

Women in a World of Men: The Transformation of Gender Dynamics through the Recovering of Identities

Matthieu Daum* and Silvia Gollini

Abstract

This paper is based on a consultancy project for a multi-national company. Conscious that an abnormally low number of women reaches senior management positions, this company commissioned the authors to design and run a training programme on career development for talented young women.

While the work contracted was not framed psychodynamically, a group relations' framework was used to understand and work with the processes at work in the request, design, and implementation of the training. In particular, it helped the authors to accompany the organization through its difficulties in bridging the gap between intention and implementation, thus truly engaging with cultural transformation.

The stream running throughout the work, and this paper, is the question: is diversity a resource? A difficult question, which certainly challenged programme participants and highlighted the risks generated by the identification of differences; in particular, the unleashing of paranoid–schizoid anxieties for women whose success so far has often relied on playing down or denying parts of who they are as women.

So, while the recovering of one's identity/identities was central to the development of one's career, it also inescapably opened up the feelings associated with the experience of being women in a man's world. The ambivalence between connecting to that experience and feeding the illusion that career development could be a genderless matter gave the work its tempo.

This paper will draw on current literature on diversity in the workplace, as well as psychodynamic and group relations' literature on organizational development. It will also draw on the authors' countertransference, processed through group relations' thinking, and understood as data on what may be going on organizationally. The key points covered in this paper will be:

- 'alter-phagia': from desire for the other to desire to eat the other;
- the visceral threat generated by allowing women to be together;

Address for correspondence: Matthieu Daum, Nexus, 39, rue de Châteaudun, 75009 Paris, France. Email: mdaum@nexusconsultation.com

- A man's world: the use of the colonization–decolonization analogy to explore gender dynamics;
- Individual, group, and organizational shame, and the processes to defend against it;
- The recovery of the Feminine: journey towards an uncharted future.

It is hoped that this paper will provide a useful illustration of how these issues can be worked with in organizations, as well as open up new ways of conceptualizing certain aspects of cultural transformation.

Key words: gender dynamics; culture; shame; identity; career development; organizational development; female leadership.

INTRODUCTION

Issues of diversity in the workplace have become increasingly popular over the past twenty years (Levine, 2002a). This appears to be the nexus of several factors, better understood using the framework developed by the Grubb Institute (2007): at the *context* level, there has been an increase in everyday experience of diversity in the general public, leading to an awareness of the importance of valuing it, and expectations then placed on employers that they will do so. Institutionally, this has been manifested by a series of new legislation, throughout Europe but also beyond, aiming to be carrots and sticks for a process of transformation in the workplace. At the *person* level, many leaders and managers (who are also citizens!) have sought to lead, whether because it matched their own values or because they saw the necessity for their organization to adapt to changes in the context (often because of both), transformation processes inside their own organisation aimed at integrating diversity into everyday practice. At the *system* level, this has been constructed around several levers for change: the economic argument (attract new customers, respond to globalization, increase productivity), the socially responsible enterprise argument (become more attractive for employees and shareholders, improve labour relations), and the financial and legal argument (a mix of duties and incentives) (Equal, 2005).

The move from intention to action is, of course, one of the core tensions at the heart of human existence, rendered more poignant by the challenge of engaging [in] human systems. 'The path to corporate responsibility' (Zadek, 2004) is a long and tormented road, whose difficult terrain is shaped by the individual and collective fantasies at work in the organisational system (Levine, 2002b). In particular, a fantasy often encountered, through perhaps various forms, is the one coined by Levine as 'the fantasy of the peaceable kingdom' (Levine,

2002a). Disguised under a pseudo good intention of equality, it is anchored in a linear thought process whereby learning about differences leads to accepting them, which in turn leads to less conflict/better atmosphere in the workplace. As Levine points out, this fantasy actually serves as a powerful defence against the experiences generated by differences (fear, hate, but also, perhaps, passion and desire), and their consequences in terms of behaviour, i.e., anything *but* a peaceable kingdom.

In this paper, we explore the issue of diversity through the particular lens of gender. Although one might think that at the dawn of this new millennium, after decades of women's activism and a range of new legislation and practices, many issues linked to the place of women at work, their relationship with their male colleagues, and their integration into leadership positions would be resolved, the reality often reveals that not much has changed in the system-in-the-mind from which most actors operate. Optimists would see this as a timely warning for our western societies to reintroject our projections on Muslim societies, projections that have attempted to locate this issue only with them. The reality is that in a [western] world built on masculine paradigms (*Le Nouvel Observateur*, 2007), since the gods displaced and even wiped from our memories the Universal Goddess (Gange, 2006), the feminine (represented by women) remains the Other, to which our relationship is, at best, ambivalent.

After setting the background to the intervention, this paper attempts to develop a few 'working concepts' drawn from the intervention itself, pitching them through an analysis of what the first pilot revealed and how the second (and last) pilot was constructed to defend against what the first had revealed.

First, we propose the idea of 'alter-phagia', where the desire for the other turns into an absorption of the other. We then explore how transformation of thought and behaviour pattern in gender dynamics is hindered by the impact, at the visceral level, of allowing the presence of the feminine. Then, we draw on an analogy, that of colonization, to explore the parallels between the transformation of gender dynamics and the decolonization process. This will then open up the exploration of an important, underlying dynamics: shame, be it at individual, group, or even organizational level. Finally, we make links between the recovering of identities at a personal level, with the recovery of the Feminine as a resource for the whole organization. While the structure of a paper invites linearity, the themes developed here are not linked through linear and chronological causality. Their unfolding is not constructed to support an analysis or an argument around gender diversity in the workplace. Rather, the focus here is on organizational

development – and what processes are triggered by the implementation of a cultural transformation programme.

BACKGROUND TO THE WORK

The organization discussed in this paper is a French multi-national company, with over 80,000 staff, working in over twenty-five countries, and with its headquarters in France.

Historically, its executive committee has been made up of white, French men; most of whom have been educated in the same 'Grandes Écoles' – a private, higher education system, forming the elites of the nation. The future members of the executive committee, working at the next few senior management levels, tend to share the same profile. It is worth noting that the above description could apply to the majority of the country's CAC 40¹ companies; the issue is becoming controversial and, as well as being addressed in organizations, has also entered the political debate (Veltz, 2007).

A few years ago, however, the CEO outlined one of his strategic visions for a culture change: more women and more non-French in senior executive levels. An initiative led by HR has since been working at translating this vision into a reality, and led, among other things, to the creation of a Diversity Committee involving both HR and operational managers. An initial separation of focus happened in this Diversity Committee, with two subsequent strands: gender diversity and cultural diversity.

The group working on gender diversity therefore took on the task of developing ways of ensuring that more women accessed senior executive positions. Thus, it organized a series of focus groups with women who, in the organization, were likely candidates for future senior executive posts. They tended to be women in their forties, with substantial management and senior management experience with the organization. While the work through focus groups and other types of seminars enabled to address these women's current needs and outlined possible interventions to respond to those needs (development of a women's network in the company, extending the 'focus group' approach to a wider sample . . .), it also led to the emergence of an unsuspected theme. Indeed, a growing number of these women shared that, while attending the current focus group to reflect on career needs for them as women in this organization is helpful, the time when it would have been really crucial was, for them, ten years ago. Had they been able then to explore their career development needs as women, and been given tools to steer their professional development more effectively, they would have made different

choices; ones that would have enabled them to be offered, to accept, and to take up senior leadership positions in this organization.

The Diversity Committee subgroup working on gender then identified an emergent strand of activity: working with women in their thirties who were likely to become senior managers over the next ten years to equip them to steer their professional development effectively in the organization's (male) culture. The rationale was fairly straightforward: a bigger pool of women, better equipped to steer their career in a male culture, will be both more available for, and more proactive to request, management and senior management positions. In the medium to long term, this will meet part of the overall objectives.

At this stage, it might be helpful to distinguish three hypotheses of phenomena likely to contribute to the current state of the system, i.e., a lack of women in senior leadership positions.

1. At the level of women employees themselves, there could be a range of thoughts, feelings, behaviours, and lack of skills that undermine their own career progression.
2. At the level of managers facing choices over whom to promote, there might be a range of beliefs, values, assumptions, habits, etc., that lead them to prefer, in many if not most cases, promoting a man rather than a woman.
3. At the level of the organization (anchored in its context), there may be a range of systemic processes, connected through both positive and negative feedback loops, manifested through rules and procedures but primarily embedded in an unconscious magma developed throughout the history of this particular organization. This would touch on the nature of the work itself; on how this organization has chosen to define, over time, what *is* reality, and therefore the boundaries of what can and cannot even be thought about (Schein, 2004).²

We met members of the Diversity Committee at the time when this new strand (targeting women in their thirties) was emerging. We were presenting our consultancy work to them, and, in particular, previous work we had done on gender dynamics in a couple of large French multi-nationals. They were sufficiently interested in what we were presenting to ask us to draft a proposal for a training programme we would run for this target group, with the aim of developing their awareness of what being a woman implies in this organization in terms of career choices, and to provide them with tools to steer their career, in this organization, so as to be better equipped for the choices they will have to make.

Interestingly, this OD axis only focuses on point 1, suggested above. The other axis of work – the ongoing networking of women senior managers through a programme of ‘focus group’ type events – also works on point 1, although it may be argued that some of the participants also face choices in appointing colleagues. Points 2 and 3 are left mostly untouched; not surprisingly, they resonate with Schein’s second (beliefs and values) and third (basic assumption) levels of organizational culture (Schein, 2004), identified by Schein as most difficult to shift.

Few will be surprised by this choice. Strategically, few people would choose to dive headfirst into an OD process working at Schein’s basic assumption level. The choice here does not denote a lack of ambition or vision; rather, it is evidence of the intuitive sense that these members of the Diversity Committee had of the intensity of the affective experiences such a broad project would unearth. The thoughts developed throughout this paper can only give credit to their intuition.

MARS AND VENUS?

Throughout the project, and this paper, people speak of women assuming they talk about the same ‘thing’ (a group of people making up about half the world population), while holding in mind a much varied range of mental pictures of what they mean by women: a group of people historically excluded from positions of power; people with equal capacities to men; people with different capacities to men; people with qualities that men do not have . . .

Much of psychology literature feeds these tendencies to classify human beings into identifiable, recognizable groups, and will tend to put forward ‘evidence’ for their assertions. In that way, women and men get locked into prescribed profiles, which also tend to equate femininity with women and masculinity with men.

While there are numerous flaws in assertions such as ‘women can’t read maps and men can’t ask for directions’ (we have come across men and women who cannot do either!), how can we make sense of repeated experiences of the differences, reported again and again, of taking part in single-gender activities? Not only what is talked about, but also how people talk, how they will relate, the affective texture of their interactions, the purpose towards which they self-organize in these interactions, is repeatedly reported to be different in women-only and men-only groups.

Medical research, however, points more and more clearly to the absence of physiological differences in male and female brains. Catherine Vidal, an eminent neurobiologist, deconstructs decades of

biased scientific research to show, in a thorough review of scientific literature, that all the evidence now points to the fact that 'the brain does not see any difference between men and women' (Vidal & Benoit-Browayes, 2005). How to account for the lived experience, then?

We propose the following hypothesis: human beings engage in the world through a qualitative spectrum (one among many) that has two poles – the Feminine and the Masculine. The same person may engage through a different point in the spectrum depending on the activity, the people he/she is with; in fact, he/she may engage differently over time on the same activity.

Historically, these poles have been embodied by social groups: men and women. Men have embodied and perpetuated masculine qualities, so that this mental concept can actually live – be truly alive – socially. And women have done the same with feminine qualities. At the same time, some men hold and express feminine qualities, while women do so with masculine qualities.

Thus, the degree to which the Masculine and the Feminine have been present through times has varied, as periods in history have tended to boost parts of it and inhibit others.

Now, how do we describe Feminine and Masculine? Below is a list of words that attempt to evoke what these two poles might be; it is not meant as a scientific categorization of masculinity and femininity, rather as a prompt to clarify which pole one might be operating from in a given situation.³

Femininity

Fair, soft, being, group-wholeness, womb, intuitive, feelings, perfectionism, leading through other, facilitating, gentle, caring, engaging, strong, connected, open, river, internal structures, networking, task orientated, reflective, multi-focused, emotion manager, familial, capacity to contain emotions, process orientated.

Masculinity

Action, thrusting, phallic, persistent, driving, focused, responsible, 'fixing' (solving problems), open rivalry, acknowledges power (own and other's), rational, right, caring, wins, dominating, ordering, detached, external structures, organizational, physical strength, protecting, hunter, strong, aggressive, directedness, concerned with and aiming at results, verticality, product orientated, individuality, ego.

Since, according to our hypothesis, women have historically tended to hold the Feminine and express it on behalf of society, a process that aims at bringing them together should, in systemic theory, generate more Feminine at a meta, systemic level. The reality, as this paper will show, is another kind of adventure . . .

ENGAGING WITH THE OTHER: FROM DESIRE TO 'ALTER-PHAGIA'

In order to sense what kind of programme they wanted to engage in, we drafted three possibilities:

1. an awareness-raising programme, based on a fairly traditional approach to learning, involving solely the target group, with a mix of theoretical input and experience-based exercises. Here, the outputs aimed for are 'trained' people;
2. an action-learning sets programme, where outputs of each ALS feeds the Diversity Committee with both data about the state of the system, and suggestions about what issue/area needs to be addressed;
3. an OD programme, where learning occurs primarily through doing, with the target group trained as internal change agents undertaking both an audit of the situation and the implementation of innovation projects linked to gender dynamics.

While stating their hopes of being able to undertake the third option in a few years, our clients chose to engage with the first option. However, clearly stated as underpinning their choice was their sense that what we were offering was *different* to what they normally do in terms of training and OD. They also stated that it was an important feature of the training that it involved men, too.

The culture in this firm was to have short, to the point, didactic training sessions; we were offering a more reflexive, self-discovery based training approach, making links between external and internal contexts through self-directed activities between sessions. We also proposed, early on, that participants should be women only; and that we would work with them at finding ways of involving their male colleagues.

The programme we offered involved three days, spaced out over three months. Field analyses were scheduled for participants between sessions, with, of course, a rationale about the importance of moving through the programme designed. The clients then commissioned two pilot training events, but stipulated that it should be reduced to two

days. They also commissioned us to do a series of individual and group interviews, both to get a sense of where other parts of the organization were in relation to the theme, and to develop internal buy-in for the programme to secure recruitment of participants.

From then on, the process of remaining different became recurrently under attack.

About *the membership*, first: focus groups revealed great ambivalence about working with women only. Under a rhetoric of non-discrimination, many women themselves (quietly supported by men), declared passionately that young men had equal needs to participate. Initially clear about the necessity to have a women-only group, the woman leading the programme internally began to doubt; doubt quickly gave way to a decision to include equal numbers of men in the second pilot. Only with great negotiation was this decision able to be overturned.

The attack then focused on the *delivery of the training*. The aspects of our work that had initially appealed to them – what made us *different* – were now being challenged, reformatted, or not included in the final version of the workshop.

Following the first pilot, new changes were then asked for, including a request for additional theoretical input. Despite a relative success in the delivery of the first pilot, some participants felt that they missed what they tend usually to get in training events, i.e., conceptual inputs from the consultants. In fact, the rationale was that they questioned the role of the consultants if we only managed a process, and did not *give something of ourselves – give some inside knowledge we had*.

After a lengthy negotiation, the second pilot included more theory. However, it proved a very difficult pilot, with participants unhappy about theoretical sessions they felt were out of touch with the pragmatic issues they wanted to address. The essence of our difference had been squeezed out; our programme had become totally reformatted to the company's parameters, thus losing the systemic effects it was supposed to produce given the way the design had linked the various parts. Having become a poor replica of their products, we were suddenly unattractive to them. In our concern to start from where the client was, we got drawn out of the place from which we could be different.

Psychoanalysis offers many ways of conceptualizing the dynamics at work in this case. Here, we shall draw on Lacanian theorizing of desire. For Lacan, the human subject is inevitably incomplete; the illusion of completeness generated by our reflection in the mirror actually covers up a fragmented series of part objects, non-integrated set of drives, contradictions, fluctuations (Hirschhorn, 1998). This fragmentary nature of being brings with it a sense of lack, source of desire, the energy that sets us in motion and enables us to act, create, transform.

For Lacan, desire is part of being; indeed, one could reframe Lacan's theory of desire thus: being is desiring. Desiring should therefore not be understood as a transitory process, a means to an end. Desiring is the means *and* the end. Hence, as Lebrun puts it, 'to obtain the desired object kills desire' (Lebrun, 2003).

Interestingly, Sacks comes to similar conclusion from a different perspective: that of the Talmudic tradition. In *The Dignity of Difference*, he explains how, in the teaching of the Jewish tradition, 'the very fact that we are different means that what I lack, someone else has, and what someone else has, I lack' (Sacks, 2002, p. 100). Hence the argument, for Sacks, of the necessity of difference, is setting up the tension through which resources can flow and enrich the system and its parts: 'the very act of market exchange is the supreme embodiment of the idea of the dignity of difference'. However, Sacks warns us, this market exchange can only function in line with its purpose if the conditions are set up and maintained for everyone to have equal chances to operate within it – an issue that is also very relevant here.

To describe this process of bringing the Other to the same (to fill the gap in order not to feel the lack, or, consequently, the desire), we would like to coin the term 'alter-phagia'. Alter-phagia – the process of eating the other to make him me – is therefore an attack on the dignity of difference, stemming out of an increased intolerance for the experience of difference. In some way, it is related to xenophobia: here, the presence of the other, or, rather, the narrow distance between me and the other, is so intolerable that I wish to expel him and sever, psychically and physically, my connectedness with him. With alter-phagia, that distance between me and the other, once source of desire, also becomes intolerable. The attack on connectedness happens through an attack on differentiation, a swallowing into one's own boundaries.

Of course, the process of alter-phagia, experienced by the consultant team in its relationship with a client wishing to work on gender difference, reveals more than just a transaction between two systems grappling with the challenges of learning. Our hypothesis is that it speaks powerfully of the actual gender dynamics at work in this organization's masculine culture. To put it another way, what we experienced was a fractal, holographic taster of what happens in this organization as it engages with a stated desire to include more women in senior executive posts. While the ideal of difference, and the increased performance it is supposed to yield, are put forward, the strong trend is to reduce the other into the same. Women are 'assimilated' into the organization once they pick up its rituals, its beliefs and values, its organizational paradigm. Any grit is finely sanded; any diversion is

firmly corrected. The feminine and its otherness, once object of desire, is fully rejected.

WOMEN TOGETHER: A VISCERAL THREAT

For the first pilot, we had planned to introduce men during the morning of the second day, and to introduce a male consultant in the staff, to replace one of the two female consultants that facilitated the first day.

The programme was structured as a typical training programme, with some space for theory and some exercises. Very quickly during the first day, the two consultants realized that the needs of the participants were different from having a typical, structured training; the needs were more to have a space for analysing and voicing some problems they encounter during their professional life and have a dialogue on them in a men-free space. The participants began a very deep, creative exchange, proposing a sort of 'feminine model' for relationship and management in the organization, based on concreteness, win-win exchanges and pragmatism, far from the dominant 'masculine model', drowned in internal politics to the point of forgetting any broader purpose to action. During the afternoon of the first day, participants were engaged in some exercises, and something very special happened in the group. A sort of current of vitality, a force, a collective sense of potency passed through the people in the room. The day ended with the feeling that goals had been reached and participants were clearer about which actions to take; the women publicly expressed strong feelings of powerfulness.

The climate and the trust created during the first day, and a lot of feedback from the participants, convinced us in continuing to work with a women-only membership during the second day, too, to encourage, through a women-only environment, the expression of the feminine dynamics that, in the organization, did not find a place to exist.

The second day ended with the same feelings and with the idea that, for boosting women's presence in the firm, they need to connect to one another, forming groups and networks for this scope. The feeling of success was confirmed from the questionnaire distributed at the end of the first pilot. The workshop had had a *succès fou* (a crazy success) and the women together, in contact with their feminine part, had really explored other possibilities of different models for being in the firm, more in contact with their desires and feelings.

At this stage, the participants seemed to have discovered a new way of being and engaging, an alternative to the one offered from the

dominant masculine culture in the organization. This way seemed to have the potential to bring more efficacy than the 'old boys with cigars way', and was based on more attention to pragmatic concerns, a win-win approach to both objectives and relationships, than to managing power for power's sake. Not that power was thrown away as a dirty thing; the issue, though, was to think of power no longer as something we long to have, but as something we can use to *do* those things we desire to implement in the organization.

An illustration of what we are touching on can perhaps be found in what has been happening recently in financial institutions, in particular to the subprime crisis. Here we can perhaps think of this subprime crisis as linked to the dominance of a masculine culture in which obtaining financial results is more important than the way in which you work at obtaining these results. Organizational processes are then put into place that operate in a world that is further and further away from reality, and can institutionalize practices of lending more and more money to people who are more and more bankrupt – just because computer models have designed financial loops that show it is possible. Reality, in its simple complexity and its awesome connect-
edness, always catches up . . .

Once the potency of 'women together' was perceived, however, the organization began to react in a very violent and visceral way, trying to 'normalize' the situation. The defences emerged in the form of attack on the pilot workshop, and little by little the space reserved for the listening and expression of needs and creativity was reduced, transforming the second pilot into a classic training situation. We were asked to fill with organizational theories all the spaces that allowed free expression and where women could collaborate in creating meaning.

Perhaps we can frame the violence of the reaction against women by linking it to the way, in medieval times, witches were treated. The attack here is on women's connectedness, through the Feminine, to life processes. At the end, the second pilot was transformed into something that could not represent a danger within the masculine culture; something that did not call organizational members to connect with themselves as human beings, linked to others through powerful life processes.

A MAN'S WORLD: THE USE OF THE COLONIZATION-DECOLONIZATION ANALOGY TO EXPLORE THE TRANSFORMATION OF GENDER DYNAMICS

As mentioned previously, this company is led by an executive committee made up of men. This feature is replicated throughout the

history of the organization, and remains consistent in the next two or three tiers of senior management. The organization is thought, designed, and directed by men. They have been holding the power in it for over a century.

Furthermore, this firm is embedded in a context (France, a western society), where science, philosophy, religion, economics, and politics have been controlled and shaped by men. The web of interconnected paradigms structuring society, developed over hundreds of years, is impregnated by the masculine.

How, in that context, can new perspectives on leadership, teamwork, success, competitiveness, innovation, and professional development emerge out of a different paradigm, one born out of a matrix of feminine values?

In an attempt to bring some pragmatic answer to this question, we suggested from the beginning of the programme that the membership of the pilots should be women only. The client agreed, though at the same time it created a problem for her: she wanted to ensure that men would be involved in some way in the process – she did not want it to be a women-only OD process, disconnected from the relationships with men.

We agreed on a way forward: this event taking place over two days separated by six weeks, the first day being for women participants only. One of their tasks during the intersession period would be to make links with male colleagues and explain to them what key issues they felt were discussed during the first day. They would then invite one of their male colleagues to attend the morning of the second day, during which they would work together, men and women, on visualizing what this company will look like in five years' time, and how the gender dynamics will have evolved in that time. In order to match the change in gender in the group for day two, the consultants would be two women for the first day, and on day two one of the female consultants would swap with a male colleague.

As mentioned in the previous section, the first day of that first pilot went really well; with sixteen women in the room the atmosphere warmed up rather quickly. Many things were voiced that could not have been said with a man in the room. The timetable for the day soon went out of the window, the group worked on another level, more in tune with the human rhythm of their encounter. By the end of the day, though, all the objectives of the day had been met, all the themes and topics covered, all the action plans for the intersession period organized. All . . . except that the explanation of how they would engage a male colleague into the topic, and invite him to the morning of the next session, was not given. The consultants only realized this a couple of

days later, when debriefing with their male colleague (who was also the project leader on this assignment). By then it was too late; they had colluded with the participants to set up a women-only day two.

The felt experience of the male consultant was that he had been killed off. In his role as project leader, perhaps, but primarily in his being a man. It seemed that, in order to achieve the aim stated in the title of the workshop (Feminine Professional Development), participants and staff felt it crucial to focus on the Feminine dimension of the workshop, and therefore excluded men (including the consultant) from their work. In other words, they chose to free themselves from the presence of men.

The thinking that then emerged in the consultant team was that we were dealing with a process similar to that of decolonization. In the nineteenth century, and the first half of the twentieth century, several European nations claimed ownership of countries throughout the world in which there were important resources for their own industries and the generation of wealth for their economies. In the process of settling and developing infrastructures locally, they also brought with them schools, universities, etc. While the use of religion often served to rally people behind those who ruled, the wealth of thoughts, ideas, and theories brought in by the colonizer could not but seep through the structures of control, and soon local intellectuals picked up some of those resources and applied it to their local context. At one point, the bottom of the intrinsic contradiction in the colonist approach was reached (i.e., claiming to be inspired by the Enlightenment philosophers and colonizing other countries and claiming the right to rule them). The local population could no longer contain the recovery of their true identity in the relationship they had with the colonizers; they had to overthrow them.

So, in order to recover their identity as women, and explore fully what resources, as women, they had to further their professional development in this organization, they had to rid themselves of men. In the room, first of all, but, more importantly, in the mind, too, our argument being that the former is a necessary – though not sufficient – condition for the latter to happen. To put it another way: in order to explore – experience – what resources being a woman brings, and connecting as women can bring, one needs to free oneself of the prism of masculine thinking and discover what light a feminine prism can shine on the issues. Only then does it become possible to re-engage more authentically as women in the relationship with men.

Did the workshop achieve that? Did absence in the room lead to transformation in the mind? To some extent it did. On their return to the second day, many women had developed insights through their

intersession work, and were able to share them with other participants. Their sense that this training was helping them to transform not only their role, but the person-in-role, was growing. However, several others were dubious, and certainly not prepared to engage in this process of recovery/discovery of identity. They had so far succeeded through adaptation strategies; the risks were probably felt to be too high to venture into trying something different.

Their group, so far, has been the only one to have the opportunity to try this, though. For the second pilot, indecision in the client about trying mixed membership or staying with women-only membership led to the second pilot having women participants but a mixed consultant team. Furthermore, in-house presenters over the two days were either men, or women sharing their career experience through stating that gender never played a part in it. As a result, the process of de-masculinization could never start; this pilot focused on professional development and forgot the Feminine.

A clear lesson emerged for us as OD practitioners, though: the threat that men might experience in the midst of diversity programmes aimed at bringing more equality to the workplace is real. Men will get killed; in fact, they need to get killed. Symbolically, that is. Just as in human development the father needs to be killed, symbolically, by the son through the Oedipus phase, in organizational development women need to kill, symbolically, the masculine paradigms that constrain their authenticity and work as obstacle to their accessing a range of internal resources they might not have suspected. The challenge for OD consultants, therefore, is to hold the boundaries well enough to both enable the process and contain it, so that acting out does not move the issue from the symbolic to the real, thus dragging the organization into an Hegelian dialectic cycle of oppressor-oppressed.

The long history of gender projection means that today the masculine continues to be held primarily by men, and the feminine by women. It makes sense, then, that a process of de-masculinization (a recovery of the feminine) be led by women. Our thinking, though, is that this should be done *on behalf of* the whole organization. This path-finding initiative led by women could, in fact, pave the way for a true transformation of culture; that is to say, a deep shift in basic assumptions and paradigms that then engages both men and women.

ORGANIZATIONAL SHAME AS EXPRESSED THROUGH INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP INTERACTIONS

A few months after the intervention ended with the second pilot, an illuminating event happened through one interaction we had with this

organization. It enabled us to sharpen our diagnostic of some of the organizational dynamics at work.

We contacted a member of this client organization who had participated in the first pilot, to invite her to participate in an event we run on generational diversity. She expressed desire to participate in this event, but later shared with us that her manager thought it not appropriate for her to participate: indeed, the organization did not feel they were sufficiently innovative, in contrast to other organizations of its type, in dealing with intergenerational issues in the workplace. Therefore, she did not want her colleague to represent the organization in an event where it might not be shown in a good light. Our hypothesis, linked to this particular issue, is that this organization is *ashamed* of its own inadequate response to a difficult issue it knows to exist internally.

The Italian word for shame is *vergogna*, derived from the Latin *vercognia*, which contains the theme *vereri*, meaning 'to revere'. The English word 'shame' comes from the Indo-European roots *skem*, and *kem*, meaning 'to cover'. Shame also means disgrace and dishonour.

So, the root of the Italian word highlights the motivation of the shame (the respect of the other); the English root highlights the action that is consequent to the shame – that is to say, the hiding and veiling.

Shame is a consequence of feeling one's mask is being taken off; the mask falls, and with it what we used to cover and protect the intimacy of our own self; now our self image becomes suddenly evident to the external eye . . . and we feel seen as we are, and not as the image we would like to project. (Galotti, 2005)

Thus the organization, facing issues of diversity, does not feel good enough. It wants to hide, and does not accept that its collective ideal self could be defectuous and does not match its real collective self.

With hindsight, the feeling of shame began to manifest itself from the very start of the project on professional development for women referred to in this paper. Many interactions and events that took place over the project's nine months can now be revisited with this new perspective on it. Below, we give a few examples.

1. During a focus group aimed at preparing the terrain for the two pilots, women (managers and senior managers) tried to deny the existence of a gender issue linked to career, and tried to redirect this initiative towards professional development for young people, not just young women. Another signal came from the first pilot, during which a test about masculine and feminine profiles was

offered to women participants. The result of the test was, for most participants, a clear predominance of masculine characteristics. The aim of the test was to facilitate the unveiling of participants' identities through the introduction of themes around masculine and feminine identities.

Our interpretation at this stage was that women with a desire to develop their careers were over-adapting in order to be able to evolve in an organizational culture predominantly masculine. To this we can add a new interpretative key, perhaps a 'because' clause: shame. The sense of aversion to, and condemnation of, themselves at being feminine in a world of men perhaps led to feeling it was something unacceptable, something to be ashamed of and hidden. The hiding then happens through vociferous diversion tactics (the needs are with young people), or through a chameleon strategy.

2. The project included an individual coaching session after the workshop. However, although the workshop had ended with very positive feedbacks from participants, one of the participants wrote to say, in a quite abrupt way, that she did not intend to have her coaching session. After long talks, she explained that she had been feeling disturbed by the fact that other participants could speak so openly of their problems in work life; she said that in encountering them after the workshop she could not continue to value them, knowing their limits, and that she thought it was not right to force somebody *to expose themselves* in such a way. This word had been used a lot before. During the initial focus groups, one of the difficulties women stated they encountered in their career was the lack of 'exposition' skills, such as, for example, the ability to start speaking in a meeting. Equally, during the first pilot workshop, one subgroup worked on the theme 'How to get better exposure in the organization', producing as output a guideline for better exposure.

In the expression 'to expose', we have another meaning: the 'exposed' (*esposti* in Italian) are the children that are abandoned because the pregnancy was undesired, so they represent in some way a problem or a shame for their mother and they are left somewhere (usually outside a church). The gaze of the Other in the organization creates shame,⁴ the same shame that Sartre describes as 'the fact to be exposed to other's stare, that looking at us rips off our subjectivity to reduce us to an object of his/her show' (Sartre, 1976). So, shame creates a relationship subject-object.

From the point of view of the organizational dynamics, this pilot project has been the occasion for the organization to expose itself

- on this theme to the consultant's eyes. The phenomenon stated above might be a clue for the subgroup of these system dynamics.
3. Participants in the second pilot were asked to share in two subgroups, one exploring masculinity and the other femininity through articles, photos, and images taken from magazines and newspapers brought by the consultants. The outputs of the exercise were very significant in terms of organizational culture. The group that had worked on the feminine had chosen images of family, mothers, women taking others on their backs, stereotyped women like those found in advertising, the absence of women in work environments. The group that had worked on masculinity had chosen images of virility, of power in the work environment, of seduction and 'good living'. The feminine part in men was represented in the choice of a homosexual couple. In no case were men and women represented together, except in the case of seduction. During the debriefing of the exercise, the female consultant tried to facilitate the exploration of the organizational 'system in the mind' that had generated these representations, and the anger of the group exploded. The group – led by the two HR participants – refused an exploration of what they had collectively created and collectively revealed. Here, again, the lifting of a veil creates a surge of shame. The unsuspected intensity of that shame is defended against by an equally intense anger at the process of revelation, and those who led it.
 4. The role of HR is important throughout. They commissioned the work, so the shaping of the pilots was done in partnership with them. As mentioned earlier in this paper, the relation went quickly from a phase of initial 'falling in love' to a phase in which, we can now hypothesize, shame began to emerge: the consultants were looking, through them, at the organization, and the organization, through them, felt 'exposed'. The relationship became a subject-object relationship, in which the 'ashamed' projects on the Other the ideal self. As Andrew Morrison explains (1997), shame is present when, in the relationship with the other, there is a perception of being defective; the other becomes the place for the projections of various aspects of the ideal self that represents a social norm, leading to a feeling of exclusion and shame producing a retirement in oneself. Then come grudge, envy, anger, and desire for revenge against the other, who is felt to be the aggressor and is then aggressed.

The first defence against shame, acted out by Human Resources, was alter-phagia, the attempt to transform the other through manipulating

him/her, transforming the relationship to move it from subject-object – as in Sartre's definition – to object-object. One piece of evidence linked to this dynamic was the continuous asking for tools and theories in order to fill the two days of workshop, substantially asking the consultants to remove the relational distance in which the gaze of the other is possible. The next evolution is towards anger and grudge, using Morrison's 'shame-anger cycle': the HR participants, during the workshop activities, were often pulled into the role of aggressor of the consultants, guilty of having taken not good enough theories and tools. One of the HR women refused categorically to participate in the coaching after the workshop, the other used the coaching session to express, another time, all her discontents towards the workshop.

This paper analysed some individual and subsystem phenomenon linked to shame that were produced in the system during the consultancy. Our hypothesis is that, from the moment that the president publicly *exposed* the problem of the unequal career opportunities for women, the organization began to weaken its defences against shame: shame for the treatment that it has reserved for women up to now. Since that moment, shame began to be expressed under different forms and at different levels. At group level, as in the pilots that were organized, but also individually, through the particular expression of some of the participants. What complicates matters, however, is that women participants were probably carrying another level of shame than the organisation's. They were also carrying their own shame at having been actors in the co-creation of this system, however unequal the distribution of power and resources might have been for them to act differently. Opening up issues of identity as a woman in this system therefore unleashed several levels of very powerful human affect.

In this context, the subsystem HR, increasingly aware that it was not working on the task of nurturing Human Resources, seems to have taken on the role of Human Resistances to this process of transformation. In some way, one might argue, they are the guardian of the defences against shame.

Words, therefore, fall short of reality when they try to portray the overwhelming human experience (conscious but mostly unconscious) of these participants and the commissioners of this work. The ambivalence can only be great, and hard to overcome, when torn between a desire to transform and the floods of affect that erupt when shifts begin to occur through OD work. To meet their clients where they are, consultants must therefore become the guardians of the boundaries of the process of transformation of shame.

THE RECOVERY OF THE FEMININE: JOURNEY TOWARDS AN UNCHARTERED FUTURE

Through alter-phagia (a form of cannibalism?), the other is absorbed, and what comes out of the process are only undigested fragments in which the original form is lost. What was, consciously or unconsciously, deemed good has been integrated, leaving the rest as waste products.

As subjects, the women we worked with were literally puzzled when we were telling them about their differences as women, showing little desire to explore their own identity and self-representation, forgotten before it reached consciousness. Hence, the passivity and the submissiveness we witnessed during the one-to-one follow-up sessions, an evidence of the non-engagement with a subject perceived as an undesired remnant.

The challenge, therefore, is bigger than anticipated: a change process, led by women, involving women, evaluated by women, but accessed, experienced, and judged through their masculine part. Issues of stimulation, hard data, too much of this, not enough of that, become the key sensors for evaluating outputs. The quality of the process, the journey, the outcomes, cannot be captured through this prism. So, what they had shared, developed, and exchanged took on the status of parts of themselves insufficiently nourishing, and not recognizable as living parts of the self, as if the fact of having being psychically ingested at a collective and transgenerational level had opened up the door to a never-to-be-satisfied bulimia, impossible to fulfil. Our proposal had been to open up a protected space, where co-creation could unfold, in a climate of acknowledgement of similarities (between women) and differences (do men have the same issues to deal with?).

Where can we go from here? Where do organizations want to go? How do the women in charge of leading transformation in the organization (in the midst of its ambivalence) perceive the way forward?

Undoubtedly, we argue, a real organizational transformation will need to include a recovery of the Feminine, led, initially, by women, for it is they who, historically, have been carrying the Feminine. But the way forward is strewn with hurdles, not least the immense challenge brought on by addressing 'head on' the recovery of identities. So, a form of systemic spiralling around the question 'what is the added value of women in this organization?' could be one way forward. With its potential for cascaded areas of relationship to clients, creativity in products, HR, management, and corporate structure, this question could enable the organization as a whole to focus on the

business advantage of integrating women/the Feminine in the work, and not so much on the past (source of guilt), but on the future(object of desire).

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Notes

1. The CAC 40 is the French equivalent to the FTSEE 100.
2. This level corresponds to Schein's 'basic assumptions' level; i.e., the matrix in which thoughts, beliefs, values, and behaviours are anchored, hence the most important yet most difficult area to transform. For more about Schein's three levels of organizational culture, see Schein, 2004.
3. For this we are thankful to a group of participants to the OPUS conference in November 2007 in London, to whom we presented a version of this paper. They came up with a range of qualitative statements to describe femininity and masculinity, of which we present an extract.
4. Interestingly, the gaze of the Other (i.e., the mother) is, for Lacan, what builds the subject, the ego. That gaze, in ordinary development, is sought by the child. For Lacan, shame accompanies the process of revelation of what he (the child) is not: the imaginary phallus supposed to fulfil the lack of his mother (Bernard, 2005).

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