

# Gender Issues Matter: An Exploratory Study of Female Managers' Competence Acquisition

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**Abstract.** This paper presents the exploratory pilot findings which focused on the first three women managers' workplace learning experiences in the context of competence acquisition. Through qualitative research design, they were purposely selected from three sectors in Malaysia i.e. the public sectors, private corporations and government-linked corporations (GLCs i.e. state-controlled companies but operate like private enterprises). This paper highlights the findings from three pilot in-depth interviews which applied also solicited research diary as a research method to provide access into women's experiences which tend to be embedded within the complex social and cultural realities. The pilot findings suggested that complex interaction of personal, organizational and societal contexts are subtle yet powerful in shaping the experiences of Malaysian women in management. Against the growing need for gender diversity at the top management and the dominant western concept of competence, this study consider issues of relevance to competence acquisition for women managers situated within the Southeast Asian cultural settings.

**Keywords:** Women managers; Gender; Competence; Social learning; Qualitative research

## 1. Introduction

Across the globe, the enterprise of individuals responsible for the competitiveness of the organisations acquiesces in the indispensability of the concept of competence to the individual and organisational performances [1; 2]. Yet, the pervasiveness of the concept of competence within the spheres of management and human resources development still warrants for an 'update of our understanding' [3] because the concept remains 'elusive' [2]. The difficulties in coming to a consensus on the concept of competence have been attributed to several factors such as the existence of different school of thoughts led by the American, UK and later European scholars [2; 3], tensions between formal and informal learning, conflict between the national and global competence framework [4] and finally, dominant, traditional and context-free rationalistic positivist approach to research in competence [5]. This study aims to explore the competence acquisition and development from the Southeast Asian perspectives within the context of Malaysian women managers from the public sector, private sector and the GLCs.

## 2. Concept of Competence

The concept of competence was introduced by David McClelland as it was clear to him that the general testing for aptitude could neither predict effective job performance nor explain the different levels of effectiveness and success exhibited by different individuals [6]. Not only that, the context-free testing for intelligence has been systematically biased against minorities and women. There have been some competing definitions of the concept of competence owing to the conceptual and terminological differences. For the purpose of this study, the explanation in Table 2.1 shall be adopted [7; 8].

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Table 2.1: Terminological Differences

	<i>Singular</i>	<i>Plural</i>
Used as an adjective	competent	Competent
Used as a noun to denote what a person needs to know and be able to do to perform the required task. Associated with the UK Functionalist Approach.	(demonstrates) competence	(demonstrates) competences
Used as a noun to denote characteristics associated with superior job performance. Associated with US Behaviorist Approach.	(has) competency	(have) competencies

## 2.1. Approaches to Competence

The US behavioural approach to competence conceptualises competence as the abilities possessed by the individuals. Thus it focuses heavily on behavior and adopts worker-oriented approach. Competency is defined as the underlying characteristics of a person manifested in effective behavior [3; 9].

The UK functional approach is largely work-oriented as it focuses on the meeting of the required performance stipulated by the job scope. Thus, the focus is largely placed on the organisations and occupational matters and defines as the ability to perform the tasks within one's occupation [10].

The situational approach addresses the inadequacy of the apparently context-independent behavioral and functional approaches in defining managerial competence and competence development within the context of organisational culture and business environment [10]. However, the approach falls short of describing the process of acquiring managerial competence.

The holistic approach which combines the various existing approaches to competence is then offered. The main contention is that those different approaches actually represent 'different facets of the same gemstone' [11]. These "facets" include personal and functional competence, reflective practitioner, technical-rational, capability and knowledge. Combining the strength of these facets, the *Provisional Model* was developed to describe professional competence.

The Hay Group [1] uses the iceberg model to explain the different levels of managerial competency where the underlying characteristics located at the bottom of the iceberg are becoming more important as managers advance towards senior positions. Identifying these deeply rooted competencies has been one of the main pre-occupations of the competency-based research which has resulted in various lists of generic managerial competencies that often claim universality. The claim of universality seriously undermines the importance of contextual factors such as culture and gender [12; 13; 14].

## 2.2. Theories surrounding Managerial Learning

Managers are conceptualised as social learners [15] and their learning often takes place within work context [16; 17]. The conceptualisation of informal learning at the workplace gained much interest with researchers attempting to approach the topic from different perspectives such as employee-oriented approach [18] and practitioner-oriented approach [19].

Workplace can be 'formal' and 'informal' or 'non-formal' [16]. Despite the plethora of works done on informal learning at the workplace, there is little appreciation that learning does take place at work [18] and certainly none had been involved in studying how women managers learn at their workplace in Malaysia. There are several informal learning strategies have identified which include, among others, self-directed learning, social learning, networking and coaching as well as mentoring [17].

The social learning theory stems from the behavioral aspect of human nature which contends that individual tends to model his or her behavior based on the behavior of others which produce the valued outcomes [20]. This theory can also be applied to broader situations especially involving informal learning at the workplace where colleagues help each other through collaboration, coaching or mentoring and ultimately, socialization.

In situated learning theory, social interaction is a critical component of the learning process which in general involves knowledge acquisition and social participation where the learner's progression is marked by an increase in the level of active participation in the socio-cultural practice. Extended thinking on context can

be found in the learner-network theory [21]. Learning is influenced by the individuals and their interactions which are mediated by the negotiation of power within the vertical, horizontal, external and liberal dimensions. Individuals are more proactive as well as independent in devising their own learning strategies to aid their performances and personal agendas [22].

In the same vein, the researcher believes that female managers gradually acquire their knowledge and skills in the context of daily activities in the same manner. A transformation of identity takes place slowly beginning with the novice acting as a “specialist and doer”. When the individual assumes the managerial role, she is moving towards the center of the community and finally becomes the expert, the ‘generalist’, ‘agenda-setter and ‘network builder’ [15]. Hence, the person, learning and community are woven together interdependently.

### **3. Gender**

What is gender? There is a tendency to associate ‘gender’ with the biological concept of sex [23]. The distinction between gender and sex was made by feminists in the sixties and seventies. According to feminist scholars, ‘sex’ is a set of biological differences while ‘gender’ is a product of socio-cultural construction of sex [24]. However, the distinction between sex and gender is often so blurred that the discourse shall find its way back to the biological concept. The manifestation of the problematic concept of sex, gender and sex-gender difference in the area of management is compounded by the traditional rationalistic positivist approach to the inquiry into women’s lives. The positivist approach, being deductive in nature, relies heavily on the crude dichotomy of feminine-masculine and male-female which inevitably creates gendered practices and management [23, p. S41]. So much so, it becomes the cultural arrangement well accepted and entrenched within the society. However, despite the gendered nature of management, there is still a dearth of research on management and organization that takes gender issue into account, or if any, they are “simple and crude” [23, p. S38].

In a study on male and female managers in New Zealand, managerial competence among male and female owners/managers of manufacturing enterprises were explored and gender analysis was included [14]. Their findings showed that the predominantly masculine theorizing in the field of management – ‘think manager, think male’ – [25] had stood the test of time. In a separate study on competence, it was found that gender moderated the relationship between the demonstration of competencies and success [26]. The authors conceded that women in leadership and management roles had been systematically devalued by the organizational practices.

Do we need gender research then? The answer is an affirmative ‘yes’. McGregor justifies the need based on the universality of women’s lack of representation especially in top management and policy-making decisions [27]. She posits that the participation of women in top management is reflective of how women are treated in their respective countries. If women in management are marginalized in the public or private sectors, they are marginalized in every respect elsewhere. Furthermore, it was the marginalization of women that led McClelland to the foundation of competency-based assessment and development.

### **4. Methodology**

These are some of the attributes of the qualitative inquiry that makes it appropriate for this study. Firstly, less reliance on positivist as well as postpositivist perspectives and secondly, it captures in detail the individual’s point of view in real life context [28]. Therefore, within the framework of qualitative method, the paradigms of inquiry chosen for this study shall be interpretive and critical to a certain degree. Under these paradigms, multiple-case study strategy [29] and constructivist Grounded Theory approach to data collection and analysis [30; 31] shall be employed. Feminist perspective is aligned to the qualitative inquiry in this study because it fits best the research design which seeks to investigate and understand the experiences of women managers in Malaysia. The qualitative approach to data collection adopted will rely on the combination of data collection methods, namely the face-to-face in-depth interview and solicited research diary. Three pilot interviews were conducted with three female managers representing the public sector, private sector and GLC. The research operational framework for the pilot study was consisting of four

main activities: preparation of pilot study design, data collection, data analysis and findings. The pilot in-depth interview seeks to address the following which are also framed in the research questions:

- The issues associated with female managers in relation to the process of competence acquisition at the workplace and the extent of their understanding of it.
- The organisational support female managers receive in terms of workplace learning and competence acquisition.

## 5. Findings

The prevailing cultural beliefs about gender where women traditionally are not expected to assume leadership in country such as Malaysia is still going strong. One of the respondents from the public sector found herself often sidelined by clients who for unknown reasons, not feeling comfortable meeting her and consult her superior directly instead. Her self-esteem was affected in the beginning but she had learnt to accept it as the norm rather than exception.

The pilot findings of this study revealed that there are different interpretations of competence. Managerial competencies are not only confined to managing top-down but also bottom-up. The importance of possessing nurturing qualities, strong ethics and persuasive negotiation skill are also highlighted. Learning at the workplace through social interaction is evident in the interviews. Apart from learning from their superiors, these women learn from their subordinates who have more related experiences. The respondents also see themselves as active agents in the learning process at the workplace.

The inclusions and exclusions of women and men based on the particular type of labour are still pervasive. Women are perceived to be less competent in organizational context and therefore not expected to represent the organizations when dealing with clients or local authorities as reported by one respondent from the private sector. Interestingly, she also related her first day of joining the upper management rung. While her male counterparts welcomed her as one of the group, other female managers joked among themselves that 'a new rose' was among them, referring to the respondent. The respondent admitted that she was perceived as a new threat to the other female managers.

## 6. Discussion and Conclusion

The exploratory pilot study had explored women managers' experience in order to develop an understanding into their competence acquisition and the issues surrounding their learning at workplace. Apart from possessing the necessary knowledge and skill, people management skill and ethics are perceived as important managerial competencies. The ability to blend decisiveness and persuasion present a unique combination that proves to be powerful in the negotiation process. The respondents exhibit the characters of self-directed learners.

Gender stereotyping is still prevalent in these three types of organisations. Interestingly, women themselves seem to be increasingly perpetrating the so-called gender bias behavior. What drives these women to devalue their own female counterparts? It would be interesting to find out more during the actual fieldwork whether women from other sectors face similar experience. The practical implication of this pilot study is to lay the foundation for further research into women in management with specific reference to competence at workplace. The research shall seek to address the lack of theoretically-based and actionable framework by embarking on a theory building process via the constructivist grounded theory approach using the multiple-case study strategy.

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