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Gender differences in the workplace: The Case of Pharmaceutical Industry in China

Abstract

Gender's equality is still an allusive phenomenon in twenty-first century workplaces. Previous studies have suggested that gendered assumptions and organizational factors may contribute to gender's inequality. However, little research has investigated how individuals make sense of their roles in the workplace in the Chinese context. Drawing on cultural constructions of gender's roles in organizations, we address three research questions: What are the meanings different actors ascribed to the sales occupation? To what extent are different actors able to (re)construct the dominant culture in the sales context? What are the implications of existing reproduction processes of the dominant culture for the way people experience their lives at the workplace? Through a discourse analysis this article examines the transcripts of thirty narratives on women in sales roles to critically analyse people attitudes to transform the dominant culture in working life. We argue that initiatives sponsored at different organizational ladders, and by both genders, are (un)consciously reproducing sales occupation's masculine cultures in the pharmaceutical sales industry. The study reveals that while there is a discursive space within the salesforce for gender's equality, in practice men and women at the workplace engage in masculine status quo, contributing to legitimize unequal relations between the genders in the sales industry in China.

Keywords: Gender in organizations, masculine culture, salesforce, China

Introduction

Numerous studies have investigated female's situation in male-dominated occupations. Topics include determinants and effecting factors of women's outflow (Torre, 2014), interaction with male counterparts (Kanter, 1977), female's coping strategies for continuing career paths (Fernando and Cohen, 2011), work-family conflicts (Watts, 2009), and gender stereotypes' influence on female's hiring (Gorman, 2005). Earlier research emphasized the adverse impacts of women's low participation, current literature discusses more its sources and related effects. However, these studies are mostly concentrated on IT industry (Adikaram and Wijayawardena, 2016), sport area (Walker and Bopp, 2011), and aviation (Germain et al., 2012). Little is known in pharmaceutical sales industry.

Moreover, the Western academics have a full, detailed view showing women's status in majority research on occupational segregation and other related topics. However, this situation is little known in China. Unlikely the America or European countries, female would experience more gender-based disadvantages in the Chinese labour market, because gender issues are more severe and explicit in the Chinese environment due to social norms and weak legal protection for women (Gao et al., 2016). Thus, it's essential to get a better understand of the status of working women in this country.

Contributing to fill in the gap, this study aims to analyse female salespeople's minority situation in the pharmaceutical sales industry in the Chinese labour market. The aims are threefold. Recognizing that the underrepresentation, as a kind of occupational segregation, could be produce and reproduce by a multifaceted set of factors, we seek firstly to explore how sales occupation is understood in the pharmaceutical industry. Then, we try to understand how different organizational actors are (re)constructing the existing male-dominated culture and the implications of the existing reproduction processes of the male-dominated culture for the way sales force works.

Theoretical foundations

Gendered occupational segregation

Occupational segregation refers to the inequality division of labour into different jobs and occupations according to demographic characteristics in the context of paid employment (Bergmann, 1981). Gender-based segregation is the most common segregation type referred on the literature and its formation has close relationship with social, cultural and historical factors.

In explaining gender segregation, the feminist theory highlights a close relationship between feminine stereotypes, woman's supposed abilities and characteristics of typical-female jobs. Gender-stereotyping of specific occupations are consistent to a significant degree with typical socially prescribed gender roles and preconceived notions of gender-related abilities. Female and male developed gendered abilities under social and cultural construction, at the same time gender stereotype internalized. This means that both gender would receive evolutionary experiences in their special fields based on the traditional labour division and finally enable them towards gender-based occupations (McDonald and Hite, 1998).

Feminist theory also assumes that the profound patriarchy influence is in all levels of the society, leading to women's vulnerable status in the labour market (Anker, 1998). Both workers and employers' decision of jobs are constrained from learned cultural and social norms. For female, long term's subordination in the family and society constructed a discrimination culture. Compared to men, the women who have less access to education and political environment do not have the same rights as men, which made them at a disadvantaged position in the labour market.

Gender in the salesforce

Because gender-based segregation restricts the individual occupations' choice, women's movement to male-dominated occupations has been seen as an important development towards decreasing occupation segregation and gender equality (Yavorsky et al., 2016). Nevertheless, segregation has not been dissipated by women's increasing participation. Gender differences are persistent in productivity, earning as well as social cognition. It has been suggested that the root of gender segregation is the result of the intertwining of a multiplicity of factors. To better understand women in male-dominated sales occupations, it is important to investigate attitudes of gender differences from both the demand and supply side of the labour market.

At the individual level, the central argument is to understand whether the differences between male-female salespeople are significant and may be a barrier block to female's entry and promotion. Linkemer (1989) revealed that men highlight recompense, promotion and job security, while women's demand is more on social and personal aspect to develop their career. Although the existing differences appear not to be suitable for women in male-dominated salesforce, other scholars claim that many differences identified on the literature can be used in benefit of female workforce.

Different from salesmen's task-related focus, female salespeople concentrate more on emotional responsive attitudes (Van Emmerik et al., 2006). Women's natural ability of empathy helps them knowing better about their customers, capacitate them to fulfil their customer's needs as well as avoiding conflicts. Gradually, women's relationship-oriented is being regarded as an essential competence in sales industries (Crampton and Mishra, 1999), which turns out to be an advantage.

Likewise, women and men perform different communication styles, and language skill is especially vital for salespeople since their job is dealing with customers. Madera et al.

(2009) pointed out that men sale representatives typically are with agentic style communication, while women are more in communal style. Sojka and Tansuhaj (1997) found out that women salespeople are more self-disclosing, more cooperative and gain more trust in their customers than their male counterparts. It is probably that men's agentic communication could be seen as adversarial by clients and female's communal form evokes collaboration.

However, gender difference would be accentuated when female is at a minority status in a male dominated concentration. Thus, rather than overlooking the gender difference, recognizing and penetrating it in a specific context is helpful for utilising female resources in the labour market. However, the organization's viewpoint plays a key role in female employment.

Historically, male's dominated role in the family and society derives hegemony masculine ideology and spills over to organisational culture today (Cha, 2013), which brings problems of acceptance and integration for women in male-dominated environments. When a new, emerging group attempts to enter an organization with traditional dominants, the newcomers tend to be viewed as the "out-group" rather than as inside individual. This phenomenon is known as "tokenism" Kanter (1977). Prior literatures also suggested that negative gender stereotype is a key reason to exclude women from higher echelons in the organization (Comer and Drollinger, 1997). Stereotypes and decision makers' gender preference in favour of people with the same gender may have impact on individual's perceptions and evaluation (Brewer and Brown, 1998).

Another factor that drift female away from central position in the organization is the role conflicts between family and work. Previously literatures argued that female sustain more pressure than male because women have to deal with family responsibilities, such as household and child caring, and have to take account of job responsibilities at the same time (Bhagat and Chassie, 1981). Recently, it is intimated that high-status occupation's time

demand of job keeps constantly raising, which was regarded as a trigger that drove women to leave male-dominated jobs (Watts, 2009). Cha (2013) suggests that long-hours working culture potentially made women harder to give both consideration to career and family and finally brought work-life conflicts. Gender stereotypes, cultural norms and conventional rules have implied the association between women and family. Compared to women's close relationship with family, men are perceived as career-oriented images and their association with family are seem weaker than female (Nosek et al., 2002). It arouses employer concern on female's ability of balancing work and family.

Research method

This study looks at pharmaceutical sales job's segregation and aims to understand female salespeople's underrepresentation in the male-dominated pharmaceutical sale industry in China. Therefore, the case study would be the perfect method for this kind of phenomenon, since it allows the researcher to explore "how and why" questions (Yin, 2009).

The research object is the GY company, a local Chinese pharmaceutical organization with an unbalanced gender composition in its sale department (approximately 80% male salespeople are men). Female salespeople's underrepresentation keeps a long-term trend in the GY pharmaceutical company's sale department, even after the influx of female workforce into professional selling fields.

The key approach of data collection is in-depth interviews with thirty respondents in the GY company (20 salespeople, six middle managers, and four HR employees). They were interviewed in person, using a semi-structure interview format. The interview guideline included the following aspects: job profile of pharmaceutical sales; the barriers and challenges people may encounter on this position; GY company's working environment; the role of

saleswomen in a sale team; the perceptions of female sales' underrepresentation in GY company; and female salespeople's personal experience.

All interviews were undertaken in June and July in 2018. The interviews lasted on average of one and a half hours. All interviews were recorded and transcribed from Chinese to English. Using a semi-structure format, the interview allowed flexibility and freedom for interviewees to talk more about their experiences, while the interview guideline assured the respondents provided relevant information on the topic and the same general areas of interest. In order to find what was "unsaid" in the interviewees' narratives, the discourse analysis technique was used (Hardy et al., 2004).

Finding

What are the meanings different actors ascribed to the sales occupation?

Job requirements

Pharmaceutical salespeople work as a link that connects doctors, hospitals and pharmaceutical companies. Their main task is medicine marketing and selling products. To achieve sales quota, organizing academic discussion with clients and partnering stakeholders up with local networks are commonly undertaken to maximize sales growth, which means that outside working environment and extensive travelling are an inherent necessity of this position. However, men and women have different perceptions and career goals.

Male salespeople view sales job as an activity that enables them to learn relevant medical knowledge and is a personally enriching process. Women had mixed feeling about sale's job. On the one hand, they highlight the personal fulfilment in the job. On the other hand, they feel uneasy about traveling alone and working late in the evening. However, the executives in GY company explicitly encourages salespeople to move to different places to

build business or personal connections, suggesting that having extensive travels and finishing heavy workload are regarded as a positive element in developing personal career.

GY's value is inconsistent with female's lives when they undertake primary family responsibilities. Even though both female and male salespeople face work-family conflicts, concerns on female balancing work and private life seems to be much higher than that of male counterparts. This situation leads female salespeople to be perceived with less willingness to business trips and extra work. Moreover, GY Company's encouragement of dedication to work might pose greater challenge for female to achieve career advancement and work-family balance.

Stereotypes of women

Female salespeople in GY company are in part perceived with gender stereotypes. One aspect is that they are considered incapable of selling products. For example, one team leader commented:

“Women are generally believed to be more approachable than males and it is easier for them to communicate with the customers. But we also worry that they would behave too submissive during the talk with our clients, which could make them lose the initiative in the following bargain.” (Yifan, man, single)

The words “worry”, “submissive” and “lose the initiative” indicate that female's feminine characteristics are regarded as inferior to masculine qualities, which imply that men are more suitable for pharmaceutical sales position than women. Interestingly, while men showed sceptical attitude towards female colleagues' performance, women revealed strong confidence on female salespeople and their capability. They believed their different qualities could bring new vitality to this job.

Nevertheless, their leaders didn't see their potential. On the contrary, they observed more women's traditional feminine role that emphasized gender stereotype.

"I don't know if it is because I am the only girl in the team or my paperwork is really good, my boss is likely to assign me to write reports or prepare statements. Sometimes I just confuse whether I'm a salesperson or a secretary..." (Mengyuan, single, junior saleswoman)

"Female's role is necessary, though the proportion of male is big in our department. Ladies' 'feminine' roles bring some kind of balance in a male-dominated environment. It was like mother, or wife standing behind us, encouraging and pushing us forward. Girls in the team could drive males to advance and support us." (Peng, man, married, team leader)

When Mengyuan was assigned more clerical work by her leader, she was probably placed on her feminine role, as secretary, which is socially acknowledged as female role in China. Her leader's understanding of female sale job is out of sales position and tends to reproduce the stereotypical perspective. Similarly, Peng emphasized that female plays a role in the team. But his description didn't put female and male at the same status layer. Female is viewed more as "mother" or "wife" who stands at the back instead of a partner with equal seat.

Gender difference in selling styles

One interesting finding in this study is the identification of two distinct selling styles. That is, informants easily offer a clear picture about how they perceive themselves and the opposed sex.

“Well, as to the differences, it depends on personality. I mean everyone would have their pattern to communicate with their clients. The most obvious different point I saw is ... our (male salespeople) way is more direct, keep it as business issue and strive for win-win relationship. My female colleague is walking on another way. She pays more attention on maintaining good relationship with our clients. I remember once she took few hours talking with her client, I thought she could at least get some information about client’s purchasing intention or something else. But she told me she didn’t talk anything about business with her client, they just chatting as friends did! I was surprised, because for me I don’t think it’s an efficient way...” (Ding, man, married, senior salesman)

It could be seen that men’s selling style is full of agentic characteristics, while women’s selling style is with strong communal characteristics. According to Madera et al. (2009), agentic behaviour requires aggressiveness, independence and achievement, like initiating tasks as male salespeople did. Communal behaviour includes caring for others, being willing to cooperate and maintaining relationships, exactly as the female salespeople’s action (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001).

To what extent are different actors able to (re)construct the male dominated culture in the sales context?

Women’s strategy: proving yourselves

In GY company, there is a smaller proportion of women in relation to men in the sales department. This reality influences the attitudes and behaviours of female salesforce. For example, female participants refer that they redouble their effort on working to prove their capabilities and have a prominent sales performance, which they believe separate themselves from a “submissive” image in GY’s male-dominated team.

“At that time, one of my male colleagues, derided me that there is no need to work so hard as a woman, marrying with a wealthy husband and then being a tender wife is quite easier than striving and working. I don’t know if it is because I was the only female in the team he often made fun of me. I’m fine with those innocuous jokes but I really took offense at this kind of comment. So, I wanted to prove myself. It’s not easy. Keep up the same level with them is not enough because that’s what I should do in their eyes. I have to widen the gap to make guys convinced women could perform as men did at this position. That would be a strong evidence ... To strive for a big order, I prepared almost all related medical literature and provided medication guidance for every possible side-effect to my clients; visited the whole related personnel and engaged in their social activities ... In that period I sacrificed my leisure time, long-time working, I was exhausted. But I’m those indomitable styles and as the only female in my team, I hope what I was endeavouring could change their views on women and gain acceptance from others...” (Wen, single, junior saleswoman)

Here the “joke” made by the male colleague was with stereotypical role expectation, like the informant said “being a tender wife”. Under this situation, the participant mentioned that only an exceeding performance is significant to prove herself.

Actually, the women’s strategy to prove themselves is a manifestation that they are accommodating men’s norms. With the goal of surpassing her male colleagues, in the above example the female salesperson emphasized men’s traits. Women’s strategy is to minimize the gender differences by reproducing the masculine norms. They seem to adopt the stereotypically masculine characteristics to be accepted by their male co-workers.

Peer integration

In the interviews, some participants recalled episodes suggesting that team leaders try to facilitate interaction and integration. Here it is an example of a female salesperson's experience in team building activities.

“Actually, my team leader would organize activities like parties and meals. Team members visit the clients individually every day; so, the leader hopes we can communicate more with each other using this chance. However, I still have the feeling that I couldn't fit in the team. They always talk about things like football, basketball, cars or politics. At first, they would ask me how I view football player XXX, or which club looks promising ...Their topics are really not my area, I don't have anything I could share with them. I tried to bring another topic but they are also with little knowledge about what I said. Then they just shrugged, showed me a smile with a little disappointment, and then continued their conversation. Most of the time men talk about their interests in high spirits and I only watch them talking...” (Cheng, single, junior saleswoman)

Team leaders seem to be aware of females' problem in the male-dominated sales team. However, the adoption of a straightforward solution to mitigate it had an opposite effect. According to the female participant's description, she failed to join men's conversation and felt excluded from men's informal network. The sense of exclusion determines female's “outsider” situation in GY's male-dominated environment, which is exactly what Kanter (1977) suggested with the expression “tokenism” or “in-group and out-group” buzzwords from social identity theory.

Co-workers' resistance

Here it is another initiative to change the status quo in a top-down movement introduced by a senior executive, but consequently it doesn't make any difference.

“There was a time that my company had a big project and I was selected to be the only female in the group responsible for it. I was delighted and felt my ability was finally acknowledged by the boss! But what I experienced in the group frustrated me after. ... Though I was included in the group, my voice was hardly heard during the decision-making process. Men were naturally taken the leading actions. Most of the time they presided over the conversation. I tried to express myself but they said my ideas were with petty restrictions. They showed me more admiring feedback when I contributed with secretarial work.” (Xueying, single, junior saleswoman)

“As a man, I will feel a little demeaning to work under a woman. I don't know how I would react, because my company has never had a female sales manager before. We already accustomed to 'alpha-male' culture. But if there is a female manager, I think her abilities, managerial traits and prestige should carry conviction.” (Ping, single, senior salesman)

It is observed that the female participant's role in group decision making is missed, or at least grossly underemphasized. Men took a granted attitude to assume the leadership positions, which implied their resistance to accept female's participation even she got the opportunity to do so. Also, it could be seen that male's acceptance to female leader is low. The male participant highlighted their imposing culture and showed less willing attitude being leaded by female leaders.

This quote provides an example of breaking “homosocial reproduction” (Kanter, 1977). The top management tried to promote people base on employees' merits instead of gender. In

doing so, he tried to remove the structural barrier for women's influx. However, the majority of men resisted to such. As Dent and Goldberg (1999) emphasize, what employees are resisting is the potential negative consequence associated with the change instead of the change itself. In this study, man is the "in-group" in GY company. However, now women are given the chance to enter into "in-group". It is possible for them to perceive women's rise as a threat that may cause their loss of status. Thus, resistance could be a kind of men's reaction to express their disapproval. Though top leaders decide to transform the male-dominated environment, co-workers' resistance is an obstacle making the change.

What are the implications of existing reproduction processes of the male-dominated culture for the way people experience their lives at the workplace?

Three attempts to change the actual reality at GY company were presented. Each one tries to promote women's integration and improve female's conditions. However, the results show that the strategies are ineffective and, to some extent, even reproduce the masculine culture.

Female's way to prove themselves is actually a process of seeking the "sameness" as men. It could be understood that adopting male's traits is a common survival strategy to integrate themselves into the male-dominated teams. However, the adoption of masculine norms reinforces their "outsider" situation and minimizes their femininity, which maintains the polarization. As Zucco and Molino (2012: 17) emphasize "androgyny looks like an invitation to women to assimilate into masculinity". In this sense, female salespeople "doing 'men's work'" have reconstructed salesmen's superiority and suppressed their feminine identities, pushing themselves far more away.

Conducted by a team leader, the second initiative tried to facilitate peer integration through a team building activity. But, it developed another polarization as a reflection of

male's homophily preferences. According to Kanter (1977), in informal networks of male-dominated occupations, male members are likely to gather together since they are easily to communicate and nurture trust as well as develop reciprocity. As a result, men gain more social integration and other advantages from this close contact, while women experience more exclusion because they differ from the majority. Consequently, women that are excluded from male's social network would have fewer opportunities to receive information and assistance from co-workers and limited access to career advancement (Roth, 2004).

The third initiative was supported by the top management and aimed to building a meritocracy culture above gender. However, women were the minority and disadvantaged group in male-dominated occupation. Their empowerment from the top management to share the privileges with men could be regarded as a threat from the male's perspective. The consequential impact may include men's perception of losing advantageous status and feeling of job insecurity. Such perceptions probably contribute to utilize covert barriers against women as a response to the organizational change, such as making a void of power for female colleague in the same group, which is difficult to be managed by the management (Miller, 1997). When co-workers show resistance, ladies are constrained at a lower level within the organizational structure, even though top management wishes to transform the actual reality.

Conclusion

By analysing and reflecting on informants' narratives and connecting qualitative data to the topic of gendered occupation segregation, we have examined female's underrepresentation in pharmaceutical sales industry in China for the first time. In the meanwhile, Kanter's tokenism theory was applied in this study after forty years, extending this theory to an Eastern social context. Focusing on both frontline employees and managers' perspectives, empirical evidence suggests that male and female salespeople have different

perceptions of pharmaceutical sales job and women experience more constraints on this position based on their social role and family role in the Chinese environment. At the same time, three examples of GY company's actual attempts were presented to promote women's integration and improve female's conditions. However, the result showed that even though female and executives are trying to promote gender integration in GY company, unfortunately all efforts seem to be ineffective. People in GY didn't gain an insight into gender problem and their superficial coping strategies are virtually reproducing GY's masculine culture.

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