

# Gender diversity in the perception of organisational politics in South Africa

by David Beaty<sup>\*</sup>  
Mandla Adonisi<sup>\*\*</sup>  
and Terence Taylor<sup>\*\*\*</sup>

## Abstract

*This research examined men and women managers' perceptions of organisational politics (OP) in South Africa. The research replicated the methodology of an earlier American study and found that while gender differences in perceptions of OP exist in the United States, similar differences were not observed in South Africa. The research points to two findings relevant to the study of OP and gender diversity research in South Africa. First, it highlights the relatively low importance of gender as a mediating factor in the way OP is judged by men and women managers in South Africa. Secondly, the study supports the notion that men and women relate to power and politics similarly instead of affiliating with their gender group when judging political behaviour. Both findings hold promise for promoting future positive inter-group gender relations in the workplace as women increasingly advance into senior management positions and work more closely with men in similar positions and as equal colleagues.*

## 1 Introduction

The purpose of this research is to replicate an earlier study of gender differences in perceptions of organisational politics. A number of authors have acknowledged the importance of researching organisational politics (OP) in the field of management (Klenke 2003; Hoefler 1995; Pfeffer 1992; Gummer 1990; Romm & Drory 1988). OP has been associated with a number of different management issues such as organisational culture (Romm & Drory 1988), trust (Klenke 2002), job performance (Gilmore, Ferris, Dulebohn & Harrel-Cook 1996), decision making (Young 2003), leadership (Nwanko & Richardson 1996), conflict management (Ferris, Frink, Galang, Zhou, Kacmar & Howard 1996), and individual, group and organisational behaviour (Klenke 2003; Hoefler 1995; Pfeffer 1992; Mintzberg 1983). Indeed, some authors go so far as to suggest that, contrary to conventional wisdom, organisations are not simply "rational" entities but are in fact "political" entities characterised by disagreements over perceptions about strategy and a common purpose (Hoefler 1995; Pfeffer 1992; Gummer 1990).

In addition to acknowledging the importance of OP, several authors have defined OP as an intentional process in which behaviour is strategically designed to maximise

<sup>\*</sup> Dr D Beaty is a professor at the Gordon Institute of Business Science at the University of Pretoria.

<sup>\*\*</sup> Dr M Adonisi is a senior lecturer at the Gordon Institute of Business Science at the University of Pretoria.

<sup>\*\*\*</sup> Mr T Taylor is a lecturer at the Gordon Institute of Business Science at the University of Pretoria.

short-term or long-term interests (Ferris, Runs & Fandt 1989; Gray & Ariss 1985). Others have restricted their definitions to self-serving and organisationally non-sanctioned behaviour. Mintzberg (1983:172), for example, defines OP as “individual or group behaviour that is informal, ostensibly parochial, typically divisive, illegitimate and sanctioned neither by formal authority, accepted ideology, nor certified expertise”. Andrews and Kacmar (2001) state that OP refers to the actions by individuals, which are directed toward the goal of furthering their own self-interests without regard for the well-being of others or their organisation.

These definitions imply that OP has a negative influence on behaviour in organisations. For example, Ferris et al (1996) assert that OP is self-serving behaviour that is not sanctioned by the organisation and that produces conflict and disharmony in the work environment by pitting individuals or groups against one another or against the organisation. Gilmore et al (1996) show that OP results in negative outcomes such as poor job performance, negative attitudes and employee withdrawal from the hostile and politicised environment. Vigoda (2002) indicates in his research that the perceptions of workplace politics can have a long-range impact on an employee's job distress and aggressive behaviour. Hoefer (1995), Pfeffer (1992) and Gummer (1990) argue that OP is actually a consequence of wide disagreements by people in an organisation over their common purpose.

On the other hand, a number of other researchers argue that OP can play a constructive role in organisational life. Ferris, Perrewe, Anthony and Gilmore (2000) argue that political skills are an essential tool for managers to use in reconciling divergent perspectives. Butcher and Clarke (2003) support this notion and add that organisational politics is an essential ingredient in bringing together stakeholders whose intentions and goals are in conflict. Klenke (2003) indicates that OP can include and enhance decision making processes at the organisational level, power building at the group or unit level and a range of political behaviour at the individual level.

While the debate continues over the positive and negative impact that OP has on behaviour in organisations, a number of authors have gone further and studied how the perceptions of employees influence the ways in which they deal with OP. For example, Treadway, Ferris, Hochwater, Perrewe, Witt and Goodman (2005) reviewed the progression of thought on OP from the late 1970s and early 1980s to the present and indicate that OP theory and empirical research have moved from studying the phenomenon as “objective” reality to “subjective” perception. They define the perception of OP as an “individual's observation of others' self-interested behaviours, such as selective manipulation of organizational policies”. Gandz and Murray (1980) go further and argue that perceptions regarding organisational politics are the product of both individual and organisational characteristics. Ferris, Runs and Fandt (1989), in formulating a model of OP perceptions, positioned their model as a product of the organisation (e.g. centralisation, formalisation, hierarchical level, span of control) the job (e.g. autonomy, skills variety, feedback, opportunities for advancement) and individual influences (e.g. age, sex, Machiavellianism, self-monitoring). More recently, these authors have called for a greater understanding of the impact of individual difference variables on perceptions of organisational politics (Ferris, Hochwater, Douglass, Blass, Kolodinsky & Treadway 2002).

In line with the suggestion that individual differences help explain the way organisational politics is perceived by employees, a number of researchers found that employee perceptions of OP are influenced by cultural factors (Romm Drory (1988),

age (Treadway et al 2005), culture (Romm & Drory 1988) and informal supervisor and coworker feedback (Rosen, Levy & Hall 2006).

In fact, Drory and Beaty (1991) also found that gender is a mediating factor affecting perceptions of OP. They concluded, in their research on a sample of US male and female employees holding professional and mid-level managerial jobs, that when it comes to assessing a situation in which it is perceived that an employee is being politically manipulated, the perceiver tends to affiliate and side with the person of his or her own gender. These researchers found that men and women relate to power and politics in similar ways, but perceive the consequences of political behaviour differently in that they align themselves and identify with a the person from their own gender. They concluded that this intra-gender identification finding holds important implications for understanding inter-gender conflict in such factors as staffing, resource allocation and promotions, etc. What is more, a number of researchers argue that for a number of reasons the link between gender and OP has particular significance for the study of diversity in the workplace and for employee performance.

For example, studies on diversity conducted in field settings guided by social identity and self-categorisation theories suggest that diversity is associated with negative performance outcomes (Pelled, Eisenhardt & Xin 1999; Tsui, Egan & O'Reilly 1992). Frink and Waterson (2003) linked gender diversity to firm performance in the service/wholesale/retail sectors. They found that gender diversity had a negative impact on firm performance when (1) employees paid more attention to "us" than to "them" within the organisation and when (2) employees affiliated more with others who were similar to themselves. These actions resulted in an overall decrease in group solidity, made it harder for group members to communicate clearly and openly, and increased conflict within the group. A number of other researchers found that employees who were dissimilar to others in their organisations in characteristics such as tenure, age, gender, and ethnicity were found to be less committed to and more likely to leave their organisation, to feel less integrated, and have less positive relationships with peers (Chattopadhyay 1999; Tsui, Egan, & O'Reilly 1992).

On the other hand, a number of researchers have advanced an alternative view of diversity which they term the "value in diversity" hypothesis (e.g. Jehn, Northcraft & Neale 1999; Diamond 1997; Watson, Kumar & Michaelsen 1993). In laboratory studies, Richard, Barnett, Dwyer and Chadwick (2004) found that diversity within work groups increases their effectiveness (see also Watson, Kumar & Michaelson 1993; Cox, Lobel & McLeod 1991). They argue that contact between workers from diverse backgrounds will lead to the development of novel solutions to the tasks at hand. These novel solutions will, in turn, enable them to outperform workers from homogenous backgrounds (Swann, Polzer, Seyle, & Ko 2004).

Finally, a "third-way" theoretical perspective on the diversity-performance relationship that is grounded in Blau's (1977) theory of heterogeneity and Swann et al's (2004) self-verification approach to diversity incorporates notions from the value-in-diversity, social identity and social categorisation literatures. These authors suggest that there may not be a simple linear relationship between cultural diversity and performance because of the mediating factors of levels of management, contextual factors and entrepreneurial orientation (Richard, Barnett, Dwer & Chadwick 2004) and peoples' self-views (e.g. thoughts and feelings about the self). Indeed, after a survey of the research literature on diversity, Williams and O'Reilly (1998) concluded that diversity is, at the very least, as likely to help performance as it is to impair it.

The notion that gender differences could also mediate in the perception of OP is supported by a multidisciplinary body of research grounded in feminist theory. Indeed, in a recent review of the sex difference literature by Ely and Padavic (2007), these authors questioned the usefulness of sex difference assumptions and suggested that the basic constructs of gender, identity and power and their interrelationships be reconceptualised to emphasise the reciprocal influences of organisational practices and internal processes of identity construction. They indicated that this new orientation does not focus on sex difference per se but on the social and psychological processes that lead to differentiation. They advance an explanation of gender as a system that operates in organisations on multiple and mutually constituted levels and identify five concepts that mediate gender dynamics.

First, for example, feminist research suggests that rather than being a property of individuals, gender is “socially constructed,” deriving its meaning from an institutionalised system of social practices (Lorber 1994; Ridgeway & Correll 2000). This system produces the appearance of two significantly different kinds of people – males and females – and organises values, experiences and meanings around that difference (Ridgeway & Correll 2000). Further, Ely and Padavic (2007) indicate that because this process is fundamentally social, institutions – including organisations – can contribute to it or undermine it (Acker 1990; Wajcman 1998).

Second, Ely and Padavic (2007) indicate that masculinity and femininity are central components of the gender system and refer to the values, experiences and meanings that are associated with men and women or that define a masculine or feminine image. However, this view is simplistic in terms of the perspective of Connell (2002), who indicates that masculinity and femininity each contain multiple forms, and the dominance of one form or another depends on the historical and social context. In fact, the range of forms of masculinity is partly shaped by interactions between gender and other systems, such as race, ethnicity and social class (Collins 2004; Ely & Meyerson 2001; Omi & Winant 1994). Likewise, expectations about femininity depend on social class, race and ethnicity producing different effects for women in organisations (Bell & Nkomo 2001; Collins 2000; Hurtado 1989).

Third, Ely and Padavic (2007) indicate that although masculinities and femininities derive meaning from their cultural associations with men and women, one of their main organisational applications is in the notion of gendered occupations (Britton 2003; Padavic & Reskin 2002; Williams 1985). The labeling of occupations by sex artificially limits both work roles and people, effects that organisations can reinforce or counter (Bailyn 1993; Bailyn Fletcher & Kolb 1997; Fletcher 2001; Meyerson & Ely 2003).

Fourth, Deaux and Stewart (2001) argue that gender identity is a profoundly social process in which social structure, norms, individual agency and other people play major roles of influence. Thus, Ely and Padavic (2007) observed that the view of gender identity as an ongoing process that is heavily influenced by organisations is a far more complex one than the view suggested by the findings of their survey of a sample of journal articles on organisational research on sex differences.

Fifth, Ely and Padavic (2007) note that power is central to the concept of gender in at least three ways. They indicate that gender and power are linked structurally (men’s overall greater representation in jobs with higher pay, more status and more formal organisational, political, and institutional power), culturally (in social practices that construct tasks, positions and traits as gendered), and by the process of gender identity formation (which involves more than identifying which group has more or less of it and how it is used to “translate” ourselves and others in gender terms).

Finally, research on gender differences in networking behaviour suggests that men and women might have different perceptions of OP. For example, Forret and Dougherty (2001) found that gender, socioeconomic background, extraversion, self-esteem and attitudes towards workplace politics were all related to the networking behaviour of managers and professionals. They also learned that the only gender difference in the five dimensions of networking behaviour they researched was that men engaged in more socialising behaviour than women. The only exception to this result was their finding that men and “single” women showed no differences in the amount of socialising. Lastly, in their follow-up study, Forret and Dougherty (2004) found that gender differences also impact on the utility of networking behaviour as a career-enhancing strategy.

Given the importance of the study of OP in management, the influence of gender and OP on the broader issues of diversity, the negative and positive consequences of OP on employee behaviour, explanations from feminist sociologists and feminist social psychologists and other theorists who offer an explanation of gender as a system that operates in organisations at multiple and mutually constituted levels, the authors conducted an extensive review of the literature on the subject of gender diversity in the perception of OP within the South African context. The purpose of this review was to ascertain whether any South African studies have been reported. The investigation did not reveal the existence of any research study on this phenomenon within the South African organisational context.

## **2 Aims of the study**

This study replicated the research methodology of Drory and Beaty (1991) in the United States by investigating the relationship between gender and perceptions of OP by managers working in firms in South Africa. The purpose of the investigation was to assess three things: first, the extent to which men and women in organisations in this country tolerate OP and view it as either moral or immoral; second, the effect political behaviour has on an organisation; and third, the extent to which gender plays a mediating role in the willingness of an individual to engage in OP as a method of influence.

## **3 Method**

As in the original study, the experiment consisted in research conducted in a laboratory setting and was consistent with Kilduff and Mehra's (1997:458) assertion that “no method grants privileged access to truth” and Ely and Padavic's (2007) envisioning of a research agenda that rigorously challenges conventional wisdom about gender by drawing on the full repertoire of research methods, including field and laboratory, qualitative and quantitative, and inductive and deductive approaches. However, regardless of the research methodology employed, these authors caution that “the inherent complexity of gender identity, in short, means that in any research design - whether carried out in the laboratory or in the field - assessing gender identity will be neither simple nor straightforward” (Ely & Padavic 2007:1138).

### ***Participants***

One hundred and twenty-nine respondents from middle management positions in diverse companies and industries completed the survey. The respondents were all

participants in Management Advancement Programmes or doing a part-time MBA at the Gordon Institute of Business Science, and were predominantly in middle management and professional positions in a wide variety of organisations. Seventy-five of the respondents were male and fifty-four were female. The average age of the respondents was 32, and the mean number of years of service with their current organisation was 4,6 years (with a median number of years of service of 3,5). Chi-squared tests of independence confirmed that there were no dependences between the sex of the respondents and their age or years of service. The South African sample differed from the sample of participants that Drory and Beaty (1991) utilised in their American study in two ways. First, the American sample comprised participants who were in full-time employment while the South African sample comprised participants who were mixed in terms of holding full-time and part-time positions. Second, the American study comprised a random sample of participants who were drawn from five American firms representing both service and industrial firms. On the other hand, the South African sample comprised participants who were selected from a pool of candidates attending University business school programmes and drawn from a variety of firms and industries.

### ***Data collection***

The critical incident used by Drory and Beaty (1991) to describe an act of political behaviour was presented to respondents. The incident was changed to cover the following four scenarios: 1) a female influencing (or attempting to influence) a male, 2) a female influencing a female, 3) a male influencing a female, and 4) a male influencing a male. The names of the male and female protagonists in the incidents were selected so that respondents could identify the gender of the protagonist. The names selected were Mike (Person A) and Jane (Person B).

### ***Instrument***

The critical incident was as follows:

Mike (Person A) and Jane (Person B) are managers working in 2 different departments in the same organisation. (Person A) wants to purchase a small computer for both departments and wants the control of the computer to be the responsibility of her or his department. Both (Person A) and (Person B) realise that this arrangement will increase (Person A's) and her or his department's power in the organisation. In order to convince (Person B) to cooperate, (Person A) approaches (Person B) informally and offers to support (Person B's) proposals concerning a separate but equally important issue in the next management meeting if (Person B) will cooperate and support (Person A's) proposal for the purchase of the computer. (Person A) also indicates to (Person B) that if she or he does not comply, (Person A) will use her or his influence against (Person B) in any possible way.

The behaviour described in the incident reflects the major elements of organisational political behaviour identified in the literature and by Drory and Beaty (1991) in their study. Since there was little room for ambiguity regarding the sex of the protagonists in the critical incident, the methodology did not require a check for the validity of the manipulation, as is typically performed in laboratory studies. Finally, the incident reflects a power-oriented attempt at informal influence using reward tactics on the one hand and coercion tactics on the other.

## **Variables**

In replicating the methodology in the original study by Drory and Beaty (1991), this research assessed the attitudes of respondents to the morality of the political behaviour in the incident, the effect of the behaviour on the organisation, and the willingness of the respondent to behave in a similar way. The statements used in each category and the Cronbach Alpha obtained from an item analysis of the respondents to each statement are provided in table 1.

**Table 1**  
**Questions constituting three research dimensions, and Cronbach's alpha for each item**

<b>Item Analysis</b>	<b>Alpha</b>
<b>Morality</b>	0.77
1. How immoral is the behaviour described in the incident?	
2. How fair is Mike's behaviour?	
3. Ethically speaking, is this behaviour acceptable in organisational life?	
<b>Effect on the organisation</b>	0.69
4. Is this behaviour detrimental to the organisation?	
5. How effective is this behaviour in assisting the organisation in achieving its goals?	
6. To what extent does such behaviour give the organisation a bad name?	
<b>Willingness to behave in a similar way</b>	0.73
7. Under the same circumstances, would you act like Mike?	
8. To what extent do you feel you could personally use such methods of influence?	

The Cronbach's alpha values computed for each group of questions range between 0.69 and 0.77. The alpha scores were similar to those obtained from the original study in the United States, which suggests that the constructs are robust despite the fact that this repeat study was conducted in South Africa.

## **Design**

As in the original study, the experiment is a two by two, non-repeated factorial design (Eynseck 1974). All possible combinations of gender of the influencing party and the target of influence were employed.

## **4 Results**

First, the results of this investigation are revealed in table 2 and show no significant differences between the mean scores describing respondents' attitudes to the critical incidents based on the sex of the influencing party and the target of influence. Whereas Drory and Beaty (1991) found that male subjects considered the manipulation of females in the scenario to be less immoral than the manipulation of males, and female subjects found the manipulation of males in the scenario to be less immoral than the manipulation of females, this study finds no support for these views. Further analysis by running two-sample t-tests for all combinations of the subgroups explored in the ANOVA tests also yielded the same result.

**Table 2**  
**ANOVA results for questions relating to morality of the behaviour in the scenario**

Source term	DF	Sum of squares	Mean square	F-Ratio	Prob level	Significance
Subject	1	1.496	1.496	2.58	0.109	N.S.
PersonA	1	0.362	0.362	0.62	0.430	N.S.
PersonB	1	0.034	0.034	0.06	0.809	N.S.
<b>Interactions</b>						
Subject * PersonA	1	0.176	0.176	0.30	0.582	N.S.
Subject * PersonB	1	0.059	0.059	0.10	0.750	N.S.
PersonA * PersonB	1	0.001	0.001	0.00	0.960	N.S.
Subject * PersonA * PersonB	1	0.000	0.000	0.00	0.979	N.S.
Residual	502	291.167	0.580			

Second, Drory and Beaty (1991) found that males considered the scenario less detrimental to organisational effectiveness than female respondents, and that the perceived severity of the incident increased when the influencing party and the target of influence were male. They also found that males considered the incident to be more severe when the target of the influence was a male, whereas females considered the incident to be more severe when the target was a female. As can be seen from table 3, this study finds no support for differences of opinion about the influence of OP on the organisation for either the sex of the subjects or the sex of the protagonists in the incidents.

**Table 3**  
**ANOVA results for questions relating to effect of the behaviour on the organisation**

Source term	DF	Sum of squares	Mean square	F-Ratio	Prob level	Significance
Subject	1	0.468	0.468	0.68	0.409	N.S.
PersonA	1	0.007	0.007	0.01	0.919	N.S.
PersonB	1	0.005	0.005	0.01	0.929	N.S.
<b>Interactions</b>						
Subject * PersonA	1	0.551	0.551	0.80	0.370	N.S.
Subject * PersonB	1	0.027	0.027	0.04	0.844	N.S.
PersonA * PersonB	1	0.121	0.121	0.18	0.675	N.S.
Subject * PersonA * PersonB	1	0.058	0.058	0.08	0.771	N.S.
Residual	502	344.066	0.685			

Third, regarding the willingness of the respondent to behave in the same way as the influencing party in the incident, Drory and Beaty (1991) found that males were more willing to behave in a similar way if the target of influence was a female, and that females were more willing to behave in a similar way if the target of influence was a male. Table 4 demonstrates that this replication study found no such interaction. It did find that male respondents had a significantly lower overall mean score (probability level of 0,048) across all questions than did their female counterparts.

**Table 4**  
**ANOVA results for questions relating to willingness to behave in a similar way**

Source term	DF	Sum of squares	Mean square	F-Ratio	Prob level	Significance
Subject	1	2.208	2.208	3.92	0.048*	Significant
PersonA	1	0.275	0.275	0.49	0.485	N.S.
PersonB	1	0.002	0.002	0.00	0.954	N.S.
<b>Interactions</b>						
Subject * PersonA	1	0.007	0.007	0.01	0.913	N.S.
Subject * PersonB	1	0.014	0.014	0.02	0.876	N.S.
PersonA * PersonB	1	0.074	0.074	0.13	0.718	N.S.
Subject * PersonA * PersonB	1	0.001	0.001	0.00	0.963	N.S.
Residual	502	282.557	0.563			



## ***Discussion***

Overall, the findings of Drory and Beaty (1991) concerning the influence of gender diversity on perceptions of OP in the United States were not supported by similar research findings on a sample of mid-level managers and professionals working in South African firms. In contrast to Drory and Beaty's (1991) findings, the South African findings indicate that men and women in this country do not differ in their attitudes towards OP, and their judgment of OP is not affected by the gender of persons acting from political motives. While Drory and Beaty (1991) found in their American sample that: (1) men are more tolerant of OP than women, (2) men find OP morally acceptable when it is done by other men to women and (3) women find OP morally acceptable when it is done by other women to men, this finding was not supported by the South African research. Men and women did not differ in their tolerance of political behaviour and neither gender affiliated with their own gender group in judging OP to be morally acceptable.

This finding is interesting and suggests a number of possible reasons that might explain the differences in the responses of managers in the United States and South Africa and the similarities in the opinions of both genders in South Africa. For example, there is a fifteen-year time gap between the research reported by Drory and Beaty (1991) and the research that has just been concluded in South Africa. It is possible that today, in contrast to previous eras, the men and women comprising the sample are both more tolerant of OP and more likely to regard the activity as morally acceptable and as a simple fact of organisational life. Hennig and Jardin (1997) argue that women in the early 1990s employed in managerial positions were not as sophisticated about the realities of OP as their male counterparts. Yet today, while acknowledging that the South African business world is still male dominated, Mathur-Helm (2006) found in her research that women are becoming increasingly sophisticated about the realities of organisational life. She researched a sample of four of the largest banks in South Africa that claim to be leaders in embracing change, transformation and compliance with government legislation. She found that 75% of the women in her research had access to mentors, 40% had access to social networks, and almost 100% had access to career development training programmes. What is more, the entire sample of women surveyed in senior management positions had access to at least one type of career or work-related support structure, 60% were major decision makers, 35% could attend board meetings and 60% had a planned career path. She found that 75% favoured socialising with colleagues or business associates after working hours and only 5% of women rarely socialised with anyone and preferred their own space. Finally, her research revealed that only 20% of women said they lacked networking skills and indicated that they never did business in informal settings.

These relatively recent South African findings of Mathur-Helm (2006) suggest that women working in progressive firms are becoming increasingly sophisticated with regard to organisational life, the importance of networking, and the value of using informal avenues to achieve results. Yet, the issue of gender and networking is far more complex than is portrayed in this as well as other related research (see Maume 1999; Lyness & Heilman 2006; Biernat & Vescio 2002; Ely & Meyerson 2001). As McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook (2001) point out, there are many types of network relationships that are influenced by gender differences. For example, Forret and Dougherty (2004) found in their research that gender differences do impact on the utility of networking behaviour as a career-enhancing strategy. Therefore, it is possible that the types of networking identified by Mathur-Helm (2006) and the findings of this investigation in which no significant differences between men and women were found in

terms of their tolerance of political behaviour reflect complex dynamics that require further research and deeper analysis. Ibarra's (1992) findings illustrate the complexity of this phenomenon. On the one hand, Ibarra found that women evidenced a differentiated network pattern in which they obtained social support and friendship from women as well as instrumental access through network ties to men. However, on the other hand, the findings revealed that men were more likely to form homophilous (tendency to form same-sex networks) ties across multiple networks and to have stronger homophilous ties. This investigation revealed complexity in understanding gender dynamics, in that while centrality in organisation-wide networks did not vary by gender, once controls were instituted, men (relative to women) appeared to reap greater network returns from similar individual and positional resources as well as from homophilous relationships.

The findings of this South African investigation also suggest that women, like their male counterparts, show equal tolerance of political behaviour regardless of the gender of the individual acting from political motives. Furthermore, their moral judgment of OP is not affected by the gender of the person or persons displaying political behaviour. It is therefore possible that women's increased awareness of and sophistication regarding OP has helped them increasingly understand and tolerate political behaviour while also deferring moral judgment on the person acting politically. It is also possible that a combination of factors - such as government legislation in South Africa, increasing awareness of the importance of equity, affirmative action and Mathur-Helm's (2006:324) assertion that "numerous men-run companies are working hard to create a fair and conducive working environment to accommodate both sexes" - all work towards creating forces which strongly influence the extent to which men and women tolerate political behaviour today in spite of gender differences.

The second finding of this investigation revealed that, in contrast to the American results, a sample of South African participants showed that men and women do not differ in the way they judge OP in terms of whether or not it is detrimental to the organisation. Neither the men nor the women in this South African sample made judgments, either favourable or unfavourable, based on whether the behaviour was displayed by a member of their own gender group or the opposite group. What is more, neither gender perceives a political incident to be more or less severe because of the gender of the individual acting politically. This finding, while difficult to interpret, probably reflects the differences of opinion and inconsistency in the literature on the ways in which gender intra-identification and inter-gender differences have been researched. For example, some research on women in management has shown that women are more likely to engage in conflict than men, suggesting that they may be more competitive than is commonly believed (Klenke 2002). However, other research suggests that women in management are more likely to prefer cooperative, compromising, avoidant and accommodative political strategies while men tend to exhibit more competitive styles (Fletcher 2001; Booysen 1999).

A possible explanation for our findings may be that no significant differences between genders in the way they judge OP in terms of whether or not it is detrimental to the organisation can be found in the views of self-categorisation theorists (Pelled, Eisenhardt, & Xin 1999; Tsui et al 1992). These authors contend that members of diverse groups, by focusing on superordinate goals (Sherif 1958), shift their focus from the qualities that make them unique to a focus on the superordinate identity of the group which serves to unite them and induce them to overcome the difficulties associated with competing perspectives (Sherif 1966). While the arguments of the self-

categorisation theorists arouse a certain amount of controversy (Swann, Polzer, Seyle & Ko 2004), the conclusions of self-categorisation theorists and the findings of this investigation suggest potential for members to move beyond gender differences in inter-group relations and their perceptions of OP and, instead, to focus on superordinate goals and identities as a strategy for finding value in diversity (Swann et al 2004).

Third, in contrast to Drory and Beaty's (1991) finding that males were more likely to behave in a similar way if the target of influence was female, and that females were more likely to behave in a similar way if the target was male, this study found no differences in reactions to OP as a result of either gender siding with their own gender. From the inter-gender relations perspective, this study suggests that when it comes to assessing a situation in which an employee is being politically manipulated, both men and women who participated in this study in South Africa are unlikely to affiliate with their own gender. This finding reflects a body of research on gender diversity and networks that indicates that gender homophily (forming same sex networks) is lower in the US among young people, the highly educated group and Anglos (as compared with African Americans and Hispanics) (Marsden 1987). Indeed, Blau (1991) found that this structuring of gender homophily is also mirrored in other societies and in more ephemeral relations (Mayew, McPherson, Rotolo & Smith-Lovin 1995). In fact, the participants in the sample used in this South African investigation were both relatively young (average age 32) and highly educated (studying for a post-graduate degree) and thus were least likely to form same sex networks than might have been the case if the sample's demographic factors had been segmented along race and ethnic lines. Indeed, Miller et al (2001) found that homophily in race and ethnicity creates the strongest divides in personal environments with age, religion, education, occupation and gender following in roughly that order. Yet again, the research findings of Ibarra (1992) might also help explain this investigation's finding since her research demonstrated that women use different network patterns to obtain both social support and friendships from women while also accessing instrumental relationships through their network ties to men. Thus, it appears from the participants in this study that both men and women are less likely to rigidly align themselves with their own gender in their perception of OP and instead draw on networks from either gender, depending on the results they are attempting to achieve and the extent to which they are focusing on the superordinate goal that unifies them.

The findings in this investigation on gender diversity in the perception of organisational politics in South Africa have a number of implications for diversity management in general in South Africa. First, it is possible that men and women with high levels of education and sophistication in today's business world in South Africa are more understanding and tolerant in their perceptions of OP. Participants in this investigation appear to have embraced the notion of "value in diversity" strategies outlined by the aforementioned authors. Second, the findings of this research suggest that gender differences might be subservient to the need for both men and women to focus on a superordinate goal that can unite rather than divide them. This observation has significant and positive implications for strategies that could be applied in uniting diverse employees.

For example, Harris and Moran (1996) and Thiederman (1991) identify a number of strategies for developing a superordinate goal that transcends individual interests and supports a vision that is worth pursuing for the benefit of the whole organisation. These strategies include:

- (1) identifying and specifying changes that appear desirable to improve effectiveness for both genders
- (2) creating a readiness in the system for change that might involve the elimination of role stereotyping by allowing women and men to engage in roles that are currently associated with specific genders
- (3) facilitating the internalisation of innovation or change by having people challenge their mental models and paradigms that hold them back
- (4) reinforcing the new cultural paradigm established through the change, or in other words institutionalising the new cultural paradigm

Finally, while providing evidence that gender differences exist in a variety of networking behaviours, the findings of this research on gender differences in OP suggest that men and women can, and will, also form multiple networks and align themselves with others from similar or different genders, depending on the results they wish to achieve. This finding has positive implications for the implementation of coaching and mentoring opportunities within a diverse workforce context.

## 5 Conclusion

The present study is a first attempt to examine gender perceptions of OP in South Africa. The research points at two findings which are of relevance both to the study of OP in South Africa and to the issue of gender at work in South Africa. First, this study highlights the relatively low importance of gender as a mediating factor in the way OP is judged by men and women participants in the study in South Africa. Secondly, the study supports the notion that men and women relate to political behaviour in a rather similar way and do not affiliate with their own gender group when judging political activity. Both findings hold promise for promoting future positive inter-group gender relations in the workplace as more women advance into senior management positions and work more closely with men in similar positions as equal colleagues.

This study has a number of limitations that serve as a caution against generalising the results to all populations and contexts. First, it is possible that the incident used in this investigation is outdated since it was formulated in the early 1990s and today's respondents might not view the details of the incident as current. Second, the incident was designed for an American sample and it is possible that a South African population group might not understand the incident in the same way as their US counterparts. Indeed, the participants in the sample employed in this study were somewhat different to those in the sample used in Drory and Beaty's (1991) US study, and this could also have influenced the findings. Third, research also underscores the complex link between gender diversity and organisational politics. There is a need to clarify these relationships in different industry contexts, with different demographic variables (e.g. high and low levels of education and sophistication, employees working in firms that are progressive or otherwise, etc) and to carry out further investigations into the relationship between OP and gender diversity in managing culturally diverse employees and managers.

Finally, it is possible that while no differences were found across gender in the perceptions of OP in South Africa, differences might be uncovered if the mediating factor of "race" was included in the investigation. For example, Bell, Meyerson, Nkomo and Scully (2003), Bell and Nkomo (2001) and Stomblor and Padavic (1997) indicate that both expectations about femininity /masculinity and proclivities for resistance to

organisational messages and mandates may be shaped by social class, race and ethnicity.

Future research in South Africa may further analyse the effects of OP and diversity for specific ethnic groups to obtain a deeper appreciation of how workplace diversity affects employees' perceptions of OP (e.g. perhaps black men and black women hold different opinions in their judgment of political behaviour relative to their white counterparts).

Finally, the cautionary advice by Ely and Padavic (2007) for authors conducting gender research has special relevance for this investigation and others of this nature. They point to the need for investigators to continuously and critically inquire into their own assumptions as invested with their own social, political and personal interests. These assumptions can guide choices around theory and interpretation and are unavoidably political and grounded in a particular cultural context.

We hope that this investigation highlights the need for a deeper analysis and understanding by researchers in exploring the mediating factor of gender and ethnicity on diversity within the context of organisational transformation in South Africa.

## List of references

- Acker, J. 1990. Hierarchies, jobs, bodies: a theory of gendered organizations. *Gender and Society* 4:139-158.
- Andrews, MC & Kacmar, KM. 2001. Discriminating among organizational politics, justice and support. *Journal of Organizational Behaviour* 22(4):347-366.
- Bailyn, L. 1993. *Breaking the mold: women, men and time in the new corporate world*. New York: Free Press.
- Bailyn, L, Fletcher, JK & Kolb, D. 1997. Unexpected connections considering employees' personal lives can revitalize your business. *Sloan Management Review* 38(4):11-19.
- Bell, EL. 1992. Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill: a personal reflection. *Journal of Applied Behavioural Science* 28:394-399.
- Bell, EL, Meyerson, DE, Nkomo, SM & Scully, M. 2003. Interpreting silence and voice in the workplace: a conversation about tempered radicalism among black and white women researchers. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 39:381-414.
- Bell, EL & Nkomo, SM. 2001. *Our separate ways: black and white women and the struggle for professional identity*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- Biernat, M & Vescio, TK. 2002. She swings, she hits, she's great, she's benched: implications of gender-based shifting standards for judgement and behavior. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 28:66-67.
- Blau, PM. 1977. *Inequality and heterogeneity*. New York: Free Press.
- Booyesen, L. 1999. Male and female managers: gender influences on South African managers in retail banking. *South African Journal of Labour Relations* 23(2):25-29.
- Booyesen, L. 1999. A review of challenges facing black and white women managers in South Africa. *South African Business Review* 13(2):15-26.
- Britton, DM. 2003. *At work in the iron cage: the prison as gendered organization*. New York: New York University Press.

- Butcher, D & Clarke, M. 2003. Redefining managerial work: smart politics. *Management Decision* 41(5):377–387.
- Chattopadhyay, P. 1999. Beyond direct and symmetric effects: the influence of demographic dissimilarity on organizational citizenship behavior. *Academy of Management Journal* 42:273-287.
- Collins, PH. 2000. *Black feminist thought: knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Revised 10th anniversary edition. New York: Routledge.
- Collins, PH. 2004. *Black sexual politics: African Americans, gender and the new racism*. New York: Routledge.
- Connell, RW. 2002. *Gender*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Cox, T, Lobel, SA & McLeod, PL. 1991. Effects of ethnic group cultural differences on cooperative and competitive behaviour on a group task. *Academy of Management Journal* 4:827-847.
- Diamond, J. 1997. *Guns, germs and steel: the fates of human societies*. London: Random House.
- Drory, A & Beaty, D. 1991. Gender differences in the perception of organizational influence tactics. *Journal of Organizational Behaviour* 12(3):238–249.
- Ely, R & Meyerson, DE. 2001. Theories of gender in organizations: a new approach to organizational analysis and change, in *Research in organisational behavior*, edited by B Staw & R Sutton. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press:103-151.
- Ely, R & Padavic, I. 2007 A feminist analysis of organizational research on sex differences. *Academy of Management Review* 32:1121-1142.
- Erasmus, B. 1998. Women power: aspects of working life in the late 1990's. *Management Today* 25-28 June:9-10.
- Eynseck, MW. 1974. Age differences in incidental learning. *Developmental Psychology* 10:936:941.
- Ferris, GR, Runs, CS & Fandt, PM. 1989. Politics in organizations, in *Impression management in the organization*, edited by RA Giacalone & P Rosenfield. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Ferris, GR, Frink, DD, Galang, MC, Zhou, J, Kacmar, KM & Howard, JL. 1996. Perceptions of organizational politics: prediction, stress related implications, and outcomes. *Human Relations* 49:233–266.
- Ferris, GR, Perrewe, PL, Anthony, WP & Gilmore, DC. 2000. Political skill at work. *Organizational Dynamics* 28:25–37.
- Ferris, GR, Hochwarter, WA, Douglas, C, Blass, FR, Kolodinsky, RW & Treadway, DC. 2002. Social influence processes in organizations and human resource systems, in *Research in personnel and human resources management*, edited by GR Ferris & JJ Martocchio. Oxford, England: JAI Press/Elsevier Science.
- Fisher, S. 1995. Placing women on the affirmative action agenda. *People Dynamics* 13(5):23-25.
- Fletcher, DR. 2001. *Disappearing acts*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Forret, ML & Dougherty, TW. 2001. Correlates of networking behaviour for managerial and professional employees. *Group and Organisation Management* 26:283-311.
- Forret, ML & Dougherty, TW. 2004. Networking behaviours and career outcomes: difference for men and women? *Journal of Organisational Behaviour* 25:419-437.

- Frink, DD & Waterson, B. 2003. Gender demography and organizational performance: a two-study investigation with convergence. *Group and Organisation Management* 28(1):127-147.
- Gandz, J & Murray, V. 1980. The experience of workplace politics. *Academy of Management Journal* 23:237-251.
- Gilmore, DC, Ferris, GR, Dulebohn, JH & Harrel-Cook, G. 1996. Organizational politics and employee attendance. *Group and Organizational Management* 28:481-494.
- Govender, D & Bayat, S. 1993. Leadership styles: the gender issues. *Journal of Industrial and Social Relations* 13(314):139-144.
- Gray, B & Arris, SS. 1985 Politics and strategic change across organizational life cycles. *Academy of Management Review* 10:707-723.
- Gummer, B. 1990. *The politics of social administration: managing organizational politics in social administrations*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Harris, PR & Moran, TR. 1996. *Managing cultural differences: leadership strategies for a new world of business*. Tokyo: Gulf.
- Heilman, ME, Wallen, AS, Fuchs, D, & Tamkin, MM. 2004. Penalties for success: reactions to women who succeed at male gender-typed tasks. *Journal of Applied Psychology* 89:416-427.
- Hennig, M, & Jardin, A. 1977. *The managerial woman*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday.
- Hoefer, R. 1995. Making politics and power respectable. *Administration Review* 53(3):298-304.
- Hurtado, A. 1989. Relating to privilege: seduction and rejection in the subordination of white women and women of color. *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14: 833-855.
- Ibarra, H. 1992. Homophily and differential returns: sex differences in network structure and access in an advertising firm. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 37:422-447.
- Jehn, KA, Northcraft, GB & Neale, MA. 1999. Why some differences make a difference: a field study of diversity, conflict, and performance in workgroups. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 44:741-763.
- Kanter, R. 1977. *Men and women of the corporation*. New York: Basic Books.
- Kilduff, M & Mehra, A. 1997. Postmodernism and organisational research. *Academy of Management Review* 22:453-481.
- Klenke, K. 2002. Cinderella stories of women leaders. *Journal of Leadership Studies* 9(2):18-28.
- Klenke, K. 2003. Gender influences in decision-making processes in top management teams. *Management Decision* 41(10):1024-1034.
- Lorber, J. 1994. *Paradoxes of gender*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Lyness, KS & Heilman, ME. 2006. When fit is fundamental: performance evaluations and promotions of upper-level female and male managers. *Journal of Applied Psychology* 91:777-785.
- Marsden, PV. 1990. Network diversity, sub-structures and opportunities for contact, in *Structures of power and constraint: papers in honor of Peter Blau*, edited by C Calhoun, M Meyer & RS Scott. New York: Cambridge:397-410.

- Mathur-Helm, B. 2006. Women and the glass ceiling in South African banks: an illusion or reality. *Women in Management Review* 21:311-326.
- Maume, DJ, Jr. 1999. Glass ceilings and glass elevators: occupational segregation and sex differences in managerial promotions. *Work and Occupations* 26:483-509.
- Mayhew, BH, McPherson, M, Rotolo, T & Smith-Lovin, L. 1995. Sex and ethnic heterogeneity in face-to-face groups in public places: an ecological perspective on social interaction. *Social Forces* 74:15-52.
- McPherson, M, Smith-Lovin, L & Cook, JM. 2001. Birds of a feather: homophily in social networks. *Annual Reviews in Sociology* 27:415-444.
- Meyerson, DE & Ely, RJ. 2003. Using difference to make a difference, in *Women and Leadership*, edited by D Rhode.. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press:129-143.
- Mintzberg, H. 1983. *Power in and around organizations*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Naidoo, G. 1997. Women must assert themselves in organizations that disregard them in formal structure. *People Dynamics* 15(2):20-27.
- Nwanko, S & Richardson, B. 1996 Organizational leaders as political strategists: a stakeholder management perspective. *Management Decision* 34(10):43-49.
- Omi, M & Winant, H. 1994. *Racial formation in the United States: from the 1960's to the 1990's*. 2nd edition. New York: Routledge.
- Padavic, I & Reskin, BF. 2002. *Women and men at work*. 2nd edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge.
- Pelled, LH, Eisenhardt, KM & Xin, KR. 1999. Exploring the black box: an analysis of work group diversity, conflict, and performance. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 44:1-28.
- Pfeffer, J. 1992. *Managing with power*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Richard, OC, Barnett, T, Dwyer, S, & Chadwick, K. 2004. Cultural diversity in management, firm, performance, and the moderating role of entrepreneurial orientation dimensions. *Academy of Management Journal* 47(2):255-266.
- Ridgeway, CL & Correll, SJ. 2000. Limiting inequality through interaction: the end(s) of gender. *Contemporary Sociology* 29:110-120.
- Romm, T & Drory, A. 1988. Politics in organization and its perception within the organization. *Organization Studies* 9(2):165-179.
- Rosen, CC, Levy, PE & Hall, RJ. 2006. Placing perceptions of politics in the context of the feedback environment, employee attitudes, and job performance. *Journal of Applied Psychology* 91(1):211-220.
- Sherif, M. 1958. Superordinate goals in the reduction of intergroup conflict. *American Journal of Sociology* 63:349-356.
- Sherif, M. 1966. *Group conflict and cooperation: their social psychology*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.



- Stompler, M & Padavic, I. 1997. Sister acts: resisting men's domination in black and white fraternity little sister programs. *Social Problems* 44:257-275.
- Swann, WB, Polzer, JT, Seyle, DC & Ko, JS. 2004. Finding value in diversity: verification of personal and social self-views in diverse groups. *Academy of Management Review* 29(1):9-27.
- Thierderman, S. 1991. *Bridging cultural barriers for corporate success: how to manage the multicultural work force*. New York: Lexington.
- Treadway, DC, Ferris, GR, Hochwarter, W, Perrewe, F, Witt, LA & Goodman, JM. 2005. The role of age in the perceptions of politics: job performance relationship, a three-study constructive replication. *Journal of Applied Psychology* 90(5):872-881.
- Tsui, AS, Egan, TD & O'Reilly, CA. 1992. Being different: relational demography and organizational attachment. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 37:549-579.
- Vigoda, E. 2002. Stress-related aftermaths to workplace politics: the relationships among politics, job distress, and aggressive behavior in organizations. *Journal of Organizational Behaviour*. 23(5):571-591.
- Wajcman, J. 1998. *Managing like a man: women and men in corporate management*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Watson, WE, Kumar, K & Michaelsen, LK. 1993. Cultural diversity's impact on interaction process and performance: comparing homogeneous and diverse task groups. *Academy of Management Journal* 36:590-602.
- Williams, KY & O'Reilly, CA. III. 1988. Demography and diversity in organizations: a review of 40 years of research. *Research in Organisational Behaviour* 20:77-140.
- Young, G. 2003. Political factors in decision making and implications for HRD. *Advances in Developing Human Resources* 5(4):458-666.