

Proceedings of the New York State Communication Association

Volume 2020

Article 7

November 2021

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Recommended Citation

Sun, Kexin (2021) "The Effect of Barriers on How Entry-Level Female Professionals in China Navigate Organization Assimilation," *Proceedings of the New York State Communication Association*: Vol. 2020 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://docs.rwu.edu/nyscaproceedings/vol2020/iss1/7>

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Cover Page Footnote

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The Effect of Barriers on How Entry-Level Female Professionals in China Navigate Organization Assimilation

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Conference Paper (Graduate)

Abstract

This study focuses on how recent female graduates navigate organization assimilation at their entry-level positions in China. This group of people could encounter more hardships when building up their careers, given that the workplace is full of gender biases in general. By interviewing five young women, who possess an entry-level position and graduated recently from university, the study attempts to uncover how young female professionals understand issues such as inflated expectations for the workplace, interactions with supervisors and colleagues, and work/life balance. In the analysis, the dilemmas they often face could be categorized into three dimensions: lack of professional skills in career planning, the threat of maternity on derailing their careers, and mentoring as an undeveloped area in China.

Keywords: gender biases, organization assimilation, work/life balance

Introduction

In the study of power dynamics in the workplace from the perspective of gender, it is of great difficulty for female professionals to obtain workplace authority to manage, make decisions, hold leadership, and avoid sanctions (Tang, 2011). Female professionals in China are only 37.2% possible to obtain workplace authority, compared to male professionals, under the influence of education, marriage, childbearing, and working full time, and so forth (Tang). It exemplifies the gender-based societal roles in society that situate women in a biased labor market where female professionals struggle to improve their social status by staying in the workplace. The gross gender gap might leave space for discussion on whether female professionals are less capable of time management and vocational investment. The net gender gap, however, reveals the deep-rooted discrimination due to stereotypes in socialization based on traditional gender roles and traits. Female professionals are given half the chance to obtain workplace authority with marriage and childbearing conditions removed, which proves that female professionals experience gender discrimination in the workplace (Tang). Doubtless, recent female graduates could encounter more hardships if they try to empower themselves in the process of organizational assimilation, given that the workplace is full of biases in general. Hence, the study attempts to reveal how recent female graduates cope with a biased workplace and the dilemmas they encounter in the process of organizational assimilation.

Research Background

In 1995, worldwide governments announced a fight to ensure “women’s right to education, health, and freedom from violence, as well as to the exercise of citizenship in all its manifestations” in Beijing (Bunch & Fried, 1996, p. 1). The Chinese government, as the host, put forward gender equality as a basic national policy to boost the development of society. The traditional concept of gender, however, still constrains Chinese women to serve in the domestic sphere. Executive Report of the 3rd Survey on the Status of Chinese Women (2011) points out that women still hold a disadvantaged position in terms of employment, pay gap, and leadership compared to men. 80.5% of top leaders in the workplace are male, and 20.6% of executive boards or leadership groups do not have any female members, which contributes partially to the biased labor market where female professionals often face gender discrimination. One-third of organizations that hire intellectuals tend to either recruit male professionals only or prioritize male candidates. Female professionals suffer from a lower promotion rate as well. Moreover, the biased labor market has a more significant impact on recent female graduates in entry-level positions. Achievement motivation drives professionals to strive for success in the workplace. Along with aging, social expectations are divided by gender: society emphasizes women’s domestic role while it expects the pursuit of careers and social status from men.

Consequently, recent female graduates possess lower achievement motivation as the degrees go higher, resulting in a declined willingness to invest in careers (Li, Wang, & Shi, 2013). Notably, female professionals usually start their careers from 22 to 30, during the same age that women are expected to either marry or give birth, or both. Furthermore, recent female graduates are expected to constrain mobility, influenced by filial piety as well as social expectations that women should live a stable life. In most situations, women are able to relocate only when their partners change their work location and leave their original family only when they marry. Therefore, recent female graduates are less likely to pursue better entry-level positions because they limit their job search to places designated by their families, partners, and probably society instead of themselves (Ao & Ding, 2011). Before the 1980s, graduates in China would not need to search for jobs because jobs were assigned to individuals according to their majors. Back then, schools and universities provided almost no training on how to enter the workplace. Until now, vocational training is still an undeveloped area. Lack of training on organizational communication results in exacerbating the dilemmas faced by recent female graduates when they try to build up a career. The study attempts to understand what difficulties recent female graduates encounter in the matter of inflated expectations for the workplace, interactions with supervisors and colleagues, and work/life balance.

Literature Review

The study focuses on young women who possess an entry-level full-time position and graduated recently from either colleges or graduate schools. In consequence, the study is designed and conducted in the frame of organizational assimilation.

Organizational Assimilation

Organizational assimilation is the dynamic process where an organization attempts to integrate an individual into the membership. By assimilation, an individual a) adapts to his/her role, and b) understands, identifies, and even alters its culture. The process is two-way communication. On the one hand, organizational assimilation is a type of socialization that communicates the culture, norms, and values (including a set of behavior codes based on the culture) by the organization to the individual. On the other, in turn, members in the

organization "modify their roles and organizational environments" based on individuals' expectations (Jablin, 1987, p. 693). Although organizational assimilation is a long-term process, three phases are suggested as a typical process for newcomers: anticipatory socialization, the "encounter" phase, and the "metamorphosis" stage (Jablin, p. 694). Specifically, in one's career, anticipatory socialization often happens before and within the process of recruitment, which involves the effect of families, education, professional skills acquired, and so on. Encounter and metamorphosis are both exerted through the communication in management and with supervisors and coworkers (Jablin). Newcomers go through "reality shock" in the stage of the encounter (Jablin, p. 695). They start to understand the difference between their expectations, which newcomers form during the anticipatory socialization, and how the organization operates in reality. In a word, newcomers appreciate their roles and how to comply with the organization. Jablin also thoroughly explains the metamorphosis stage. Newcomers seek to be accepted by regulating their behaviors and beliefs according to the organizational norms and culture. While they intend to interact intensely with their supervisors and coworkers during this stage, newcomers not only adapt to the shared norms but tend to affect the norms and culture to their satisfaction.

To sum up, newcomers negotiate through intense interactions. With supervisors, they either "lead" to some degree in the open climates of communication or "follow" the instructions when their supervisors exert their authority (p. 706). For coworkers, oldtimers may feel threatened by the newcomers as they try to alter the culture oldtimers are used to. Eventually, the organization reaches a point to accommodate newcomers' needs despite how well they are accepted by their coworkers/old-timers. The latter two phases for newcomers result in forming either the understanding or perception, in the frame of communication, of satisfaction, climate, culture, network participation, and competence.

Power Dynamics and Work/Life Balance

According to Williams (2020), "Most jobs are gendered" (p. 77). In fact, many careers are shaped by masculine norms. Thus, "today's typical woman is seen as nurturing, expressive, and responsive to the needs of others, naturally suited to homemaking and emotion work required by secretaries, flight attendants, and nurses" (p. 78). Those spheres of jobs are the extension of family responsibilities as caregiving, which is usually designated as what mothers do. Female professionals still struggle to balance work and life because they often need to invest more to be considered competent in masculinity-shaped jobs.

Meanwhile, they are required to take more responsibility to manage their families and raise children. In turn, Xu and Qi (2016) argue that work/life balance should focus on work-family conflict. Role theory explains work-family conflict as an incompatibility of roles in the family and the workplace. In contrast, boundary theory considers it as a result of the vague boundary to separate work and family life. The concept of "working couple" also suggests a growing conflict in marriages in which both sides modify how they want to cooperate in terms of household, childcaring, and other domestic obligations, while sufficient energy is saved for the workplace (Schultz, Hoffman, Fredman, & Bainbridge, 2012, p. 48-49). By contrast, young single professionals develop various strategies to achieve work/life balance by setting the psychological boundary between work and life, allocating time accordingly, and focusing on personal relationships outside of work.

Research Methodology and Design

This study conducted semi-structured interviews (60-90 minutes duration) with five interviewees through snowball sampling. With the interviewee's permission, the study recorded the audio of each interview and the demographics of each interviewee. The semi-structured interviews focus on the following dimensions (see Appendix One for the semi-structured interview questions):

1. The organizational culture they think of as ideal and perceive in reality
2. Interactions with their supervisors and coworkers
3. Self-empowerment and disempowerment
4. The concept of work/life balance and the strategies to achieve it
5. Self-evaluation on their careers to date

Demographics of Interviewees.

All five interviewees are female and graduated in the recent 1 or 2 years. Two out of 5 obtained master's degrees, while the rest earned bachelor's degrees. Only Olivia chose to pursue a career outside of her major, while the rest continue to apply what they have learned in universities to their jobs.

Newcomers' inflated communication climate expectations are deflated in their organizational encounters as they go through reality shock in which "perceptions plateau at this lower level for at least the first six months of employment" (Jablin, 1987, p. 715). The five interviewees are roughly categorized into two different stages in organizational assimilation, that is, encounter and metamorphosis, by whether they have spent more than six months in their careers.

Table 1

Demographics of Interviewees

Interviewee	Gender	Age	Degree	Educational Background	Field of Work	Length of Career to Date/Month
Emma	Female	24	M.A. T	Teaching	Teaching	5
Olivia	Female	24	B. E	Electronic information engineering	Entertainment	24
Ava	Female	25	B. E	Computer science	Media & Internet	25
Sophia	Female	23	B. E	Electrical engineering and automation	Energy	21
Amelia	Female	24	M.S	Data science	Finance	5

Results

The goal of analyzing the interviews was to uncover difficulties recent female graduates encounter related to inflated expectations for the workplace, interactions with supervisors and colleagues, and work/life balance.

Inflated Expectations Deflated in Reality

Although specific terms differ when it comes to how they would benefit from the organizational culture, all five interviewees suggest they want to be empowered and encouraged by concrete goals and teamwork.

Sophia admired their cooperation style that every member knows the clear line among different obligations assigned to an individual:

“We have a distribution system in our company to make sure everyone is responsible for a particular task. So, everyone is working in a chain by cooperating, and I know exactly whom to cooperate with. And I know I must finish what I have even if I have to work overtime.”

Ava provided negative examples, stating how confused and lost she was:

“It is supposed to be teamwork, but my coworkers hardly make efforts. What is worse, our team needed to build a promotion code system at that time. I was not responsible for this project at the beginning, but my supervisor assigned this to me when a senior colleague rejected it. I mean, I am okay with the interruption because some tasks take priority. But I barely know anything about it, and I was told to email the tech team. What exactly should I email?”

“And another day, my supervisor asked me to sort information and make tables on fraud transactions. But we don’t have a clear definition of fraud transactions. I tried to confirm, but she [the supervisor] just told me to figure it out myself. All I could do was inputting the details of the transactions she sent. And she thought I was doing a great job as she glanced at other tables I made. I was happy! But two days later, she told me that I should make clear how the promotion worked in those tables. I am always the one in the team to follow instructions and deal with trivial things. [I am] the table expert! ”

Non-experienced graduates often feel lost in an unclear assignment. Worse still, the power dynamics in the workplace depict female professionals as caregiving. They take care of detailed and trivial clerical work, which contributes to a vague identification of their roles in the organization. Subsequently, they could be discouraged from insisting on their occupational plans. Ava (categorized in the metamorphosis stage) and Amelia (categorized in the encounter stage) stated they lack motivation and described their companies as “nursing homes.” It shows a sign in the conversations that both interviewees consider job-hopping despite the different stages of organizational assimilation they are in. Ava, a product management assistant in the media field, thought of quitting in the first half-year of her employment but stayed because she was concerned about job security. Likewise, Amelia is in the fifth month of her employment at a financing company and forces herself to stay due to the working visa.

Self-Empowerment and Disempowerment

Working serves as a tool to empower ourselves. Male professionals are recognized as committed to work, which in turn facilitates social consensus on men as breadwinners in their families. With feminism reaching out, young women claim masculinity in their self-recognition and self-development. Emma is establishing her confidence in teaching through

work and already recognizes herself as a qualified teacher after receiving positive feedback from her supervisor, coworkers, and students. Notably, the other interviewees are going through the same empowerment too. Olivia, who works in the entertainment industry, receives thumb-ups from followers of the fan pages she operates. She gained the greatest sense of achievement in her life when she found that people re-created excellent projects based on her work.

The overall sentiment on contributions, however, goes significantly lower than when they were sharing the achievements. They noted their contributions as neither good nor bad. Ava pointed out a strong connection between how good she feels about her contributions and how attached she is to the company. Hence, recent female graduates in the study experience a loose connection with the workplace and suggest a desire for more recognition from their supervisors and coworkers.

Moreover, earning replaces the connection with the organization and ties them to the current jobs. All five interviewees focus on either the promising industries or projects where they could get promotions or higher salaries. Olivia, who works in the entertainment industry, believes her ultimate motivation is to earn enough money so that she could live a comfortable life. Amelia shared similar life plans:

"I plan to: renew my work visa in a year, switch to a big corporation in two years, buy three apartments in five years. I know I won't be capable of trading in finance as I dream since I don't have a supportive background, so that I will work in the back offices with a stable salary and spend all my spare time on outside ventures where I can make a fortune. Some depend on their knowledge, and others get rich by taking advantage of the information gap. I will be the latter!"

Masculine norms in the workplace require a "Go-To" status (Williams, 2010, p. 88). Male professionals exercise their control over the family and the workplace by preserving their "Go-To" status and spending less time in the domestic sphere. Both sides of the story, including preserving the ideal amount of devotion to work as well as the energy-efficient statues at home, set a high bar for women to excel and stand out. Instead, stay-at-home moms are pushed to the margins of economic life (Williams).

How Hard Should I Work?

Society, families, and workplaces as gender factories contribute to the anticipatory socialization among recent female graduates, which probably underlies their views about work/life balance as they attempt to empower and support themselves through their occupations. Notwithstanding the moments they feel tired of their jobs, all the interviewees evaluate their current occupational status as idle. Four out of five see themselves as "working to be happy" (Olivia), "workaholic" (Ava), "work-oriented" (Sophia), and "crying for more work" (Amelia). Even for Emma, who does not appreciate a workaholic lifestyle, she does not mind preparing for teaching materials at home, citing "no pain, no gain," as she enjoys paid vacations during the summers and winters as well as sacrificing her leisure time during the semesters. It reflects three themes in strategies young single professionals identify to cope with work/life balance: prioritization of either work or life, desire for success, and sacrifice for success (Schultz et al., 2012). The critical point of the three interviewees is the desire for success. As mentioned earlier, young women desire success so much that they either work hard to make a fortune or seek a promotion. The five interviewees were raised in middle-class families and should not worry about poverty. Nevertheless, by going through class solidification and economic downturn, they perceive

the threat posed by society in a more profound sense that women are more likely to be tossed aside to the margins of economic life. Two of them are concerned about upheavals in their families and personal relationships, which would lead to the change of their occupational status, both stating: "What if I need money? What if I need to take care of my beloved ones?"

Another concern is linked to the maternal wall (Williams, 2010). None of the three interviewees who plan to get married eventually viewed marriage as a threat to their devotion to work. Nevertheless, in light of childbearing and child-raising, four of them have pessimistic predictions that they should be pulled back to domestic life, and their career might suffer from work gaps, which leads them to postpone their plans on having a child. Sophia took a step further, discussing when Chinese moms could go back to work freely:

"I hope to fulfill my plan for marriage or maternity. But I put much effort into working right now. To be honest, the best life span for women to develop is either now [before marriage] or after my child is old enough to take care of him/herself. Under our country's current situation, mothers sacrifice a lot more than fathers, especially when the child is so young. [Why I hope to have a child later is] I hope I could grasp the moment right now to achieve something or make solid progress in my life. Desiring to invest more in careers, though, the five interviewees hope their efforts could pay off eventually."

Who Is My Mentor?

Overall, the five interviewees obtain more equal positions when they interact with coworkers. Emma, Ava, and Sophia described the interactions with coworkers, including peers and old-timers, as relaxed and reciprocal. They are in a relatively friendly working environment where few office politics happen. Most of the coworkers around them are elder old-timers who do not regard them as a threat to the organization's culture. On the other hand, as young female graduates who have little experience, they respect the wisdom from old-timers and tend to alter their behaviors to suit the organizational need instead of the opposite in the stage of metamorphosis. Due to little experience, the understandings of interpersonal relationships, organizational procedures, and corporate culture are barely gained.

However, the interactions with supervisors reveal a different style. Recent female graduates tend to develop supervision concerning communication relationships. A dilemma emerged. "Newcomers frequently are not satisfied with their first bosses" (Jablin, 1987, p. 699). Meanwhile, the supervisors exert bureaucratic and straightforward control over them by giving direct orders and designating rules, job descriptions, and incentives (Allen, 2010). Both give them less space to communicate efficiently with their supervisors by either a lack of willingness to communicate (since they dislike their bosses) or lack of techniques to strengthen the ties or both. Three interviewees are troubled by how to communicate with their supervisors, saying, "I don't know what to talk to him/her about." For male-dominated industries, the issue grows bigger. Amelia, who works in finance, suffers from a distant connection with her supervisor:

"I don't know what to say. If it were a she, I could easily start a conversation on make-up or shopping. But I don't know where to start with my supervisor. We have an age gap, and he is always busy. And I know he doesn't "see" me. All the work he assigned to me is supportive. I would like to know more about the projects he is doing. But I know he probably feels I am too incapable or not smart enough."

Amelia is a confident young woman. But she experienced a turndown when talking about the few opportunities granted to her.

Moreover, mentoring emerges as a problem in women's interactions with supervisors, too. First, recent female graduates regard their initial supervisors as their mentors. They hardly ever learn about locating a mentor by expanding their social circles. It works similarly to imprinting. Newcomers exchange, confirm and seek feedback from their supervisors who know the organization and point out the path to higher positions, exemplifying an occupational model. Besides, coworkers as mentors are reluctant to give intensive and deliberate advice on professional development. It cost Ava a vast amount of time and energy to learn about all the systems. When she sought instructions from her coworkers, they either gave her random thoughts or told her to learn independently. At the same time, Sophia was assigned a mentor/instructor by the company. She commented on official mentoring systems as the best way for newcomers to avoid making errors.

Conclusions and Future Study

From the conversations related to reality shock in the workplace, work/life balance, and mentoring, recent female graduates often find it challenging to navigate in the following dimensions:

1. Recent female graduates often lack professional skills in career planning. Olivia wishes she could consider more aspects of the organizational entry. Instead, she made a reluctant choice. Emma also commented as she lacks professional experience that she would not know whether she made the right choice for a career.
2. Societal norms expose recent female graduates to the threat of maternity derailing their careers, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of work/life balance.
3. Mentoring is currently an undeveloped area in China. Due to the lack of professional experience and males holding high-level positions, it is harder for young women to locate a mentor and establish a mentoring relationship unless assigned one officially.

In order to gain more details of understanding how young women professionals navigate organization assimilation, several factors should also be taken into considerations, including, but not limited to, majors, degrees, and industries. Gender distribution varies greatly among majors and industries, which might affect female students' understanding of industries from the perspectives of the glass ceiling and pay gap.

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Appendix One

The Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. Describe the culture, norms, values & expectations for performing well in your current/latest work environment.
 - a) What factors do you value in the work environment?
 - b) What is the culture or values in your company?
 - c) What do you expect from your company to boost your career?
 - d) Has your current job reached your expectations?
2. Describe your interaction with your supervisor and coworkers (peers and oldtimers).
 - a) What is positive? Please provide examples.
 - b) What is negative? Please provide examples.
 - c) How would you like to improve, and why?
3. Do you feel that you are contributing positively/succeeding at your current job (that is, your job performance)?
 - a) What aspects are you contributing to? Please provide examples.
 - b) If not, why not?
 - c) Please give examples of conflicts or troubles in your working experience.
4. Describe your life/occupational plans in the next 5-10 years.
 - a) Have you reached a work/life balance? Please provide examples.
 - b) Would you achieve a work/life balance in the next 5-10 years?
 - c) What is your current view on work/life balance? Please provide examples.
 - d) What factors you think are going to change your current view on work/life balance?
 - i. How would marriage and maternity impact your occupational plan?
 - ii. What factors would impact your occupational plan besides marriage and maternity?

- iii. Would you consider leaving your current job because of issues in work/life balance?
 - iv. What factors would impact your decision to leave your current job?
5. How do you evaluate your occupational experience so far? What would you change if you were granted a second chance to start your career?