

**Another Point(e) for the Patriarchy – An Examination of the Underrepresentation of
Women in American Ballet Artistic Leadership Through the Feminist Standpoint Theory**

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Introduction

Despite the cultural ritualization of the ballerina as an accepted icon of femininity, males syndicate the upper echelons of ballet institutions. The inability of women to achieve parity in artistic leadership is systemically fixed. Rooted in the noble courts prepossessing a rigid gendered hierarchy, professional ballet developed as a domain exclusive to man. The 20th century concept of the ethereal and elegant ballerina gradually emerged and monopolized the stage supporting the essentialization of the field as feminine. This performative transformation, however, fostered a sexual division of labor as men, enabled through the previously established hierarchal structure, preserved their authority as women became objects of discrimination and sexual harassment. Amidst the historical institutional preference towards man, he crafted the narrative in favor of himself defining masculine authority as an organizational norm.

Though the subordination of females across ballet institutions is an anachronism, this study will strictly examine the underrepresentation of women in ballet artistic leadership through the feminist standpoint theory (FST) through assessing the recorded gender disproportionality quantitatively to illuminate the linguistic relativity, relationships, expectations, and other cognitive features within ballet companies that construct and perpetuate the observed gender disproportionality to subsequently encourage women to challenge this antiquated standard. Following a brief review of FST literature, I will explore my methodological analysis and expound upon the results of the study through the FST in a concluding discussion.

Review of Feminist Standpoint Theory Literature

Literature examining feminist standpoint theory tends to critically explore the feminist standpoint within patriarchal institutions and the fortification of homosocial reproduction

through gender codification. One study entitled “It is a Man’s World: A Qualitative Study on Females in the Military” authored by Sarah Amer & Guowei Jian (2018) transcends the holistic inequal distribution of males and females within a predominantly male organization to address directly the gender codification of accomplishments and ranks that impose occupational barriers for women. FST is engaged in a postmodernist fashion as a means by which to identify the dichotomy between a man and woman’s experiences and break down the systematic structure, such as homosocial reproduction, that fortifies a gendered hierarchy within the upper echelons of hegemonic institutions. Another study, Chris Lezotte’s “Born to Take the Highway: Women, the Automobile, and Rock 'n' Roll” (2013), identifies the constitutive nature of organizations enforcing normative gendered relations and invokes FST as a means by which to deconstruct the codification of masculinity and femininity to subsequently posit a multiplicity of femininity.

Contemporary scholars attempt to counter the monolithic feminist standpoint and expand the application of FST to address the intersection of the female experience with ethnicity and race. Donnalyn Pompper’s “The Gender-Ethnicity Construct in Public Relations Organizations: Using Feminist Standpoint Theory to Discover Latina’s Realities” (2007) encourages the exploration of social order beyond gender relations. Pompper’s study addresses homosocial reproduction of males alongside the underrepresentation and coping strategies of women of racial and ethnic minorities in the upper echelons of predominantly female fields.

RQ: Why, despite the weighted demographic, are women underrepresented in artistic leadership across ballet institutions?

Method

The study primarily adopted an ex-post facto design in which the majority of data analyzed to determine the underrepresentation and experiences of women in ballet artistic leadership was available publicly. The study applied a report conducted and published by the Data Dance Project (DDP) that examined the demographic and pay distribution of artistic and executive leadership across the top fifty American ballet companies, defined through expense budgets, aggregated interviews of prominent women in American ballet isolated upon vetting three articles from hundreds of venerable dance magazine archives as well as one that appeared in *The New York Times*, and a conversation conducted by means of email with an expert of the field, *Dance Magazine*'s editor in chief Jennifer Stahl who was invited to contribute to my study by elaborating on her experience with *Dance Magazine* and as a speaker for the Women in Dance Leadership Conference. Interviews were then independently coded to assess the tone with which feminine leadership was regarded.

Results

Upon assessing the substantial disparity in the gender distribution across American ballet companies, three thematic recurrences that have upon been expanded in the subsequent sections – homosocial reproduction, institutional stature, and women empowerment – are indicative of the dichotomy between a man and woman's experiences within a patriarchal institution and the postliminary subjectification of women to a vicious hegemonic cycle.

Homosocial Reproduction

Homosocial reproduction is excellently embodied through a quote provided by Stahl (personal communication, March 11, 2020):

“Throughout American culture, not just dance, we’re more likely to see men as leaders.

And once a man becomes a director of a dance company, he's more likely to mentor other men as assistant directors, or choreographers etc, so the cycle perpetuates.”

The term defines the phenomenon in which the demographic composition of organizations becomes homogenous as those in power erect invisible barriers of social similarity through electing incumbents sharing such comparability. Reference to orthodox authority – the rarity of women in leadership or male dominance – was tallied thirty-four times across all articles assessed and recorded statistically in the examined report. Graphics recorded in the DDP’s “Artistic and Executive Leadership Report” published on March 31, 2020 indicate relative stagnation with only slight deviation favoring women in gender distribution between 2015 and 2019; as the composition of men within artistic leadership fell by eight percent over a period of four years, that of women rose equally. While a paradigmatic shift is uncertain and precarious, recognized by the overarching study is a gradual shift across American ballet companies towards further heterogeneity in executive makeup.

Institutional Stature

Institutional stature was recorded six times across the study, quantitatively in the DDP’s report and with at least one mention in each article embedded in statements equating, “few women running ballet companies of size in America” (Thompson, 2016, para. 5), “all top-tier ballet companies (budgets over \$7M) in the U.S. are run by men” (Marshall, 2010, para. 2), and “none of America’s most prominent ballet companies are run by women” (La Rocco, 2007, para. 4). The theme explores the relationship between the gender distribution of artistic leadership and the size of the ballet company, While the dichotomy is stark across the top ten American ballet

companies, the gender disproportionality calms approaching the bottom twenty-five; the dramatic 90% plummets to 65% (Data Dance Project, 2020).

Women Empowerment

When questioned as to her role in promoting women in leadership, Stahl (personal communication, March 11, 2020) replied, “I make sure Dance Magazine gives smart women in dance a voice by hiring them to write for us, and by actively pursuing interviews with them instead of always giving the microphone to men.” Women empowerment was identified by examining linguistics and recording the references made to notions of mentorship, inspiration, empowerment, young girls, equity, and equality and was tallied twenty-two times across conversation and articles, absent only in the DDP’s report. The theme refers not to the election of women into leadership roles by sheer tokenism but the agency of women to restructure the organizational system to enable other women to acquire accreditation to achieve such positions.

Discussion

Feminist standpoint theory posits the adverse repercussion of the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles across American ballet companies by means of socially constructed obstacles. The theory explores the dissonance between a man and woman’s experiences in the organization as exposed through the aforementioned themes. Foregrounded in the study conducted by Amer and Jian (2018) is the theory’s role in assessing the constitutive component of communication that structures and sustains dominant and periphery populations through homosocial reproduction observed in a hegemonic institution. Upon promotion to principal within ballet companies, men are typically warranted more opportunity to hone their directorship skills through choreographic endeavors as classical ballets tend to be more demanding on

women. In a conversation with *The New York Times* (LaRocco, 2007, para. 17), however, Melissa Barak, a former choreographer for the New York City Ballet posits that “a lot of girls, especially in ballet, are very shy, very sheltered in a way. I think it has to do with that personality type.” As can be concluded, while men within American ballet are being groomed to adopt executive roles, women are being socialized to question their ability to lead. FST construes that ostracized women are implicitly encouraged to offer more credence to voice of a man thus fostering their stratum victimization by homosocial reproduction.

Observed as a byproduct of homosocial reproduction is a masculine codification of leadership constituting a disproportionate gender composition accounted under institutional stature which thus engenders women empowerment. Executive positions are often encoded with pontification, confidence, ambition, aggression, and assertiveness. While such terms are often venerable toward men, they are derogatory toward women. This is exemplified in the narrative of many misogynistic classical ballets that while vilifying the powerful woman alongside venerating the heroic man of corresponding strength also propagate the subjectification of women to fragility through manipulation, doomed domesticity, and seemingly romantic deaths.

While the opportunity of promotion more often lends itself to men, many women who are afforded the opportunity to shatter the invisible barrier do so by conforming to the executive structure crafted by men thus degrading their feminist standpoint. In an interview with *Dance Magazine* published in a 2016 article entitled “Leading Ladies” (Thompson), Emily Molnar, artistic director of Ballet BC, addresses the dichotomy between the prevailing masculine structure and the emerging feminine approach characterized by pensiveness and compassion through stating, “I am not interested in a top-down or fear-based structure” (para. 6). FST posits the bifurcated styles as a repercussion of dichotomous experiences within the organization. In the

referenced article, the founding artistic director of Ballet Memphis, Dorothy Gunther Pugh, questioned, ““Did [women] have a different inclination from men that made us want a different toolset to enter that world?”” (para. 5). Pugh’s reference of tools is indicative not only of the contrast between approaches but of the negligent organizational imposition of a burden on women rather than the institution. Women are evaluated against unjust standards. By the perpetuation of the codification of leadership as masculine, FST conjectures that many women feel pressured to adopt the preexisting norms to break through systemic barriers rather than craft a new narrative. As it is the interpolation of women into dance leadership that will be the impetus for women to counter the exacerbating homogeneity, FST is applied to ballet as a means by which to eliminate socially constituted barriers within an institution that may obstruct and impose burden on the holistic integration of women into conventionally male roles. Empowering women to assume directorial roles is a fairly contemporary movement that is perceived through FST to be a retaliation against objectification and marginalization.

FST addresses also the discrepancy in gender distribution across American ballet companies varying in size, namely in the assessment of the correlation between the two variables, as summated under institutional stature. The theory proposes that, rather than challenge the hegemony, women have digressed from pursuing artistic leadership within top-tier American ballet companies to instigate a new regime. Chris Lezotte’s (2013) research embraces the epistemological nature of the theory to assesses a similar phenomenon in the initial divergence and subsequent emergence of a new feminine car song. Finding themselves unable to achieve parity, women have founded their own ballet companies to circumvent ostracization. Similar passive patterns of coping with marginalization are discerned in Donnalyn Pompper’s study (2007). FST exposes the muted female experience and seeks to inspire agency to counter

male hegemony and alleviate the detrimental impact of gender disproportionality afflicting American ballet artistic leadership.

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