

## Literature Review

### Power in the Workplace

Maria Popo

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Social groups tend to form based on gender, race and culture. My original research question asks, “How do relationships across gender, race and class impact the workplace?” To explore the answer to this question, I examined three studies that explore workplace power, networks and mentoring in the United States, South Africa and China. I chose post-apartheid South Africa as a contrast to the U.S., because the majority/minority race population are flipped but the upper, wealthier class is still predominantly white. The China study was selected given that gender power dynamics are historically male oriented and the population is predominately East Asian. For the purpose of this essay, workplace power is defined as those with influence over others that are able to make executive-level decisions.

The first article, *In the Blood: The Consequences of Naturalising Microsegregation in Workplace Social Networks* (C. Hugo et al., 2020) examined the effects of “like” naturally associating with “like”. In South Africa the Black population exceeds the white, but most of the leadership roles are still assigned to white males. The study conducted an empirical study

utilizing qualitative research through interviews of approximately 200 bank employees. The purpose was to understand the impact of social groups in the workplace. The interviewees were segmented as Black male, Black female, white male, white female. Although apartheid laws were eliminated in the early 90s, their effects can be observed by examining leadership by race. Top management consisted of 61% white male. Black African men and women made up 12% of senior management, though the country's population is 91% Black. The interview questions asked about social groups, efforts to engage across gender/race and personal experiences related to networks of power. There were several interesting findings. First was that even if you take part in social groups across racial lines, race and gender inhibit inclusion. For example, one Black woman indicated she learned how to play golf but was never invited so eventually she stopped trying. Another finding illustrated that having access to powerful networks was not enough. Access did not mean inclusion in the social group, so the power of those potential relationships was defused. Finally, the study revealed that people are drawn to socialize with those they are most comfortable with and many times this is how hiring and promotions are also decided.

The second article, *Race, Gender, and Workplace Power* (Elliott, 2004) examined power and control in an American workplace and how race, gender, ethnicity influences promotions which are typically an outcome of power. This study also utilized qualitative analysis through interviews, but also quantitatively measured them against workplace promotions. The outcomes of the study were strikingly similar to the South African study in regard to how social groups form and intermingle. There was an added conclusion that "women and minorities' odds of advancement decrease, relative to white men, at higher levels of power," per James Elliott, the lead researcher. Of the women and minorities group, a subgroup of Black women had the lowest odds of advancement. White women typically struggled due to less experience compared to

white males at senior management levels. Latinos struggled with less education compared to white males. Also, notable was that Black women relied on social networks the most out of all groups to move up.

The third article, *Network Intervention: Assessing the Effects of Formal Mentoring* (Srivastava, 2015), conducted a qualitative study divided between 40 Chinese women and men through interviews related to formal networking programs. A secondary empirical study was conducted with 74 people in the mentoring program and 64 that were not and utilized as the control group. The researcher's theory was that women, more than men, would benefit from mentoring. This was measured by identifying each participant's pre- and post-workplace network. The results illustrated that women respondents reported better results than men, but only if certain conditions were met, which included improving one's social skills, being connected to someone of power, and participating in semi-formal networks. Researchers indicated that while women provided self-reported greater improvements, that men may have minimized success of the program since they were at a smaller power deficit originally.

All three articles confirm that women and minorities experience less power in the workplace as compared to white men and that social networks impact opportunity to move up the corporate ladder. The China study focused on mentoring and its perceived benefit, which could be considered potentially inconclusive since the outcome was based on participant opinion. Notable in China was that having access to people of power provided the mentored women some degree of improved workplace opportunity, while this was not the case for women and minorities in the other two studies. It would be interesting to track the women in China to evaluate whether "access" resulted in advancement over time.

In the South African and American studies all employees understood the impact of social networks on promotions, but that regardless of effort, it was exceedingly difficult to be accepted across race and gender. While the “good ‘ole boys” went out for drinks or golf, a majority of the Black men, and women of all races had different cultural responsibilities, priorities, likes and dislikes in manners of socializing which excluded them from the inner circle. While some made efforts to be included in these social groups, they failed to be fully accepted seemingly due to their inability to consistently and regularly access the targeted circle. Groups tended to unintentionally form around social comfort and since studies illustrate that people tend to hire those most like themselves (Rivera, 2013), there seems to be a connection to who has corporate power and who gets promoted.

A 2019 U.S. McKinsey study on employees that held titles of “senior vice president”, illustrated: 59% white male, 13% men of color, 23% white women, 5% women of color. Given that the majority of senior executive positions in all studies were held by the historically dominant male race, there seems a causal connection between promotions and workplace social cohorts which consist of “like with like”. Therefore, my conclusion is that these relationships increase power and ultimately determine upward corporate mobility.

The studies illustrated how relationships across gender and race are formed and impact individuals in the workplace but did not reveal any insights related to class. Therefore, my next research question might be, “How does social stratification related to class affect the workplace?” I could explore this topic by finding research that sheds light on social class and work hierarchy.

## REFERENCES

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