Finding the Critical Moment within the Tactical Space: *Kukan* (slack), Feudal Organizing & IOI

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Abstract

Non-hierarchal organizing has been touted as a save-all for modern-day organizations, but gate-keeping can be more problematic than hierarchy itself. Practices of gatekeepers create and perpetuate systemic exclusion while maintaining the illusion that such exclusions do not generate from organisational policies. In the combat analysis sector, normalized gender biases serve to exclude women from becoming trusted experts. This article examines an international combat analysis organization, Interactional Objectives Investigations (IOI), and its normalized policies of advancement to reveal how these practices operate to systemically exclude marginalized social actors. Because the modern organizing of IOI systems stems from feudal principles of *shogun/daimyo/vassal* in which specific criteria (gender, class, fealty) must be met for advancement, advancement criteria often forms a type of 'glass ceiling' for women, single-parents and non-heterosexuals. Organizational (systemic) exclusion within IOI is perpetuated by ideological assumptions about the naturalness of existing policies and by the eagerness of participants to advance by subscribing to IOI's exclusionary traditions. 'Lack of success' within IOI is presumed to be a fault only of individuals and not of the system itself or of the practices of its members, encouraging worker ignorance of systemic exclusion. *Kukan* as a tactical principle is understood within IOI systems as the 'slack' or 'empty space' wherein the next interactions of business might occur. *Kukan* can also be understood as the spaces and moments where assumptions regarding common practices are perpetuated, thereby indicating a site where discriminatory organizing may be challenged.

Introduction

Interactional Objectives Investigations (IOI) [1] is an international conflict-management organization specializing in the analysis of combat methodologies and stratagems. The output of IOI is used to inform military and police training paradigms as well as tactics for video games, television programs and films. With offices on every continent, IOI employs an estimated 150,000 persons, approximately 1.5% of whom are female (personal communication, 2009). The modern organizing of IOI systems is modelled after the feudal structure of *shogun* (senior management), *daimyo* (junior management), and *vassal* (long-term, skilled employee), in which specific criteria (gender, economic class, fealty) must be met for advancement. Women comprise approximately 6% of IOI's *shogun*, and less than 1% of IOI's *daimyo* (personal communication, 2011); these small numbers are partially explained by two distinct factors: significantly higher numbers of *daimyo* than *shogun* within the organization, and differing methods of promotion. Although hierarchal, authoritative, gate-keeping organizational structures are not unique to IOI, due to the presumed 'masculine' nature of conflict and combat, the organizational structures governing advancement in IOI serve to exclude women and other marginalized social actors. Biological masculinity is often utilized as the first criterion of competence within IOI, followed closely by acquired skill set, length of employment and completion of successful sojourns. Where biological masculinity is absent, performance standards for advancement are reduced, resulting in decreases in acquired skills that both prevent advancement to managerial status and serve to reinforce the assumption that aberrant (non-masculine) employees lack the ability to acquire advanced skills. Lack of success within IOI is presumed to be a fault only of individuals and not of the system itself, encouraging employee ignorance of systemic exclusion and perpetuating ideological assumptions about the naturalness of existing policies in conjunction with the eagerness of participants to advance by ascribing to exclusionary traditions.

IOI's exclusionary traditions indicate a problematic lack of internal understanding regarding the alleviation of inequality and abuses of power – fundamental aspects integral to conflict management. The processes of combat analysis only become necessary after conflicts become combat, and combat, when it is not the infliction of abuses of power, often arises as the objection to abuses of power or rights-violations. Paying particular attention to the echoes of feudalism found in the modern-day organization of IOI in correlation to the organizational (systemic) exclusion created by IOI's operating procedures, this article examines potential avenues to alleviate IOI's marginalization, both purposeful and inadvertent, of specific social locations and actors. Alleviating IOI's marginalization of specific

social locations and actors is a necessary step in eradicating abuses of power internal to the organization, thereby proffering a secondary site of conflict management education within the primary organizational environment. Through discussion of *kukan*, or viable sites of change, this article proposes that IOI follow one of its foundational tactical principles by instigating advantageous changes before an opponent – possibly a collective of IOI's membership resentful of its outdated methods of member valuation – utilizes the *kukan* to IOI's detriment.

Echoes of Feudalism

For the purposes of this article it will be easiest to understand *shogun* as senior managers, *daimyo* as junior managers, and *vassals* as long-term, skilled employees. *Shogun* and *daimyo* operate offices and experience minimal supervision from the organization as a whole. *Shogun*, in addition to maintaining their own offices, mentor and train *daimyo*; while it is not unusual for two or even four *daimyo* to comprise the management of an office, it is more common for an office to be run by a single *daimyo* or *shogun*, and most female *daimyo* are situated in offices headed by male *daimyo* or *shogun*. Although junior managerial status is achieved through successful completion of an apprenticeship to a *daimyo*, senior managerial status is achieved only from the recommendations of multiple *shogun*. Attainment of managerial status requires mentorship, apprenticeship, sojourns and office-to-office alliances. *Shogun* and *daimyo*, by possessing the authority to advance employees, act simultaneously as mentors and gatekeepers. Just as *daimyo* can act as gatekeepers working for or against *vassals*, *shogun* can act as gatekeepers toward *daimyo*. No employee may gain *daimyo* (junior management) status without permission from *shogun* (senior managers) to undertake the requisite apprenticeship, presenting the first challenge to female employees in that, as Tyler and Cohen (2010) observe about gender performances within organizational spaces, "performances recognized as successful are those that conform to the binary and hierarchical terms of heteronormativity" (p. 179), performances that situate women not just as different but as lesser than men. Katila and Meriläinen (2002) explain that the site against which many professional women are measured is "the masculine" (p. 338), a site against which women, by virtue of being different from 'the masculine' through biological sexedness, are often evaluated to be 'lacking'. Within IOI, the standard of measure used to evaluate competency begins with the biological sexedness of the applicant's physical body, with preference given to bodies with male genitalia that display 'typical' male characteristics. Although it is not the intent of this article to argue what constitutes the domain of 'masculinity,' it is the argument of this article that applicants within IOI who exhibit a predominance of physical characteristics typically attributed to 'femininity' are immediately classified as less competent candidates (male Shogun, personal

communication, 2009). Because gatekeepers can deny employee access to the training programs requisite to achieve managerial status (both for junior and senior levels), because these programs require sojourns (self-paid, training-based travel), and because these positions are thought best met by the aptitudes of men, women (and other marginalized social actors) are organizationally deterred from success within IOI.

Exclusionary Gate-keeping

As gatekeepers, managers are central to the functioning of IOI's offices, "in determining direction and overall guidelines, in setting strategy and creating visions of the future" (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003, p. 961), and in cultivating diverse specializations. Junior managers (*daimyo*) in IOI are responsible not only for the focus, direction, specialities and goals of their offices but also for mentoring employees. This mentoring sometimes takes on the guise of indoctrination: how to focus analysis, what skills should be considered primary, what proficiencies employees should aspire to. When it comes to evaluating female employees, junior managers often focus on *lack*; that is to say junior managers focus on the concept that women are not naturally suited to understanding and analyzing conflict or combat. The output of training programs and allocation of apprenticeships by junior managers reflect an expectation that female employees will never be as proficient as male employees. Managers often assert that different skill sets should be desired in and aspired to by the different genders based solely on the 'biological sexedness' of the physical body and assumptions of capacity demarked by 'gender' (Daimyo A, personal communication, 2002). Such erroneous distinctions regarding capacity as attributed to gender perpetuate notions and practices of inequality between genders. Until a female employee achieves senior management (*shogun*) status there is always the discreet sense – and sometimes outright claims – that she succeeds because the men have agreed to 'let her' (Shogun A, personal communication, 2008). Many female *daimyo* are asked whose leadership they follow even though *daimyo* are no longer considered to have a singular specific mentor but instead are encouraged to learn from and study with all *shogun* (senior managers) and even other *daimyo* (junior managers) in a gestalt of tactics-sharing. This mindset of 'the man achieves, the woman is permitted' acts as a second, perfunctory gatekeeper preventing promotion, and in some cases forms a type of glass ceiling (Wright & Baxter, 2000). Where men attain autonomy at the level of *daimyo*, women of the same level are still regarded as requiring permission, mentorship and supervision (Shogun B, personal communication, 2008). Since it is the goal of management to produce employees with ever-increasing analytical skill sets, much in the same way soldiers undergo increasingly intensive training regimes as they progress through 'the ranks,' this

double standard regarding gender contradicts IOI's mandates for training and promoting employees.

But where does this double standard originate? Although IOI has no *official* written policy on the differential treatment of employees based on gender, there are many internal policies passed down through training paradigms and memoranda that perpetuate double-standard expectancies (Shogun A, B, C & D, personal communication, 2011; Shogun F, personal communication, 2013). That IOI's double-standard expectancies regarding competency are based on limited and binary ideas of gender is both problematic and intricately linked to the gate-keeping practices that act as exclusionary measures against women and other marginalized social actors. However, most managerial employees of IOI view these policies and double standards as 'the way things ought to be' (Daimyo C, personal communication, 2007), 'the way things have always been done' (Shogun C, personal communication, 2011), 'not a big deal' (Shogun D, personal communication, 2007), 'not as bad as it used to be' (Shogun A, personal communication, 2009), and as 'reflecting a natural division between the way men and women navigate the world' (Daimyo B, personal communication, 2011). Many managers openly admit that women cannot embody or command the same 'intimidation, competency, or knowledgeableness' as men – adding that when women do come close to embodying these aspects in an 'acceptably masculine' way, what those women earn is ridicule rather than respect (Daimyo A, personal communication, 2002; Shogun A, personal communication, 2008; Daimyo D, personal communication, 2008; Shogun D, personal communication, 2009; Shogun E, personal communication, 2011). While some women occupying positions of management recognize and bemoan IOI's exclusionary practices and ideology, many claim to have no knowledge of preferential treatment while simultaneously cautioning that broaching such topics is a sure way to 'earn' detrimental treatment from male managers (female Shogun & Daimyo, personal communication, 2008; female Shogun & Daimyo, personal communication, 2012). These pervasive assumptions circulated within IOI's operational and organizational policies reflect, and perpetuate, ideological assumptions that the goals and aptitudes of 'women' are fundamentally different from those of 'men' – notably, all the 'reasons' cited for these assumptions about the aptitudes and goals of women, even for the idea that gender is binary and divisible based on specific attributes, both physiological and psychological, boil down to the explanation of 'because' rather than any rational argument or evidence-based research.

IOI offices differ between management that openly espouses policies of preferential treatment for male employees and management that claims to eschew such differentiations. Yet, ideological assumptions about the aptitudes

and goals of women, what Benschop and Doorewaard (1998) term 'the gender subtext,' within IOI reproduces systems of marginalization even within offices that claim to 'value' their female employees. The hierarchal structure of IOI, while on the outside appearing as an equal-opportunity workplace, operates to exclude women from promotion in what Benschop and Doorewaard (1998) identify as "hegemonic power processes…consisting of concealed processes of meaning formation…uttered in (non)verbal expressions of common sense, identification, consensus and legitimizing rationalities" (p. 790). Moreover, the "Operational Politics" (Drory, 1993, p. 60) of IOI, in privileging the perceived attributes of men, not only reduces the resources (mentors, training opportunities) provided to women but fosters a marginalizing environment for low-level female employees that reduces the likelihood of women achieving the status of *vassal* (skilled and valued long-term employee).

The child-unfriendly nature of sojourns, and of IOI offices in general, work as barriers to advancement for women who have the task of child-rearing (and by extension for any social actors who hold familial responsibilities). New employees are encouraged to spend five hours of review each week outside of work until they reach the level of *vassal* (skilled employee), at which point competency is considered significant enough to require monthly sojourns. *Daimyo* are expected to sojourn to other offices at least every other month, and both *daimyo* and *shogun* are encouraged to make additional yearly sojourns to the corporate head offices. As these trips are neither funded by IOI nor child-friendly, as requisites to continued employment they immediately present barriers to mothers (and all social actors who engage in care-work for dependent others, even when that care-work is only through financial contributions). As it is possible to work for IOI without sojourning outside of one's hometown, only employees seeking specific advancements, such as junior and senior managerial positions, must undertake costly sojourns to foreign offices; therefore, within IOI these barriers are not considered to preclude careers but merely to be a method to 'weed out' those 'not dedicated enough' to be considered for managerial status (multiple Shogun, personal communication, 2011; Daimyo C, personal communication, 2007; Daimyo D, personal communication, 2007; Shogun A, personal communication, 2008).

Normalizing Lack of Success along Gendered Lines

The viewpoint that IOI's advancement requirements weed out the 'undeserving' and the 'not right for management' is an attempt to excuse and normalize current procedural practices in denial of any purposeful marginalization. In reality, marginalized social actors are prevented from being viewed as 'the right sort' through difficulty or inability to undertake sojourns, from being perceived as an

'embodiment of competency' through the perpetuation of ideological paradigms that uphold the masculine body as the ideal employee, and from representing an aspect of an organization's 'mask of competency' by being denied status as potential candidates. Yet, the very idea of an organization's mask of competency demonstrates simultaneously the socially-created reality/fantasy of authority and the sometimes arbitrary, sometimes ridiculous, contents of such constructs.

By appearing as 'just the way things are done,' IOI's marginalizing environment creates an imbalance of power between genders while *normalizing* this imbalance. The organizational structure of IOI works to produce fewer women in managerial positions while simultaneously locating this lack within the aptitudes and interests of women rather than recognizing this production as a result of the organizational structure itself. As Fiol (1991) states, "[p]ower in organizations is reflected in overt decisions and behaviours and in the empty spaces of non-decision and non-behaviour" (p. 547), and "power in leadership is an interpretative phenomenon that derives its meaning within a particular context through socially-shared rules" (p. 552). Fundamentally, this means that managers within IOI not only reproduce marginalization through unquestioningly subscribing to current ways of doing but also that they risk *losing* attributions of power for decisions that stray against the normalized imbalance. Ultimately, this means that IOI managers are systemically if not outright pressured into perpetuating abuses of power – the marginalization of specific social locations – in order to 'succeed' within the organization and its current embodiment/manifestation. Grint (2009) identifies that actions in contrast to the norms of an organization function as a type of 'sacrilege' that is perceived to threaten the power of the organization as a whole. Actions not in adherence to norms are rarely taken by IOI's *daimyo* and *shogun*, illuminating that the freedom *shogun* and *daimyo* possess is comprised by an "*omote* [outer appearance] of cooperation [that] often hides the *ura* [hidden truth] of weakened bargaining power and susceptibility to employer interference and pressure" (Johnston & Selsky, 2006, p. 192). Because IOI emphasizes success through cooperative mentorships and collaborative tactics-sharing, *daimyo* and *shogun* who commit sacrilege risk losing the support of their contemporaries and the faith of their *vassals*, culminating ultimately in the risk of termination.

Similar to what Liff and Ward (2001) observed in banking institutions, many women who choose to pursue a career in IOI are considered to be "aberrant" (p. 31). And although backing a less-than-popular choice for management can sometimes cause 'the right kind' of political upheaval, IOI gatekeepers more often choose to support the 'standard face of competency' even when that means promoting incompetent but standard bodies over competent but not standard bodies. Lapidot and Boas (2003) explain that the character of persons upon

whom "status is bestowed, is of major symbolic significance because the identity of the institution is defined by the qualities" (p. 474) of its leaders; employee faith in the 'mask' of the organization is directly contingent with success. When the mask of an organization changes through the selection of 'aberrant' leadership, employees may 'lose faith' or loyalty to that organization. As the competency of female employees at all levels within IOI is evaluated in comparison with masculine ideals of job performance, and because men comprise the majority of IOI's employees, female employees are simultaneously measured against the minimum standards of masculine success and situated as 'different' – and therefore 'incapable' – of achieving masculine standards or embodying the accepted mask of the organization. Given that studies have found that male and female managers lead and organize using a mixture of 'gendered approaches,' achieving 'masculine ideals' is an invalid measure of success, even for male managers (Cliff, Langton & Aldrich, 2005). Further, the perpetuation of inequity in promotional practices threatens the validity of the organizational mask of IOI by presenting as compelling evidence on which to condemn IOI, whether for its human rights violations or for its failures to alleviate its own internal conflicts. And yet biased standards persist within IOI, along with a reluctance to promote aberrant bodies to managerial positions. Promoting aberrant bodies to managerial positions risks incurring the ridicule of workers instead of faith, and disrupting faith risks disrupting the traditional ceremonies of IOI that keep employees, regardless of authority, reminded of 'their place' within the organization. Traditional ceremonies, or *ways of doing*, also operate to assign and maintain the shared reality/fantasy of locations of authority. However, it is precisely within this 'ceremonial work,' or the traditional ways of doing, of IOI that an immediate site for 'remedial work,' work done to counter gendered expectations and assumptions, can be found (Gherardi, 1994).

Kukan/Slack & Tactical Reorganization

Kukan as a tactical principle is understood within IOI as the 'slack' or 'empty space' wherein the next interactions of business or conflict might occur; *kukan* in this way can also be understood as the spaces and moments where assumptions regarding common practices are perpetuated, thereby indicating a site where discriminatory organizing may be challenged. "'Spaces that matter' are therefore those that represent a materialization of the cultural norms" (Tyler & Cohen, 2010, p. 193), and these spaces are inextricably tied into the perpetuation or eradication of what Mills (1988) calls 'reproduction rules', the "ideological justifications used to legitimate current practices" (p. 363). IOI's reproduction rules need to be challenged and altered, not just at the level of management but on all levels of the organization. This is not to suggest that IOI should change to reflect an exacting gender parity, merely to state that the barriers to success and

successful advancement that women in IOI face should be removed at all levels of employment. Challenging the entrenched organizational practices of IOI, however, is particularly problematic in that the majority of its employees see no reason for change.

Part of the problem in proposing alternate ways of organizing to counter IOI's preferential tendencies is that the organizational system of IOI *works* – that is, it works to serve the majority of its employees, the men, most of whom are content to navigate the system's current incarnation. Further compounding this problem is that very few women express interest in pursuing careers, or even temporary training experiences, within IOI or the conflict management/combat analysis sector. Another compelling aspect of the problem resides within the militarized nature of IOI. In many ways, IOI reflects the combative stratagems it studies, creating an additional site of contestation to change. Both the subject of the sector and the organization of IOI reflect the hierarchal structures deemed necessary for governing large groups of combatants, and this mirroring of structure creates strong resistance to non-hierarchal ways of organizing. Proposing non-hierarchal organizational structures to alter IOI is somewhat akin to proposing that a military organization should adopt non-hierarchal structures, the results of which would likely be disastrous. Despite these challenges, solutions present in two areas: the ideological motivations of mentors and gatekeepers, and the accessibility of training paradigms within IOI.

IOI's problems in relationship to gender disparity are intricately connected with *conceptions of gender*. Conceptions of gender result in preferential treatment of male IOI employees, including procedural paradigms that cater to men while excluding women. As Gherardi (1994) notes, "homo-sociability tends to be the model of behaviour in mixed social settings" (p. 601), and "it is very often the task of the women to develop communicative competence in male discourse, to take responsibility for repairing the embarrassment caused by their 'diversity' and to make amends for the intrusiveness of their presence" (p. 602). Remedial work to correct the assumption that women have anything about their presence to apologize for must be undertaken within the ceremonial work of IOI, as much by mentors and gatekeepers (*shogun* and *daimyo*) as by low-level employees, to counter current gender biases. Simple shifts in ideological practices can serve to alter the organizational practices of IOI into a system that promotes inclusion for all of its employees regardless of gender or social location. Combat is not a foreign enterprise for women, even if the concept of 'marching off to war' has in recent centuries typically excluded women as likely participants. Women fight in wars, both physical and ideological, every day of their lives. Since civilian men are often understood as the perpetrators of violence and civilian women are often perceived as the recipients of violence, the argument that women have combat

experience before formal training is not unfounded. Although this 'feminine combat experience' or even 'feminine experience of conflict' is typically *different* from 'masculine combat experience' or 'masculine experience of conflict', both men and women witness the outcomes of combat stratagems and successful oppositions to combative techniques, as well as various methods of conflict resolution, and so the experiences of women cannot be said to be *lesser*. Recognizing this companioned experience of combat and conflict could help lessen the degree to which women are viewed as 'inexperienced' with the concepts of conflict management. Recognition that, as caregivers and peacekeepers (and sometimes as combatants), women have experience with conflict management before employment in IOI may help remove the ideological insistence that women possess lesser experience with and aptitudes for conflict management and combat analysis than men.

Offering vital training programs in locations other than only the corporate head offices may help alleviate the burden of sojourn cost in terms of familial obligations; providing supplementary funding for sojourns, or reducing their cost, would also help alleviate the financial burden of sojourns. Making high-level training programs accessible to marginalized social actors would immediately make apparent discriminatory promotional practices, making it harder to dismiss the fewer numbers of women in management as a matter of 'interests and aptitudes'. As the number of women in privileged positions (*vassal*, *daimyo*, *shogun*) increases, assumptions about the incompetence of women would necessarily lessen, thereby eradicating notions of the 'aberrance of femininity'. If the feminine ceases to be aberrant to IOI, it is possible that the numbers of female employees would cyclically increase, making instances of prejudicial promotion more obvious. If instances of prejudicial promotion become obvious, sites for comfortably contesting gender discrimination will also increase until it becomes sacrilege or a 'risk' for IOI managers to participate in promotional practices that favour the masculine over the feminine or ascribe competence to gender rather than individual ability.

Conclusion

Within IOI, distribution of training resources, coupled with hierarchal training paradigms, distinctly favours male employees. Management is organized along feudal constructs (*shogun*, *daimyo*, *vassal*) requiring specific measures of *fealty* be met for advancement, including adherence to training and promotional paradigms that, through purposeful design, exclude, deter and prevent women and marginalized social actors from advancement. Because the hierarchal organizing of IOI works for the majority of its current employees – men – few employees see any need for change. By appearing as the way things have always

been, the operational practices of IOI serve to normalize the exclusions those practices create, obscuring the culpability of operational policies in producing and perpetuating male-dominated employee populaces. Popular ideologies within the combat/conflict analysis sector contribute to the privileging of particular employees, resulting in an organizational mask that appears to be only trustworthy when worn by specifically gendered bodies rather than when donned by competent persons. Alleviating the imbalance created by the favouring and promotion of male bodies requires adjustments in the ideological discourse of IOI and of the combat/conflict analysis sector to allow for recognition that female bodies are potentially competent bodies. Although hierarchy itself serves IOI in terms of its organizational practices, exclusion and marginalization operate as a detriment through denying specific social actors from full participation within the organization and preventing a wide variety of social actors from contributing to the development of combat analysis. Preventing a wide variety of social actors from contributing to the development of combat analysis wastes resources, perpetuates inequality and fosters environments of conflict, recreating the precise phenomena (conflict and combat) IOI seeks to study; although some amount of healthy competition can internally benefit organizations through inducing increases in self-sought employee competencies, the marginalization of specific social actors is the unhealthy incarnation of prejudicial paradigms and not the hallmark of competency or intellectual advancement within an organization professing to understand methods of conflict resolution. IOI cannot plausibly profess precise expertise on conflict management while its procedural paradigms foster unhealthy conflict within its ranks. If IOI fails to resolve its internal conflict resulting from the purposeful and inadvertent marginalization of specific employees, it will have failed to grasp a fundamental concept of conflict management itself – that of alleviating inequality and abuses of power.

ENDNOTES

[1] The organization (IOI) and sources discussed have been anonymized.

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