

Cultural Identity Overcoming Organizational Identity: A Study of Workplace Identity of Pashtun Female Employees

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Abstract

This is an exploratory study, which aims to understand workplace identity of Pashtuns female employees in a large public sector organization. This study has been carried out in two different cities (Dera Ismail Khan, Peshawar) of Pakistan. These cities are featured with the culture of Pashtunwali which informs local gender practices. The data was collected through twenty five unstructured interviews with male and female employees. Data was analyzed through constant comparison method. The findings revealed that Pashtunwali is very much important to understand workplace identity of female employees. Female employees are identified as 'females' and not as 'employees'. Theoretically, this study is important in understanding the work life of female employees in a novel context. Practically, this study can be helpful in devising the workplace policies and hence to promote workplace gender equity and equality.

Key Words: Workplace identity; Gender, Pashtunwali

Introduction

Researchers have always been interested in exploring and understanding employees' workplace identity issues under different circumstances and in different contexts. It has been explored that workplace identities are constituted by different factors in different contexts, which include family background, education, culture, religion, beliefs etc. (Leavitt & Sluss, 2015). Among these factors, culture and religion are very much important in regard to workplace identity of female employees. In recent times we have witnessed more females entering into workplaces and occupying higher organizational positions. However, issues of tokenism and glass ceiling are still evident at workplaces. This happens majorly because of cultural and religious beliefs about the basic identity of male and female. People carry these beliefs with them at workplaces, which shape their behaviors towards opposite sex accordingly (Martin, 2003). This causes workplace identity issues for female employees. Female employees have dilemma of whether to be recognized as 'females' or a 'workers' (Srinivas, 2013; Hippel, Sekaquaptewa & McFarlane, 2015).

We know that 'identity' is a contextual construct. Social science researchers have studied the various dimensions of workplace identity of female employees in different contexts. Still, it would be interesting to study the workplace identity of female employees in a different and novel context. The phenomenon is even more interesting to be understood in those contexts where culture and religion inform the major discourse of social life. It has been studied that employees' work life is duly informed by cultural and religious beliefs (Martin, 2003). This is also very important to workplace identity of female employees because male employees see female employees through cultural and religious lens.

This study is an effort towards understanding the workplace identity issues of female employees in a different and novel context. The study has been carried out in different branches of a larger bank within two cities of Dera Ismail Khan and Peshawar of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. This province is featured with a culture of Pashtunwali. Pashtunwali is unwritten code of life which defines the social, religious, political and economic life of Pashtuns/Pakhtuns. Pashtunwali defines the respective roles of male and female within defined gendered boundaries. Gendered boundaries do not allow females to any social role beyond the four walls of home (Junaid, Shah & Shah, 2015; Junaid & Shaheen, 2014; Kakar, 2004). However, in recent times due to access to higher education more females are joining out of home paid employment. These females face identity issues at workplaces because of cultural and religious beliefs about the respective roles of male and female.

It is expected that this study is important in understanding the work life of female employees in the context of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. It may also invite the attention of other researchers to explore workplace identity of female employees in other contexts too. All this can be significant to address the issues of workplace gender equity and equality. Practically, the findings of this study can be helpful in devising workplace policies, procedures and practices to make workplace more friendly and conducive for female employees.

Theoretical Underpinning of the Study

Due to gendered nature of organizations, gender related workplace issue like discrimination, sexual harassment, work- family balance and identity conflicts have become much apparent in daily life of organizations. Among all these, identity issues are of more importance because female employees always face interpersonal and intrapersonal identity conflict. How do a female employee sees herself and how do others see her at workplace is a question of interest for organizational scholars.

Identity is a complex and multifaceted concept (Alvesson & Billing, 2009, Burke & Stets, 2009; etc.). An individual has his/her own perception of him/her. How does an individual define and see him//her is called personal identity. In simple words it is perception of self. There is a wider belief that an individual passes through multiple and complex experiences and is exposed to different situations which require him/her to adopt different roles. This suggests that identity is not static rather it is changing, as an individual come across various social situations/interactions (Alvesson, 2010; Chasserio, Pailot & Poroli, 2014). Individual identities are neither specific nor static rather an individual has multiple identities at the same time. There is wider agreement among scholars that individuals have many identities because of multiplicity of their social roles (Chasserio, Pailot & Poroli, 2014). According to Jones (2016, p.4)

“Postmodern notions of identity reject the idea of a stable, homogeneous and unified identity, rather highlighting multiple, fragmented and contradictory identities in a process of constant being and change.”

This suggests that “an individual identity is intertwined through personal and social identities” (Berger & Luckmann, 1991 cited in Chasserio, Pailot & Poroli, 2014: 130). Every individual has to interact with others in different situations and in different roles. In order to perform various roles effectively one needs to confirm and affirm to the defined standards of these roles (Lindgren & Packendroff, 2008; Stockard, 2006). As we know that social, religious, economic etc. roles are embedded in social structure and are believed to be long held, hence, one’s identity is not a matter of choice (Alvesson & Billing, 2009).

Chasserio, Pailot and Poroli (2014, p.131) described two types of identities i.e. “private social identities (Parents or spouse)” and “public social identities (occupational identity)”. In all societies gender is the basic principle in defining and regulating the various social identities. For example, in traditional societies, like Pakistan, females are identified as mother, wife, daughter and sister and are assigned their social roles accordingly. However, due to changing patterns of social life, females must be ready to take on new workplace identity challenges without distancing from their basic social identities (Alvesson & Billing, 2009).

The awareness of the localized societal practices is important to understand the nature of multiple and fragmented social identities within a particular context (ibid). These societal practices are informed and shaped by the ways social power[s] defines and informs the discourses of social life and how do these discourses address the interests of different segments of society (Jones, 2016). In addition to providing meaning to the experiences, these social discourses help individuals to define their subjective position[s] in varying situations (Carbado & Gulati, 1999). Foucault (1984) revealed that these discourses are produced by the individuals in different settings and help them to define their ‘self’ in relation to their individual position and others’ position. These discourses are also important to define one’s subjectivity [ies] which is “fragmented” and “multifaceted” because of multiple identities of individuals (Jones, 2016, p.4). West and Zimmerman (1987) research on social construction of gender is important to understand workplace identity of female employees. West and Zimmerman are of the view that gender is not something which individuals own, rather something which they do. This doing of gender is reflective of their basic social identities and these differences of doing are reflected in multiple ways (e.g. dressing). One needs to place himself/herself in a sex category for social recognition hence ‘doing gender’ is not avoidable. While positioning ‘oneself’ an individual needs to act or behave in a way which is socially acceptable act or behavior of the sex category to which he/she belongs. The act or behavior is thus an assessment of one’s gender or in other words it is a way that how does one sees/perceives himself/herself and how do others see/perceive him/her. Doing gender is rather an important way of one’s identity. How a society does define to be a male or female in a given situation and how does this definition is transformed while performing organizational roles is pertinent to female employees’ workplace identity (Alvesson, 1998). It is understood that female employees act and behave in a way to confirm to the defined standards of femininity. Alvesson points out, that workplace gender relations cannot be avoided while capturing the workplace identity of female employees because gender relations significantly define and inform individuals’ positions and related expectations. Our understanding of an organization as of masculine or feminine with respect to its process,

procedures and practices significantly influence our understanding of workplace identity of female employees. For example if an organization seems to be of masculine (majority of higher positions are occupied by men) the identity of female employees is shadowed under the notions of masculinity and femininity. This has been known that male and females are widely identified through masculine and feminine cultural images. Female are assigned tasks which are easier to do and not challenging, while males are assigned tough assignment because “men and women may too easily be labeled in terms of masculinity and femininity” (Alvesson, 1998: 973). Diaz-Garcia and Welter (2011, p.386) cited Moloney and Fenstermaker (2002) as under:

“We understand gender as a social construction which has to be enacted or performed through the individual’s own process of identity formation, as well through social interaction undertaken within normative and situated conceptions of what it means to be a woman or a man”

Structuration theory states that individuals are confronted with defined positions and are engaged in such way to produce and reproduced these positions in the presence of defined rule and resources (Diaz-Garcia & Welter, 2011). These rules and resources help individuals to define their and others’ position in various settings. Female employees have socially assigned gendered roles through which they position themselves and others. In this way we can conclude that workplace identity of female employees is the product of their social position and expectations (imposed by the social structure). This suggests that, we need to be aware of the social influence and localized gendered practices to encompass the workplace identity of female employees. For that, we must take into consideration the ‘context’ where these gendered practices are practiced.

The Context: Culture of Pashtunwali

This study has been carried out in different branches of a larger Pakistani bank. These branches are located in two cities i.e. Dera Ismail Khan and Peshawar of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. Because of the presence of number of higher educational institutes, females of these cities have more access to higher education and employment opportunities. Many of the young educated females join out of home paid jobs. Though there are some social, religious and political barriers on female employment but support of family is playing crucial role to bring these young females into economic sphere of life. An awareness of local culture is very important to understand the identity issues of female employees at workplace. Following section describe the local culture of ‘Pashtunwali’ to make sense of findings of this study.

Pashtunwali is an unwritten code of life which defines various aspects of Pashtuns’ life. Junaid (2011, p.231) defined Pashtunwali as “a standard course of action for a Pashtun which has been historically constructed, shared, and agreed upon to be collectively followed by the society”. Pashtunwali is deeply rooted in the daily life of Pashtuns and widely practiced through local customs (Junaid & Shaheen, 2014; Kakar, 2004). It defines both public and private life of Pashtuns. The social divide between males and females in Pashtun society is quite visible. Males are responsible for fulfilling economic needs of their families, while females are engaged with domestic chores (Ginsburg, 2011). These gender boundaries are strictly observed. If someone crosses these boundaries, he/she is excluded from society. In severe cases, this exclusion may be in form of honor killing.

Though much has been written on the social role of Pashtun females (e.g. Benson & Siddiqui, 2014; Hawkins, 2009, Nocker & Junaid, 2011) still it does not clearly depict the social

status of Pashtun females (Junaid, Shah & Shah, 2015). These writings state that decisions relating to marriage, education, access to health, inheritance of property etc are made by male members of society. Females have been victims of the tribal customs (Junaid, Shah & Shah, 2015; Junaid & Shaheen, 2014, Kakar, 2004). Many of these writings reveal that Pashtun females are marginalized and unprivileged segment of Pashtun society.

In Pashtun culture, there is very close interplay between religion and culture. Religion defines major discourse of tribal life. Many of the cultural values, norms and practices have been derived from religion, but, wrongly interpreted. This misinterpretation with respect to the public and private roles of females has also troubled the life of Pashtun females (Junaid, 2011).

Pashtunwali is integral to define the identity of Pashtuns. It is a code of honor to which every Pashtun (be it male or female) has to adhere. The characteristic features of Pashtunwali (chivalery/ courage, nanag or ghairat/respect, melmastia/hospitality, pardah or namus/veiling/ gender boundaries, jirga/council) are significant to Pashtuns' identity (Benson & Siddiqui, 2014; Hawkins, 2009, Nocker & Junaid, 2011). If someone does not follow these codes, is not considered as Pashtun. Practicing these codes is like doing Pashtu which must be central part of a Pashtun life. Among these various codes, namus or pardah are pertinent to define the place of females in Pashtun society. It is social, moral and religious compulsion for every Pashtun to respect a female. Namus is momentous to uphold gendered boundaries within Pashtun society (Hawkins, 2009, Nocker & Junaid, 2011). Pashtun females are symbol of family respect and honor. One who does not respect females, is not a Pashtun. If we deeply look into Pashtun culture, it would be surfaced that Pashtun females are not unprivileged but highly regarded and protected.

Research Methodology

Research methodology is a broader term which encompasses research philosophy, choice of method[s] for the purpose of data collection and analysis, sampling methods and procedures, presentation of research findings etc. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Researchers are available with variety of methods, tools and techniques to carry out a research study. However, choice of a specific research methodology/method is dependent on different factors; the most important is nature of research question. Normally, the research question defines and informs the research methodology/method to be adopted (Trumbull, 2005).

As described earlier that this is an exploratory study which aims to explore/understand workplace identity of female employees in a specific context. This informs that qualitative methodology is appropriate one to understand the given research problem. Philosophically, this study believes in social construction of reality, which states that reality is mutually constructed by the social actors (Atwater, 1996; Kim, 2001). This means that it is important to capture all the relevant voices (respondents) to understand the nature of workplace identity of female employees. Various studies (e.g. Chasserio, Pailot & Poroli, 2014; Diaz-Garcia, 2011; Nadin, 2007) on workplace identity conclude that workplace lived experiences are significant to understand workplace identity. Same is the case here. Workplace lived experiences have been captured through unstructured interviewing of relevant employees (both males and females).

Unstructured interviewing technique helps to understand the research issue from the view point of respondents. It allows respondents to narrate a phenomenon the way they feel, understand and experience (Britten, 2007; Masson, 2010). Unstructured interviewing also allows

different field issues to emerge; hence to guide and inform further data collection. Additionally, this study used filed observation, filed notes and memos for the purpose of data triangulation and data convergence. This was necessary to ensure the truthfulness of research findings (Golafshani, 2003; Decrop, 1999). Over all twenty-five (15 with female employees and 10 with male employees) field interviews were conducted. This was sufficient to reach data saturation. Data saturation is a stage during the data collection process where no new data (issue) emerges. It is advised to stop data collection once data saturation is reached (Charmaz, 2006).

Qualitative methodology allows changing of sampling techniques (respondents selection) when and where appropriate (Golafshani, 2003; Marshall, 1996). In the beginning, convenience sampling because researcher had personal contacts with few respondents. This was followed by snow-ball sampling. In the later stages, extreme cases and deviant sampling were also used. Majority of respondents were female Management Trainee Officers (MTOs), but, few other employees were also interviewed to ensure the presence of relevant voices in data and to understand the research issue more deeply. Also, research ethics (i.e. official permission from authorities, anonymity of respondents and places, respondents' consent etc.) were followed in true letter and spirit. As this study involves female employees so familiarity with local culture was very much helpful during data collection phase. All interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed and coded properly. Member check was also carried out to confirm that interview data has been properly transcribed and represents what respondents narrated. Coding of transcribed interviews was made using both line by line coding and paragraph coding techniques. Codes were named using in-vivo coding, descriptive coding (for open codes), focused coding (for thematic codes) and theoretical coding (for thematic category) (Saldana, 215). Following table reflects an example of the development of various levels of codes.

Table 1: example of open code ' Respect to females '

In Vivo Code - Respect to females	“This is because of the culture here. You know that in this province female are ... but now many are coming into the jobs, I think that most of the educated female are in this bank, so because of culture they do like this and especially the Pashtuns (smiling) ... but Pashtuns they give lot of <u>respect to females</u> and in every matter they say that you are female so this... They give lot of respect but in their own way, for example I am operation manager, even yesterday a male staff member was saying to me that you are female so we can't speak openly and can't tell you everything openly
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Table 2: Example of thematic code

Open codes	Open codes description
‘Distancing from female employees.’	
Thematic code	
Distancing from female employees	Less coordination b/w male and female employees
Male and female employees distance themselves from each other	Assigning separate task to female which are not much challenging
	Less talk on work issues or personal issues b/w male and female employees
	Both male and female have separate places for lunch and prayers
	To recognise females in subordination of males

Table 3: Example of developing thematic category 'Workplace identity of female employees'

Thematic category	Thematic codes	Thematic codes description
Workplace identity of female employees	Distancing from female	Male and female employees distance themselves from each other
The way female employees are identified and dealt.	Less work	Giving less work to female employees because they are females
	Relations of respect	Female employees are considered as sisters or daughters
	Facilitation for females	To facilitate female employees in various work assignments

Empirical Findings of the Study

This section presents the major findings of this study. Overall, findings suggest that female employees (MTOs) are victims of local customs and norms. Prevalence of cultural stereotypes about females are quite evident in this organization. Female MTOs are still struggling to find their organizational identity. They are treated as ‘females’ and not as like other employees. They are not assigned difficult tasks like filed visits or customers’ dealing because they are not considered fit for these kinds of work. Many of the female MTOs are working in

back offices, where they are mainly engaged with record keeping activity. Female employees are allowed to leave earlier because then they have to perform domestic chores. The local gendered practices not only inform the workplace behaviors of male employees towards female employees but also apprise bank's policies in this regard. For example, it is bank's policy to depute female employees in a branch near to their home. If a female is unmarried then she is deputed in a branch closer to her parents' home and if married then closer to her husband's location. This is due to the cultural stereotypes/beliefs that female cannot live or perform well when they are away from their home. It provides a sense of security to female employees if workplace is near to home. This also help them to access home easily and quickly when they are needed at home for household chores. Though there are few female employees occupying positions of branch managers but still they face issues while performing their tasks. In many cases it was found that male employees do not bother when the manager is a female. They are normally late from the offices and leave early. Most of the time male and female employees keep themselves at distance from each other. This is because of the reason that local gendered practice do not allow more coordination and close interaction between males and females. Local gendered boundaries also prevail in the organization.

As describe earlier that 'namos'/honor is an important tenant of Pashtunwali. This entails respect for females in society. Female employees also disclosed that being females they enjoy lot of respect from their male colleagues. This is due to the reason that Pashtunwali makes it mandatory for every Pashtun to give respect to females. Findings also revealed that cultural identities dominate/overcome the organizational identities as far as the case of female employees is concerned. These cultural values and norms dominate organizational ones as far as the case of female employees in this study is concerned. Following are some of the selected excerpts from the field interviews, which support the above facts. One female MTO narrated:

I cannot say that there is any problem for me because of my male colleagues. Not at all, they are always nice to me. They deal with me in the same way they deal with their own females at home. For them (male colleagues) I am either a sister or a daughter. They help me and share my work burden. During our training I was only female there and everybody cooperated with me. Our branch manager is a very nice person and he behaves with me like a daughter. (Hira)

Another female MTO describe her workplace experiences:

Our colleagues recognize us females not like other employees. They respect us because we are females. I mean there is gender divide in this bank. I am an operation manager and if I give some task to male employees then they do not refuse to do. This is not because of that I am operation manager and I have some authority but because I am a 'female'. They always tell "we cannot refuse because you are a 'female'. This is because of our culture (Suriya).

Similar findings were revealed by another female employee.

I mean everything and every matter they can't explain or tell me openly. They are hesitant and feel shy but I think it is good, because there are some bad things which should not be there like misbehaving with the customers, some conflicts between themselves and so on and they avoid these things because of my presence in branch, so environment remained disciplined, you know the culture in which we are living, so because of female there is a check and they do not use odd

language. This is they (male employees) know that this is our culture to respect females. You don't need to teach anyone ok come on and respect me, they do it by themselves (Sakina)

Another female employee revealed her experience of working with male employees as under:

I mean that you grow there, like those (male) colleagues; they are best friends; like your sisters and brothers and they are growing with you and you grow with them. My institution is a very good institution, it has given me so much beside the financial compensation. I mean respect, social recognition and every good thing is there. They (male employees) are very nice, really very nice people and people do consider me as a sister. Yes it is true that in our culture female have a lot of respect so because of that they respect a lot and prefer us in every case, so there is a lot of respect if I talk about this branch and the whole Peshawar (Mahrukh).

Another female, on a higher position, stated that male employees distance themselves and are shy to talk to her because she is a female. She disclosed that:

If we talk about the gender difference.....may be male are bit shy of me, it is the other way around. They keep distance with me. I do not know may be it because of gender differences. I mean male and female but what I think it is because of the reason that I am a 'female'. Yes as for as their behaviour with female employees is concerned that is very good and that is because we are female, as you know that in our province there is lot of respect for female, maybe they behave well because we are females, because we are brought up in such a way and socialize in a way where we are taught to respect females ... we (Pashtuns) have lot of respect for females (Farzana).

As stated previously that data collection was not only limited to female employees, but some male employees were also interviewed to include all relevant voices. A male operation manger described about her female colleague that:

In my branch there is one female employee and she feels very easy because there are fourteen, fifteen male staff and they are treating her like their daughters and sisters. She also consider them as her brothers, she communicate openly and tell her problems openly, unfortunately she is not here today, if she would be here then you would see that how male employees treat her and how she discuss every matter with us.

A male training officer stated the way a culture of respect for female is promoted because they are first females and then employee. He stated that

During training there are total 20 – 25 MTOs both male and female MTOs. We provide them such environment and we tell male MTOs that these females are like your sisters. We are able to develop a brother - sister relation between them. . The one who observe pardah (veiling) and the one who does not, there is no problem to express herself and learn from us because psychologically she also thinks that these males are like her brothers. So we develop such type of relation between them and we are like their parents.

Another branch manager told that:

You know females are weak and cannot be given tough task. Also they have their family and kids and they are more interested in that. If I give them some challenging task they will not be able to perform because they have less time. I usually try not to put burden on them because I know their problems. You cannot treat them like male employees. We know they are females and they are doing job because of some personal issues. You can ask them that I take a lot of care of them because I have females in my home as well and if I respect my females and treat them nicely, then I should treat these females (employees) similarly.

All the above findings revealed that female MTOs enjoy a lot of respect and regard from their male colleagues. This is because of culture of Pashtunwali that inform this all. We can see that female MTOs are identified as ‘female employees’ and this all comes from the culture. Cultural identities of female MTOs overcome their organizational identities.

Discussion and Conclusion

From the above findings it can be concluded that female employees are seen through cultural lens (Chasserio, Pailot & Poroli, 2014) and male employees interact with them accordingly. This interaction is informed by the social norms and practices to recognize them in line with the defined social standards of femininity (Lindgren & Packendroff, 2008). Female employees also have their own ‘identity portfolio (Chasserio, Pailot & Poroli, 2014). For example, they are females; they are mothers, sisters and employees at the same time. These identities are embedded in social structure and needs to be maintained to sustain the social structure. This also suggest that these are not the female employees who make choice of having a particular identity at a particular time but this is culture which label them of having a particular identity. We cannot overlook the role of societal power and the way it has been distributed between males and females. While defining the subjective positions of female employees, male employees usually identify them as belonging to such social category, which is less powered (Jones, 2016). It seems that not only the male employees but also the female employees position themselves as belonging to a social category which have to be dependent in the performance of her roles (Carbado & Gulati, 1999).

Many of the findings also suggest that social construction of gender is also important to the identity of female employees. As argued by West and Zimmerman (1987), female employees do not distance themselves and are not distanced by others from their basic social identity. All the relevant behaviors are in accordance with the defined gendered behaviors. The gender relations and gendered practices prevailing in the social structure are very much significant to identify female employees. It is mandatory both for males and females in Pashtunwali to respect and recognize gender boundaries. It was known through various findings that male and female employees keep themselves at distance to be recognized and identified in accordance with the codes of Pakhtunwali. The relations between male and female employees are also defined and build in the light of codes of Pashtunwali. All the findings conclude that female employees are identified more as ‘females’ and less as ‘employees’ of the bank and they are treated by male colleagues in the similar way. The workplaces are of gendered nature and blind to the existence to female employment. This has resulted into masculinity of workplace. Workplaces are considered as male domain and employment ‘tag’ suits only to male employees. The gender stereotypes have portrayed female employees more as ‘females’ and less as ‘workers’.

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