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Feminist Theory and Interorganizational Collaboration: An Ethnographic Study of Gendered

Tension Management

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Feminist Theory and Interorganizational Collaboration: An Ethnographic Study of Gendered Tension Management

Building on feminist theories in organizational communication, this study investigated gendered tension management strategies in interorganizational collaboration. I analyzed data from a 2-year ethnographic study and semistructured interviews within a collaboration. Results showed that collaboration members engaged with gendered discourses across levels of the collaboration, including in tensions related to collaborative structure, professional identities, and goals and outcomes. I propose that collaborators engage in gendered tension management to indicate how gender and difference, particularly the unspoken cultural norms of white masculinity, constitute collaborations. Tension management prioritized tactical, control-related goals over more holistic, care-related goals in this collaboration. This study brings feminist theorizing into consideration with interorganizational collaboration and finds that gendered discourses are implicated in tension management strategies used by collaborators.

Keywords: interorganizational collaboration, organizational communication, gender, dialectical tensions

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Interorganizational collaboration has been heralded as a way to share resources and knowledge to address problems that transcend organizational boundaries, appearing as a fitting solution as communities deal with entrenched problems (Heath & Isbell, 2017). However, amidst the promise of collaboration scholarship, there is less focus on who collaborations benefit and, as importantly, who collaborations exclude. Feminist organizational communication scholarship has already carved a path for thinking about organizing, inclusion, exclusion, and intersectional discourses of difference as interconnected (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2003). Collaboration scholarship has failed to consider the relationship between gender and power as fundamental to the constitution of collaborations. This gap is a serious shortcoming, as collaborations are often trusted to frame problems and propose solutions for their communities (Gray & Purdy, 2018; Heath & Isbell, 2017).

Gray (1994) invited feminist studies of collaboration, noting that collaborations can be feminist forms of organization due to their emphasis on equality among members, but that this is dependent on practices that disrupt existing power structures. Collaborations can strive for minimized power differences, but research has revealed they can also engage in politics, hierarchies, and unfair influence among members (Huxham & Vangen, 2005). A feminist analysis of collaboration can shed light on the tensions members engage within their communicative constitution of equal, or unequal, relationships among collaborative members. Who has a seat at the table—or not—and how they are invited to participate impacts what problems collaborations name and address.

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The purpose of this study is to explore gender as constitutive of interorganizational collaborations (IOCs). Use of feminist theories will increase understanding of the negotiation of power and tension management strategies of IOCs. IOCs contend with tensions and competing values as members of multiple organizations come together; however, members experience these tensions differently based on their relationships to the IOC. Feminist theory demonstrates that tension management is not a monolithic experience; instead, subject positions influence the tension management strategies available to IOC members. I propose that collaborations engage in gendered tension management, indicating that 1) negotiation of tensions draws on gendered professional discourses and 2) gendered discourses influence the tension management strategies of IOC members. Examining tension management through a feminist lens clarifies that gendered discourses influence tensions experienced at professional, structural, and goal and outcome levels of collaborations. In this study, collaborators engaged with discourses of white masculinity, and organizations and members who could align their professional identities with those cultural values influenced tension management strategies of the collaboration as a whole.

I proceed with a review of prior studies within the collaboration literature and reread these contributions from a critical feminist lens. Next, I introduce the research site and methods and the three levels of tensions. I propose gendered tension management as a way to increase understanding of tensions and power negotiations in collaborations. This perspective demonstrates that collaboration members engage gendered discourses to enable and constrain their own and others' actions, and that gender and difference are constitutive of collaborative tensions.

Tensions and power in collaborations

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Interorganizational collaboration (IOC) scholars have in the past defined collaboration as a cooperative form of organizing—an assumption that leads scholarship to overlook power differences that emerge in interaction in IOCs (Hardy et al., 1998). IOC scholarship has been critiqued for assumptions that equalization of power occurs in the collaborative environment (Lewis, 2006) and that collaborations are open to all who wish to participate (Keyton et al., 2008). Instead, scholars have identified processes and sources of power imbalance. Among these, discussions of collaborative dialogue and sources of power and authority open the door to consider collaborations as sites of political struggle.

Research in collaboration has identified multiple potential sources of inequality of power, including network position (Provan & Kenis, 2008), perceived risk of stakeholder independence (Rice, 2021), and perceived expertise (Woo & Leonardi, 2018). Here, Woo and Leonardi (2018) have demonstrated that outside organizations can engage in persuasion strategies to gain access to IOCs and may frame themselves as having unique resources or expertise to gain entry. They found that organizations have the most success in joining collaborations when they frame their missions in ways that accommodate the existing IOC mission instead of framing themselves as incompatible or superior. However, gaining entry into a collaboration does not guarantee collaborators will be treated equally after joining. More research is needed to understand how, within IOCs, member organizations are treated as central or peripheral to the shared mission. Collaborations should constitute a shared identity instead of drawing on discursive resources that perpetuate differences (Koschmann, 2016). Missing from this conversation is a discussion of who is included in and can access this identity.

To this end, organizational communication researchers have asked how collaborations contend with competing yet coexisting goals and values. Studies of dialectical tensions stem

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from an interest in opposing forces as constitutive of human relationships and argue that tensions can never be fully resolved (Bakhtin, 1994; Baxter, 2008). Scholars in organizational communication have highlighted that organizational life is full of contradictions in values (Putnam et al., 2016; Tracy, 2004; Trethewey & Ashcraft, 2004) that members may not actually perceive but still inform their actions (Tracy, 2004). In collaboration, scholars have found tensions related to organizational versus collaborative identification (Lewis et al., 2010) and being cooperative versus being assertive of individual goals (Hardy et al., 2006). The initial promise of collaboration as a more equality-based approach to organizing has given way to a complex view of the relationship between collaborations and power.

A tension-centered approach does not assume that power inequalities can be resolved and highlights how IOC members communicatively manage these tensions. Baxter (2011) suggested that tension-management strategies can include selecting one pole of the tension over the other, integrating the poles, or transcending the presented tension through communication. IOC members have managed tensions by invoking previously created strategic plans (Hoelscher, 2019) and missions (Lewis et al., 2010) to guide their decision-making. Woo (2019) argued that IOCs do not just respond reactively to tensions; the conveners of collaborations can also proactively set up tensions to respond to changing opportunities and problems. Woo (2019) proposed that “either-or” strategies for managing tensions may simplify collaboration, but “both-and” and “more-than” approaches that transcend tensions to create innovative ways to support oppositional values increase collaborative capacity. While either-or strategies seek to neutralize tensions by giving in to one side of the tension or segmenting tensions, both-and strategies embrace paradoxes and seek to integrate seemingly competing elements. More-than strategies seek to create a new relationship so that tension poles are reframed as complementary (Putnam et

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al., 2016). Much of the IOC scholarship has argued that tensions are inescapable and may even create collaborative advantages. Considering the use of gendered discourses in IOC tension-management strategies opens up the possibility to see how tensions may also be foreclosed at the expense of certain IOC stakeholders. Further, IOC members may experience tensions and tension management differently based on their positions within the collaboration.

Toward a feminist theory of collaboration

Gray (1994) has already considered the implications of feminist analysis of collaboration. In her rereading of her highly-cited 1989 article defining IOCs, she suggested that collaboration can be viewed as a feminist form of organizing due to the emphasis on interconnectedness among members and collective shared power. However, drawing on feminist standpoint theory and poststructural feminism, Gray also recognized that collaborations can privilege certain voices over others and that the term “collaboration” can itself lead to discursive closure of conflicts. In other words, a feminist perspective on collaboration should not assume that collaborations favor feminine, interconnected ways of knowing (drawing from standpoint theory), and a poststructuralist feminist perspective would allow scholars to critique the naturalized assumptions of collaboration, including that collaboration is possible (which may trivialize important differences among collaborators). Instead, scholars can ask, “whose interests are served through collaboration?” (Gray, 1994, p. 290). Gray’s suggested feminist lens of collaboration has not been taken up in the IOC scholarship. Studies of gender and collaboration have tended to focus on feminist collaborations that explicitly form to address gender inequalities (i.e., gender is the subject of the collaboration, Kamaara et al., 2012). A second line of scholarship has looked at collaborations among feminist scholars who, therefore, consciously label and work toward feminist practices (Kaplan & Rose, 1993; Long et al., 2020; Pratt, 2010).

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A feminist perspective on collaboration is useful and relevant today, as the promise of collaboration to solve shared problems has grown in the public eye (Gray & Purdy, 2018).

Studying gender and collaboration can illuminate the tension of both emancipatory potential and practices of inequality present in IOCs. In particular, organizational communication scholarship on gender draws attention to the ways gender pervades all “levels” of organizational life from the individual to structural communication processes (Keyton et al., 2008). A gendered analysis of collaboration answers calls for further scholarship on IOCs to consider how communication practices constitute collaborations and how those practices can create power differences (Keyton et al., 2008).

Organizational communication scholars have moved beyond considering gender as an organizational variable to recognize that organizations are gendered (e.g., structures, values, and patterns of interaction). Gender intersects with race, sexuality, class, and other forms of difference that must be interwoven in critique and analysis (Linabary et al., 2020). Consideration of gender across all levels of organizing activity can generate insight into how power infuses collaborative practices. Beyond looking at women or individuals in organizations, scholars have critiqued organizational discourses that uphold cultural conceptions of (white) masculinity and link it to organizational success (Acker, 1990; Ashcraft & Flores, 2003). This scholarship has challenged the notion that gender is a niche concern within organizational communication and instead notes that gender is an organizing principle. Gender, difference, organizations, and power are fundamentally linked, and subjects are constituted in gendered ways in their relationship to others (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2003). Given these starting points, feminist organizational communication scholars have analyzed gender across multiple organization levels, including

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structural, professional, and institutional levels. These levels inform the three sites of tensions in IOCs discussed in this study and are thus reviewed here.

First, critiques of organizational *structure* have focused primarily on the assumption that structures are value-neutral. Organizational structures are the processes by which members manage their communication via rules for operation and engagement (Lewis et al., 2010). Feminist scholars have acknowledged the racialized and gendered history of bureaucracy as an organizing structure that privileges culturally masculine traits, including competitiveness, control, individuality, hierarchy, and rationality (Ashcraft, 2001). These critiques move beyond efforts to involve more women in organizational life to note how structural inequalities impact all organization members. Organizational scholars drawing on radical feminism have instead identified feminist and alternative forms of organizing (Calas & Smircich, 1999). Feminist organizations recognize the importance of personal experience, emotionality, and embodiment in organizational life (Buzzanell, 1994). Similarly, feminist organizations are cast as collectivist and focus on cooperation over competition among members (Buzzanell, 1994). Despite this promise, the ability to create a bureaucracy-free organization may be unfeasible in practice. Instead, Ashcraft (2001) proposed that feminist organizations can embrace the dissonance of feminist organizational values and bureaucratic structure, keeping the tensions between these competing values alive in practice. A feminist perspective on collaborations can embrace this tension-centered approach. In feminist scholarship, tensions have highlighted that competing values are inherent to organizing and are not necessarily resolvable; instead, organizational members must manage these tensions in their communication (Trethewey & Ashcraft, 2004).

Additionally, gendered discourses of organization do not simply exist at the intraorganizational level. Broader societal understandings of *professions* and *institutions* are also

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gendered in ways that favor the masculine (Acker, 1992). Thus, a meso-level perspective on collaboration as influenced by broader institutional discourses can shed light on how institutional understandings of gender influence the microlevel of the organization (e.g., technical rules, job positions, and requirements) (Mills, 1988). Similarly, professional fields influence gendered perceptions of careers and organizations, and, as multiple professions come into contact in collaboration, these professional frames can clash. Studies of “the professional” in organizational communication have argued that discourses of professionalism are racialized, gendered, and classed (Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007; Ashcraft & Flores, 2003). Ashcraft’s work on airline pilots noted that hegemonic masculinity links professionalism and structural advantages. Jobs tied to white masculinity enjoy benefits of perceived expertise, higher social status, and pay (Ashcraft, 2013). Discourses of professionalism treat white masculinity as the ideal concept of the “neutral” worker whose identity can remain unspoken (Allen, 2007; Rabelo et al., 2021). Here, whiteness is defined as a set of unnamed cultural practices that confer structural advantages to those with identities that fit and perform those practices best (Frankenberg, 1993), creating advantages of “silent inclusion” (Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007, p. 165). In contrast, women, people of color, and others with feminized identities can be treated as excessive, overly emotional, and irrational in ways that disrupt the ideal professional image (Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007; Trethewey, 1999). Similarly, scholars have pointed out that organizational communication scholarship has tended to treat race as existing only at the margins of research (Cruz & Sodeke, 2020; Hanchey, 2020). These critiques have pointed out that masculinity and whiteness are treated as displays of professionalism against which other identities are measured (Allen, 1996; Ashcraft & Allen, 2003; Frankenburg, 1993). Organizational scholars have moved to examine how interacting levels of gendered discourse are at play in work. Interorganizational collaboration presents as a

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unique organizational form where these levels intersect and interact, especially as IOCs are often sites where multiple professions interact, leading to struggle as multiple discourses of gender and difference vie for dominance in the collaboration.

Collaboration appears poised to be adopted as a feminist form of organizing due to the emphasis on cooperation, ad hoc organization, and equal participation in processes. However, feminist theories of organizational communication can also encourage the study of how power in collaboration is negotiated in communicative processes. Feminist analysis opens the possibility of examining and critiquing everyday practices as sites that communicate gendered discourses (Ashcraft, 2001; Ashcraft & Mumby, 2003). Turning a feminist lens on collaboration creates the possibility to examine how members express power in their routine interactions while drawing on organizing structures and professional and institutional discourses. The intervention of feminist critique into theories of collaboration leads to the following research question, which seeks to examine the multiple potential levels of gendered discourse in interorganizational collaboration:

RQ₁: How do participants of IOCs recreate and resist gendered discourses as they navigate collaborative tensions?

Methods

To answer this research question, I engaged in a two-year ethnographic study of collaboration. The research site was a county emergency management (EM) collaboration¹. Offices of emergency management are common in US counties and cities. They exist to respond to and coordinate community efforts during emergencies, including natural disasters, human-caused security threats, and health threats. Because of the scope of the mission, offices of

¹ EM collaboration, EM, and all names included are pseudonyms to disguise members and their organizations.

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emergency management engage in ongoing collaborations beyond their internal organization. They often work closely with first responder organizations (e.g., firefighting agencies, sheriff's offices), other government agencies and services (e.g., FEMA, local human services offices, public health departments), and community organizations (e.g., local nonprofits). The disparate organizations brought to the table during emergency management collaborations can create a "culture clash" among the different priorities and missions. As a result, EM collaborations train in standardized government response systems to create a shared response framework.

This EM collaboration existed in a populous county in the Western US that contained a dense urban center and multiple communities in the wildland-urban interface. The county is predominantly white (approximately 90%) and affluent, with high median incomes and housing costs. The EM collaboration facilitated robust partnerships by inviting collaboration members to a standing monthly meeting where members defined their priorities and reported about their positions. City and county employees could be assigned to collaborate with the EM office during emergencies, but the in-between meetings were completely voluntary. Despite this, the meeting room was often so crowded that members would sit on counters and tables. The collaboration also engaged in shared emergency exercises (my observations included a contagious disease outbreak and a wildland fire response) and trained together on shared government systems.

Data for this study was collected using ethnographic observation of the site between 2015 and 2018. In all, I observed 182 hours of collaborative activity, including monthly meetings, exercises, and trainings. Between 30 and 60 participants attended meetings and exercises, though people did fluctuate due to changing commitments. Observation primarily took place at the emergency management office, where collaboration members gathered to participate in shared activities. I created thick description fieldnotes (Geertz, 2000) focused on organizational

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practices or describing how everyday actions accomplish organization (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). This observation yielded 194 pages of single-spaced field notes focused on how members interacted, defined their goals, and coordinated their activities.

The study also included 30 semistructured interviews with collaborators representing multiple organizations (Kvale, 1996). The interviews totaled 204 pages of single-spaced transcription. Those interviewed included staff from first responder organizations ($n = 12$), members of volunteer groups ($n = 5$), Office of Emergency Management (EM)² staff ($n = 6$), public health workers ($n = 3$), and representatives from other county offices ($n = 4$). The interviewees were all present in field notes and tended to represent the most involved members of the collaboration. During field observations, I invited collaboration members to sign up for interviews using announcements during the monthly meetings. Interview questions asked members to define collaboration, share examples of instances where the collaboration worked well and did not work well, and discuss their roles and routines as they participated in the collaboration.

Analysis

Data coding took place in NVIVO, a qualitative data analysis software. I engaged in multiple rounds of coding, starting with open-level codes to describe the main activities occurring in the data from both the transcribed interviews and the fieldnotes. After coding the entire data set, I returned to the data using an iterative approach to consider the relationship between codes and existing theory (Tracy, 2020). Feminist theory became a “sensitizing concept” (Tracy, 2020) during data analysis after several interviews where members referred to others as being “touchy feely” or “feelings oriented,” which I coded as feminine descriptors. I

² I use “emergency management” or EM to refer to the collaboration as a whole. EM office refers specifically to the office that hosts the collaboration and its direct employees (who facilitate collaboration as part of their job).

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captured my interest in these findings in personal memos during observation (Tracy, 2020). A challenge of critical analysis in ethnography is that power may be “unspoken” and appear not to be present in the data. Using intersectional feminist theories, I sought to make gender and race visible in the second round of coding by considering that “explicit terminology” of whiteness may not be present in data (Crenshaw, 1997, p. 254). During the second round of coding, I noticed that feminized descriptors applied to particular collaboration members: health, human services, nonprofit, and volunteer members. Further exploration of the relationship among codes found that there appeared to be a “counter” to this value in the form of masculinized descriptors of first responders. Looking “around” moments in the data where someone or something was feminized, I often found characterizations of other collaborators appeared in opposition to these terms. For example, if care workers were “feelings oriented,” this was often spoken about in opposition to first responders, who were “type A” or “action oriented.” Further, race was rarely explicitly mentioned in any of the data, but during the second level coding, I noticed that many conversations were headed off by participants who labeled those conversations as “political.” I returned to the data to look at what was labeled political and particularly benefited from my fieldnote interpretations of what participants had been implying. Once I applied the sensitizing concept of gender, the relationship among codes became clearer. Other codes, such as “stand up and check in,” appeared to be tied to the masculinization and feminization of collaboration members, practices, and outcomes. I returned to the data for a third round of coding, where I grouped themes by “levels” of the collaboration. The themes of gendered tensions at the structural, professional, and outcome levels and how participants communicatively managed these tensions are presented below (see Figure 1).

--figure 1 about here--

Results

In response to *RQ1*, “how do participants of IOCs recreate and resist gendered discourses as they navigate collaborative tensions,” this study found three differing levels of gendered tensions in the IOC at the levels of professional identity, structure, and collaborative goals outcomes. At the level of professional identity, participants experienced a tension between control work and care work. In response, participants who worked in more feminized professional fields employed irony in the form of strategic femininity. The tension negotiation among professional identities served as the primary tension, which then influenced both the negotiation of collaborative structure and collaborative goals. At the level of organizational structure, participants kept the tension of bureaucratic versus collaborative structure in play by discussing the benefits of both. Finally, tensions at the collaborative goals and outcomes level included valuing tactical or holistic community outcomes as the goals the collaboration should work toward. In response to this tension, the collaboration explicitly favored tactical goals (see Table 1).

--table 1 about here--

Gendered tensions in professional discourses

Collaborations can be sites of struggle due to the different industries and professions that come into contact. As IOCs are often made up of multiple career fields, practitioners here experienced tensions among their professional identities. The collaborators made sense of these professional differences by describing other members and their representative professions and organizations in feminine or masculine ways. Doing so created an either-or tension management strategy that favored professional discourses of control. However, participants with feminized professional identities also engaged in a strategy of both-and to embrace the paradox of needing

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to affirm control discourses to achieve their care goals. In other words, they appeared to favor masculine professional identities, but did so in order to align the collaboration with the work of feminine professional identities, by employing irony. In this way, the appearance of an either-or tension management strategy actually served to create a both-and tension management outcome.

Masculine professional identities

In the collaboration, members often described certain representatives as masculine. In particular, representatives of first responder agencies, especially police and fire departments, were described by both themselves and others as having a masculine “ego.” Other terms used to describe first responders included “type A” and “take charge” personalities (fieldnote). Whereas these terms could be denigrating to the profession, many first responders themselves described it as an asset. Ethan, a police officer, told me that “I think most people in emergency management have big egos, and they should, you don’t want shrinking violets that are second-guessing themselves” (interview). Here, masculine traits like ego contrasted with undesirable feminine traits that would make someone a “shrinking violet” in the collaboration.

Descriptors of one group from the collaboration were often tied up in opposition to other groups, most commonly human service workers. Stephanie, who worked for a sheriff’s office, explained that “sometimes with housing and human services. They’re very....interested in people taking care of themselves and self-determination, and a lot of the time the sheriff’s office is like ‘no you need to do this and you need to do it now’” (interview). Here, the focus of other groups and their work styles was described as more feminine. Stephanie contrastingly described the sheriff’s office in more masculine terms of decisiveness and willingness to take charge.

This comment also touched on the often unspoken racialized dynamic of the collaboration. The EM collaborators were predominantly white and existed within a

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predominantly, but not exclusively, white community. The organizational representatives most likely to discuss people of color within the community were also the feminized “care” workers of the collaboration—for example, county employees who ran cultural broker programs, engaged translation services to send out public messages to Spanish-speaking communities, and provided social support services. EM collaborators sometimes disparaged this care orientation and reinforced their professional preferences to control community members (e.g., “you need to do this and you need to do it now”). They also treated racialized others in the community as challenges to be overcome to control emergency response. For example, during one training, the trainers talked about the need to consider how different populations within the community would react to an emergency. A participant in the training said that one example of this was that Spanish-speaking communities would be afraid to evacuate during a wildfire if sheriff’s deputies went door-to-door because they did not trust the deputies due to the current political climate (fieldnote). Members described first responder organizations as having masculine professional identities.

Feminine professional identities

Contrastingly, health, human service, and nonprofit members were often described using feminine terms linked to their professional identities and interests. If first responders were type A, these groups were caretakers who were more interested in feelings than tactical missions. A common phrase used by both first responders and health and human service workers was “touchy feely” (fieldnote). Again, this contrasted with other groups involved in the collaboration. Melissa, from a human services office, said that first responders were “militant, just that military structure. Social workers are different. We’re the touchy feely ones” (interview).

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In addition, these groups more frequently described their role using customer service terminology. Martin, from a nonprofit group, explained his relationship with the collaboration by saying that “you are a customer, I’m support” (interview). As the convener of the collaboration, the office of emergency management also tended to be described in these terms. Harry, an EM office staff member, told me that the EM organization’s goal was to make people feel welcome, “it’s me asking you, how can I help you with whatever your job is?” (interview).

As these members were feminized due to their professional identities, they also sometimes deployed this femininity to embrace paradox related to professional discourses of control. Libby, a representative of a neighboring EM organization, explained to me, “I’m the exhausting social butterfly, where these other guys are like ‘I don’t wanna go to a meeting,’ it’s just aggressively building those relationships” (interview). Here, Libby saw herself as having an advantage over her male counterparts because of her feminine interest in relationship building. She turned this into a masculine asset to her office by labeling it “aggressively building relationships.”

Similarly, if first responders had masculine egos, one thing feminized organizations could do was pander to these egos in ways that helped them accomplish their goals. Zoe, an EM staff member, demonstrated this for me in a mocking tone as she explained how she would get a police officer to hand over their resource ordering power to the collaboration. The collaboration preferred to centralize the ordering of all supplies to reduce duplication of efforts and ensure coordination. Zoe said that when first responders came in to collaborate, they often wanted to be in charge, saying, “it’s like ‘I wanna order the helicopter!’ and I tell them ‘yeah of course, you can order the helicopter. Now if you order it, you’re gonna have to pay for it, but you can absolutely order the helicopter.’ And they’re like ‘wait a minute, I don’t wanna pay for it’”

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(fieldnote). Here, Zoe both mocked the masculine ego of first responders (“of course, you can order the helicopter”) and used a more feminine, even flirtatious approach to lead them to give up part of the ego and come to realize what she knew, that collaboration had its advantages (that they would not have to pay for resources if they collaborated). She did this by employing irony to make the more masculine collaboration members feel “empowered” while framing her position as one of support, simultaneously pointing out the consequences of their controlling orientation (that if you want to be in charge, you also have to pay for the decision made). Zoe knew the first responders would not want to order resources once they realized that the EM collaboration could pay for those resources if they gave up control. In particular, EM staff seemed willing to take this approach. Fred told me that getting people to collaborate often involved “being willing to be slapped in the face” during the initial meeting with another organization (interview). The more feminized organizations involved sometimes took the approach of using false humility to induce cooperation from others. One strategy to deal with the tension between masculine and feminine professional identities was to employ irony to “give in” to the masculine value while strategically using femininity to achieve collaborative goals.

Gendered tensions in structure

Collaboration members also felt the pull between two opposing structures: bureaucracy and collaboration. They expressed the benefits of both in ways that tied these organizing forms to gendered values. To address this tension, members seemed to seek balance, or a both-and approach, between collaboration and some bureaucratic elements.

Collaboration as feminine

EM collaborators often discussed collaboration itself by using culturally feminine descriptors. Good collaborators listened to others and worked to build strong relationships,

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according to participants. Melissa, a member of the county Health and Human Services department, said that collaboration was unlikely to succeed if members did not “know each other ahead of time,” meaning before an emergency. As she said, “if you don’t know someone, you’re less likely to be nice. Especially during stress” (interview). Here, EM members linked collaboration to harmonious relationships and kindness.

Another important collaborative practice that members described was the need to routinely “stand up and check in” (fieldnote). During an emergency, the collaboration members would share space in the county Emergency Operations Center (EOC). In this shared room, they would sit at and run the station related to their roles (e.g., sheltering, fire department liaison). As Fred, the county emergency manager, explained, it was easy to get “sucked in” to your job and forget what others were doing in the room (fieldnote). As a result, during training, members often discussed the need to stand up and walk around because they never knew what could be going on that they could assist with. The “stand up and check in” motto tied collaboration to flexibility, spontaneity, listening, and curiosity for others.

Bureaucracy as masculine

Conversely, members described instances where too much collaboration was undesirable. They also spoke of the merits of more hierarchy, structure, and clear chains of command. Here, members valued the more culturally masculine traits that bureaucracy brought with it. Collaboration members would describe bureaucratic structures as necessary to “rein in” members and keep them performing their specific roles. Theo, a police officer, told me that “what I’ve found is to some extent an over reliance of collaboration can slow the process of achieving results, because you have too many decision makers” (interview). Similarly, Amber, from a city office, explained that “the only thing that I would think could be a challenge is collaboration for

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the sake of collaboration... instead of looking at objectively who are actually, which parties do you need to be involved and why?" (interview). In other words, the spontaneity of collaboration could be too much for the group, and instead, having some bureaucratic practices in place was seen as contributing to the collaboration's effectiveness.

If the slogan of collaboration was "stand up and check-in," the bureaucracy instead reminded participants to only speak on behalf of their designated role (which was, again, tied to their profession). This value was present during the collaboration trainings, and members often discussed the need to focus on their own tasks and goals instead of others' goals. As Martin, a volunteer group representative, explained, "There's a big group of stakeholders, and they all have a role, whether it's the fishermen, or the kayakers, or the bugs and bunny types, or the true civil engineers, but if you're representing one group don't start representing another group" (interview). Martin used this example to point out the importance of speaking for your group of stakeholders and not to assume a role occupied by another person or organization.

IOC participants disciplined feminized members who deviated too far from their roles. For example, during one monthly meeting, a volunteer named Leah began questioning Scarlett, who worked in donation management. Leah asked Scarlett why she did not consider partnering with local neighborhood associations to bring in donations. Scarlett said that that was the job of the volunteer coordination groups, not donation management. Leah pushed harder, explaining that her local neighborhood association could be helpful during an emergency. The rest of the room became restless, and several people sighed. It appeared that Leah was taking the meeting off track and did not understand either her role or Scarlett's role. Finally, Jordan, from a law enforcement office, interjected that neighborhood associations could be contacted through the volunteer management group. This comment seemed to cut off the conversation, and the group

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returned to the meeting agenda (fieldnote). Here, Leah pushed the group too far toward making spontaneous connections. Additionally, she was a volunteer and not a first responder representative (like Jordan), which seemed to undermine her attempt to use the more flexible, collaborative values espoused in training. While members praised spontaneous connections in interviews, this exchange demonstrated that the EM collaboration also oscillated between the values of collaboration and bureaucracy, marking when each was appropriate as related to the corresponding member, and thus professional identity, attempting to engage the tension.

Structural tensions were tied to culturally feminine values of listening and relationship building, versus culturally masculine values of hierarchy and chain of command. In response to this tension, members strived to balance each structure's values by discussing the need for both; however, feminized stakeholders were not always allowed by the masculinized, dominant stakeholders to perform the both-and strategy to manage this tension. The tension at the structural level was also linked to collaborative outcomes, discussed next.

Gendered tensions in collaborative outcomes

Finally, these tensions were not limited to how IOC participants understood each other's professions but also suffused their discussion of the collaborations' preferred goals and outcomes. Creating shared perceptions of problems and plans to address those problems are essential collaborative outcomes. The collaboration used an either-or approach that privileged goals related to masculinized professions and deprioritized corresponding feminized goals. As a result, the collaboration pursued more instrumental outcomes over care-related outcomes.

Masculine collaborative goals

Through communication, masculine organizations and goals became prioritized collaborative goals. This prioritization occurred through talk that ranked the collaboration's

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priorities, especially in trainings and monthly meetings. Most notably, the EM collaboration's top goal was "life safety." Life safety is first responder terminology for focusing on immediate needs for medical assistance, rescue, and controlling threats to human life during an emergency. During meetings, Fred, from the EM office, would remind everyone of this goal using a call-and-response style, calling out "what's our number one goal?" to which meeting attendees would call back "life safety" (fieldnote).

Life safety came to be the dominant collaborative priority by labeling which participating organizations had a central and a peripheral role in the collaboration. During this talk, members glorified action-based, tactical goals and labeled care-based goals as peripheral. As Fred, who was acting as a trainer, joked during one shared training, fire and police departments did not want to be in charge of long term care for the public, "I wanna be in charge of the flash, bang, hut hut hut stuff." Here, Fred mimed himself as a SWAT team member, carrying a gun and kicking down an invisible door in front of the projected training slides. The first responders in the room laughed. "Do you wanna manage the sheltering of 30,000 people?" he asked (fieldnote). These jokes about care goals were shared in collaboration-wide trainings, indicating that care goals were a lower priority.

The trainings spent significant time on the immediate needs of medical and life, with less to no time to discuss long-term community efforts like rebuilding, counseling, resilience, and healing. One way that alternative goals were excluded from the discussion was by labeling topics as too "political." By "political," EM collaborators often meant that some emergency response had been plagued by problems, sometimes tied to communities of color. However, members would not speak further on the topic—the term political shut down the conversation. Victor, a volunteer, explained this by saying that emergency response could be "tightly linked to whatever

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politically goes on. And if you haven't guessed I'm trying very hard not to go that route" (interview). Despite not wanting to elaborate, Victor described the Hurricane Katrina response as "political." The FEMA response to Hurricane Katrina has been condemned as a federal failure to help predominantly Black communities. Further "political" examples included the slow federal response to Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico (interview). However, in labeling these responses as political issues, members avoided speaking further about them or acknowledging that the failures could impact their community as well. While social inequality was a problem in some emergency responses, it was a problem "out there" in the world and not an issue to be discussed or overcome in the local collaboration. Instead, the EM collaborations focused on the here-and-now goals of immediate response.

Feminine collaborative goals

By contrast, the label of "support" positioned feminized organizations as having secondary roles in the collaborative outcomes. Stephanie, from a county community services office, accepted this labeling, saying that "I think there's some wiggle room in some of the less important [positions] like mine" (interview). Stephanie saw the label of support as also creating flexibility in how she could achieve her goals. The convening organization, the EM office, was also often cast as a supporter of first responder goals. Joe, from public health, explained this as "The two primary differences are command and coordination. [EM] is coordination, that's all they do, they support whatever the emergency is. Firefighters put out the fire, that is command. [EM] supplies support or coordination to put out the fire" (interview). Just as masculinized organizations were labeled as "take charge," above, they were then allowed to "take charge" of the collaboration's goals. At the same time, feminized organizations were seen as support for those goals.

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Additionally, goals that became feminized tended to relate to caring for the community, community empowerment, and addressing community inequities during disaster response. Fred explained this when he diminished the goal of resilience as not essential to the collaboration. As he explained to me, “a resilient community is where we have equity, access to knowledge, services, housing, all the things that come with it. You start getting into the social science piece, it becomes ‘how do you do that?’ Then there’s problems. What institutions of our community are gonna tackle that? Because it’s not emergency management” (interview). A consequence of the gendering of the professions involved was that the goals tied to feminized professions became peripheral to the collaboration. In response to the tension between masculine and feminine goals, the collaboration chose to privilege instrumental goals over holistic care goals.

Discussion

This study ultimately finds that gender is constitutive of collaborative organizational forms and shared outcomes. Gender influenced tension management in collaboration and served to create a preferred ranking that privileged the culturally masculine. Gendered tension management occurred across the collaboration’s structure, engagement with professional discourses, and definition of collaborative goals. The implications of these findings for collaboration scholarship are 1) a consideration of how power permeates multiple “levels” of collaborative activity and 2) an enhanced understanding of tensions and tension management in collaboration.

A meso-level perspective on power in IOCs

For collaboration scholars, this study demonstrates that discourses of gender informed multiple “levels” of collaboration, from the inputs of professional identities to the process of organizing to the collaborative outcomes (Lewis, 2006). Additionally, feminist analysis adds

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depth to scholarly understanding of how communication constitutes collaborations (Koschmann et al., 2012) across micro and macro-levels of communication processes (Keyton et al., 2008). The levels identified here (structures, outcomes, professional identities) contribute to IOC scholarship that examines processes and interaction among levels of power negotiation in collaboration.

A feminist perspective also moves gender from a potential variable in IOCs to demonstrate that difference fundamentally informs collaborative practices. Gray's (1994) reexamination of collaboration using feminist theory finds that collaboration can be a feminist form of organizing, but this study demonstrates that gendered and racialized discourses can also create *unequal* outcomes for IOCs. Previous studies of gender in collaborations tend to look at collaborations that are explicitly labeled as feminist (Long et al., 2020; Pratt, 2010) or collaborations designed to address gender-related concerns (Kamaara et al., 2012). This study found that feminist theory sheds light on power negotiation in IOCs on the whole, even when gender and race remain largely unspoken by collaborators. The use of the term "political" by members of this IOC is a good example of the ways norms of whiteness often exist in "discursive silences" that stop collaborators from discussing difference (Crenshaw, 1997, p. 260). From a feminist perspective, we can see how collaborations engage in tension management strategies that authorize a dominant account of the collaboration that becomes the accepted reality of the collaboration (Gray, 1994). This dominant account is informed by discourses of difference, whether collaborators acknowledge these discourses or not.

A notable finding from this study is that feminist analysis allows researchers to see how professional identity discourses overlap and interact to produce the collaborative frame. Collaborations are unique organizational forms, where multiple professional fields can come

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together to address shared problems (Gray & Purdy, 2018). A feminist analysis of collaboration indicates the importance of professional fields in the constitution and management of collaborative tensions. Here, professional fields informed the primary tension of the collaboration, which gave rise to additional tensions around collaborative structures and outcomes. Without feminist theory, the relationship among these tensions, and the process by which structure and goals became foreclosed from alternatives, would remain unclear. In this case, collaborators who considered difference as part of their organizational work (e.g., social workers, cultural brokers, and nonprofit organizations) were also feminized in ways that diminished these missions. Collaboration scholarship can continue studying how difference and professional identities constitute collaborative outcomes that benefit some stakeholders over others. Everyday discussion by collaborators ultimately reinforced the norms of white masculinity that influenced the collaboration's goals.

Gendered tension management in collaboration

Using a gendered analysis also allows us to ask who can successfully perform tension management strategies. This study adds to knowledge of tension management by demonstrating that tension management strategies in IOCs are unevenly applied and that not every stakeholder can perform tension management in the same way. Scholars have noted structural tensions in collaboration, for example, the tension between structured and spontaneous participation (Lewis et al., 2010). While the collaboration studied here attempted to use a both-and strategy that supported both bureaucracy and collaboration, the data demonstrated that not every member was allowed to perform flexibility to check in with others. Performances of a both-and tension management strategy also relied on other members to accept or reject that strategy. The motto to “stay in your lane” disciplined members who fulfilled supporting roles. While the IOC

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encouraged a both-and strategy in talk, in practice, members who had already been aligned with feminized professional identities could not successfully embrace tensions between masculine and feminine organizing structures. IOC research can do more to consider the role of power in the negotiation and performance of tension management strategies, as the use of a both-and strategy in this collaboration was effectively a “selective” both-and strategy where other foreclosed tensions related to professional identities influenced the performance of tension management.

Further, IOC participants here engaged irony and resistance to manage gendered tensions. Feminized members used irony to reclaim femininity as an asset to the collaboration. Like previous studies (Trethewey, 1997), this study found that participants used irony to transform the gendered relationship between dominant and supporting values. Supporting collaborators could both appear to “flatter the ego” of masculine organizational members while also working to achieve more collaborative outcomes. Perhaps in response to this, IOC members who were aligned with femininity seemed to align themselves with femininity strategically. In some cases, they “gave in” to privileging the masculine but also resisted the masculine discourse of “ego” by using femininity in ironic ways. The example of flattering a sheriff’s office member into the sudden realization that he could not afford to order a helicopter serves as an example of using femininity to achieve the preferred collaborative outcome by giving in to the discourse of professional masculinity among first responders. A tension-centered approach highlights that collaborations are not simply feminist organizational forms, nor are they simply masculine. Instead, tensions between gendered cultural values are in play across multiple levels of discourse in the IOC, and members with less power may find alternative ways to participate in the IOC to achieve their preferred outcomes.

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Finally, scholars have recently turned to consider proactive tension management strategies, or setting up tensions as productive to collaborative efforts (Woo, 2019). In this case, collaborators embraced the tension between collaborative and bureaucratic structure; however, they seemed unaware that not everyone was invited to keep that tension in play in interaction. Collaborators did not appear to be aware of how their tension management strategies involved gendered discourses. Even as tensions were set up proactively, then, greater attentiveness to tension management strategies was needed to ensure that some collaborators were not excluded from tension management strategies. Practitioners could strive to create and encourage inclusive tension management strategies by explicitly naming and discussing feminist commitments (Long et al., 2020). Beyond setting up productive tensions, the tension management strategies engaged also constitute inclusive and exclusive collaborative practices.

Conclusion

Collaboration may appear as a potential feminist form of organizing, but in practice, members can engage in discourses of gender and difference that create power disparities, ultimately influencing the collaborative goals and outcomes. Feminist analysis demonstrates that professional tensions are a constitutive force for IOCs. As multiple professional fields interact in collaboration, professional identities serve as a central tension, and tension management strategies surrounding professions then inform the collaborative structure and outcomes. In this case, organizations associated with culturally feminine traits were communicatively framed as supporting organizations, and organizations associated with culturally masculine traits were aligned with and influenced the collaboration's mission. Gray's (1994) rereading of collaboration as a potentially feminist form of organizing does not foreclose that collaborations can also become sites of discursive closure and power imbalance. The

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implication of gendered tension analysis is that for collaborations, gendered discourses are tied to real outcomes in terms of collaborative missions and decisions.

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