiences of a typically marginalized class of individuals (i.e., women), an interesting direction for future research might include men in the sample to extrapolate how they construct and experience power paradoxes. Being able to juxtapose the accounts of both men and women will help future researchers to draw real conclusions about the potentially gendered nature of gendered power paradoxes.

This study reinforces the belief that power and paradoxes are complex social constructs and reveals that this complexity often serves to marginalize. The ability to define and redefine power serves to (re)subordinate the already marginalized to sustain the current patriarchal structure as was seen when participants consistently and hegemonically defined power in self-marginalizing terms. Yet, at the same time, it appears that redefining is also functional for the women as a way of negotiating their organizational roles for themselves. Scholars must continue to look for and expose the intricate layers of paradoxes that obscure dominant ideological values and marginalize women but should also further seek to understand how paradoxes might also be functional for the women who participate in them.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol 1

1. Tell me a little bit about your job.
2. Tell me about some of the people you work with.
3. Describe what it means to be a professional woman.
4. Describe your early encounters or experiences with professional women.
5. Describe your professional role models.
 - a. Describe your first female professional role model.
 - b. What lessons did you learn from her?

Appendix B

Revised Interview Protocol 2

1. Tell me a little bit about your job.
2. Tell me about some of the people you work with.
 - a. Describe your relationship with these coworkers.
3. Describe somebody in your organization whom you view as powerful.
 - a. In what ways is this person powerful?
 - b. What makes this person powerful?
4. Will you also describe a man/a woman (opposite of whichever sex was described previously) within your organization you view as powerful?
 - a. In what ways is this person powerful?
 - b. What makes this person powerful?
5. Describe a person in your organization who is less powerful than you.
 - a. In what ways is this person less powerful?
 - b. What makes this person less powerful?
6. What is power?
7. What does it mean to have power in an organization?

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