

Work as Home and Community: The Workplace Culture of an Alternative, Women-Led Company

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Abstract

This is an in-depth, qualitative case study of an alternative, women-led company—White Lotus Futons—utilizing participatory observation and interviews. The research focuses on the workplace culture and how women impact and influence it. White Lotus, a small alternative company that produces handmade futons, began as a feminist organization for women workers and has evolved into a “post-feminist,” integrated company with both male and female employees. This paper traces changes in the company’s ideology and organizational practices. It then examines the impact of the company’s ideology and the dominance of women in leadership on the environment and workplace culture of the organization and its employees. White Lotus was founded to provide its young employees with a homelike work atmosphere and a community-based network of co-workers, an environment frequently associated with highly feminized workplaces.

Introduction

Management literature has paid increasing attention to new forms of work organization and developments in workplace culture. The focus of this literature has been on the move away from traditional bureaucratic structures to less hierarchical, team-based structures, where employee participation is encouraged. These organizational structures and practices are not new; there has been an extensive history of collectivist, nonhierarchical workplaces within alternative companies and feminist organizations. This research project presents a qualitative case study of an alternative, women-led company, White Lotus Futons in New Brunswick, New Jersey, in the United States. Because of White Lotus Futons’ commitment to worker empowerment and the advancement of women workers, the company provided an intensive environment to study a collectivist workplace culture and the impact of women on this culture. The intent of this study is to extend and deepen the research on alternative companies and feminist organizations to better understand new forms of work organization and their effect on workers.

Literature Review

A collective or cooperative organization can be defined as any enterprise where control resides primarily with members or employees who are also owners (Rothschild and Whit 1986). Many feminist organizations are collectivist in nature because of the commitment of feminism to create alternatives to bureaucracies. A feminist organization has been defined as an organization that has feminist ideology, principles, goals, and outcomes or was founded during the women’s movement or as part of the women’s movement, with *feminist* defined by recognition of women’s oppressed status as compared to men (Yancey and Collinson 1999). When women create feminist organizations, they seek not only to eliminate gender discrimination but also to reduce differentials between women members of the organization through skill sharing, task rotations, and attention to within-group processes (Brown 1992).

Feminist organizations in particular must address the role of emotion because in most cases where feminism is practiced, an “emotional subtext” develops along with an “emotional culture” that creates feeling and expression rules (Taylor 1995). In the study of feminist organizations, most researchers believe that it is

necessary to consider not only the actions and ideas of members but also their feelings (Morgen 1995). Members of collectivist organizations have been found to bond a great deal more with their co-workers, as they often share similar belief systems and spend time with one another outside of work, unlike the often disconnected members of bureaucratic organizations (Bordt 1997).

The impact of women on workplace culture has also been identified in organizational studies. Work culture consists of the “values, ideas, and practices” created and perpetuated by a particular groups of workers. Women’s work culture has been clearly identified by researchers examining clerical workers and waitresses, where the workplaces were found to be more nurturing and supportive, with co-workers having strong interpersonal ties and social relationships (Cobble 1991, Costello 1991). This culture is drawn from both the common experiences of women with domesticity and reproduction as well as from the realities of the workplace.

Research Methods

The research presented here involves a 10-month in-depth observation of White Lotus Futons, where I occupied the role of participant-as-observer (Gold 1958). I entered the field setting openly acknowledging my research purpose. Everyone was aware of my position and my intentions but included me through involvement in the daily activities of the organization. Unlike a complete observer, a participant-as-observer does not operate as a fully integrated member of the organization; I was not an employee of White Lotus Futons. My participation was negotiated with the various gatekeepers who endorsed my research and allowed me to have access to the organization.

I spent time observing at both the manufacturing facility and the store in New Brunswick, New Jersey, as well as the other store in Princeton, New Jersey, and was able to observe the normal routines and behaviors of the White Lotus workers, paying particular attention to the interactions between men and women. I also attended company meetings and social functions with the workers, such as special meals to celebrate workers leaving and holiday parties. In addition to my observations, I conducted intensive two-hour semistructured interviews with workers in the company.

History of White Lotus Futons

Two women, “Lydia” and “Tammie,” started the company in 1981. (All names of individuals have been changed to maintain the anonymity of my informants.) During the late 1970s, Lydia traveled to Japan, where she learned the art of futon-making. After returning to the states, Lydia began making futons in the attic of her house with the assistance of her friend Tammie, and they started selling futons through “word-of-mouth.” At this time in the U.S., futons were not as common as they are today, but the two hoped to produce an alternative form of bedding that was both ergonomically beneficial and environmentally sound. From the beginning, Lydia and Tammie had the intention of providing women with secure and rewarding jobs, and at the start White Lotus employed only women and was a very women-centered organization. Most of the women working while Lydia and Tammie owned the company were lesbian women. This may have been because one of the founders’ other goals was to provide a safe and welcoming environment where same-sex couples could shop for bedding. Within a few years of opening the first store in New Brunswick, Tammie moved to Arizona to start her own futon company, and Lydia stayed in New Jersey. Lydia owned White Lotus from 1981 to 1990 and developed all of the core products. During the 1980s, although futons were not so popular, Lydia and White Lotus were successful and became renowned for futon-making throughout the region and even opened a second retail store near the Princeton University campus in 1986.

In 1990 Lydia sold the company to a married couple, “Phil and Ann,” who wanted to run an environmentally and socially responsible small business. Phil had worked for a number of years as a stockbroker, but after the birth of his children he began to seek a less stressful life that would allow him to have control over his work. Phil and Amy have both worked intermittently at the stores, but for the most part have they have been much more hands-off with the company than Lydia was. They also were committed to providing young women with the opportunity to learn about running a small business. The women-only hiring continued until 1993, when a new manager, “Jane,” was promoted from futon-builder. Before her tenure as manager, Jane said that “there was a perception that only separatist lesbians worked at White

Lotus.” As manager, Jane started hiring men to work at White Lotus, and for the first time in its history the company was not entirely female. The men whom Jane hired, however, were open-minded, mostly artists, musicians, “punks and hippies,” so they fit better into the culture of White Lotus. Jane says that she hired these men because “any sexism is sexism, whether it is reverse or not.” She added, “You want to have a woman-owned, woman-ran business, but at the same time it is not really proving anything because we all know that women can do it. But that is no reason to exclude everyone else.” The management of the company has since changed hands a number of times, and the Princeton store closed its doors in 2005, but White Lotus has continued to thrive through growing online sales.

Results and Discussion

Work as Home

From my first visit to the White Lotus store in New Brunswick, I became aware of the uniqueness of the company’s atmosphere and workplace culture. The overall physical arrangement at the New Brunswick facility presents an unusual company environment, one that is much more like a person’s home than a place of work. The front room or sales floor is used to display the futons and furniture for sale. The room changes every few months, with new covers being put on the futons or new pillows and quilts being displayed. The room presents the futons very informally and is set up much like a family room in someone’s home. The front room is constantly being used by employees as a type of living room, where they sit freely on the futons. The room is also utilized for informal and formal meetings for the employees and for mealtimes and social events. The “company cat,” Tripper, remains another pleasing feature of the front room because she usually spends her time sleeping on the futons or in the store window, adding to the homelike quality.

Behind the front room, in the section of the facility accessible only to employees, is the office area, with a desk, phone, and fax machine. Just behind the office area is the manufacturing area, with three pedal-driven sewing machines and an enclosed separate room for making the actual futon mattresses. What is most striking about this section of the building, however, is the fully equipped kitchen, with refrigerator, stove, sink, toaster oven, coffeepot, and a small round table for dining. Notes reminding people to clean up after themselves are posted on the refrigerator and over the sink. The kitchen is stocked with food bought or made by individual employees. All of the food is communal, and people often cook for one another. Food remains an important part of the White Lotus culture and is most often organic and homemade. When I asked “Evan,” the maintenance person—or “schlock boy,” as he is teasingly called—about the benefits of working at White Lotus, his first reply was “having a full kitchen where you work is a great benefit.” Delia echoed this sentiment and said that she enjoyed her workplace because “it is a relaxed atmosphere, where you can just eat breakfast with your co-workers.” The kitchen area and food sharing among employees creates a sense of connectedness and adds to the home feeling of the place, creating a strong community of workers.

Not only do employees cook for each other and clean the kitchen together, but they also share a number of household-like tasks, including cleaning the cat’s litter box, feeding the cat, cleaning the bathroom, vacuuming, dusting, and reading the mail. According to former manager “Amy,” “At White Lotus, on top of doing your real job like keeping the business alive and hopefully making it grow, you also have to change the cat litter, do the dishes, clean the front room, clean the toilet, and even fix it when it is broken.” The “schlock boy” Evan is ultimately responsible for making sure that all of these household chores are completed, and he does a significant amount of the storefront cleaning. However, the other tasks are communal, and employees share the responsibilities informally by taking turns doing these chores, much like members of a household would.

Also similar to a home, the entire back room of the facility is decorated with various personal items belonging to the employees: postcards, photographs, posters, comic strips, invitations to parties, band tour schedules, and the like. Another prominent feature of this area is the stereo and shelf of compact discs and cassette tapes. The collection of music, acquired over the years as employees brought in music from their personal collections, contains a variety of rock, folk, punk, and reggae. There is always music playing, and any employee can listen to her or his own music while at work. A favorite among the employees is a punk band called the Bouncing Souls, whose members worked for White Lotus in the early 1990s but who now have gone on to being successful and well-known full-time musicians who actively tour and have their own record

label. Employees also often perform live music at work, with people singing as they sew or someone playing an acoustic guitar during a lunch break. I also noticed repeatedly that music exists as a topic of conversation for employees and plays an important role in the culture of the organization. Members express themselves by sharing their recorded music or their own music with others.

White Lotus remains a place where employees can express themselves to the fullest extent not only by listening to their preferred types of music but also by wearing whatever they want. Varied manners of self-expression come through in employees' personal appearances. Jane, the long-time manager of the New Brunswick store and mentor to the current employees, has very distinctive hair, dyed bright blue, and most often wears concert t-shirts and patched blue jeans. Many of the other employees have visible tattoos and body piercings as well as dreadlocked hair with beads. A number of workers sew their own clothes or apply patches or appliques to decorate their clothing. In the warmer months, employees often go barefoot. Employee dress is very casual, and the company places no boundaries on the way employees can present themselves, even if they are servicing customers or in management positions. This seemingly minor aspect of the job remains an important benefit in the eyes of White Lotus employees. Evan, the "schlock boy," expressed the freedom he feels to be himself at work. "It is kind of like a home. You are allowed to wear whatever you want. . . . I think it is a sense of freedom. . . . I can show up in boxers and a tank top and listen to, like, Slayer or something, and no one is going to say anything." The company encourages employees to engage in this type of self-expression. Jane says that "White Lotus is a place where people can wear what they want to work and listen to different types of music, because the idea is that if you keep people happy they will want to be here."

The self-expression permitted within the homelike atmosphere of White Lotus goes far beyond just music and clothing, as people are encouraged to "just be themselves" in every way. White Lotus has much in common with feminist or women's organizations and confirms the argument that the organizations create a network of support for their members (or employees) that allow them to express their emotions openly (Morgen 1995, Taylor 1995, Bordt 1997). A woman-centered culture exists at White Lotus, where the workers cultivate a nurturing and supportive workplace. Jane attests that everyone at White Lotus is encouraged to "express their opinions and how they feel because you don't need to 'turn your person off' to work at White Lotus." She firmly believes that this is an important benefit of working for the company, particularly for women workers.

In a man's world there are no exceptions for your life, your beliefs . . . and saying, "Oh, you know what, I understand that you really need to go home and take care of your personal stuff" or, like, "Oh, you are PMSing, and you are going to cry if you stay here all day, go home." . . . Women in workplaces are discouraged from sharing their person, their personalities, especially. You know, like, whining or crying or whatever it is, and you know that is perfectly legitimate here.

This remains a key element of the home environment at White Lotus; employees are allowed to express their emotions openly, and the company works to accommodate each person's individual needs so that the employee's time at work fits within the larger frame of the person's life. If a person needs to take unexpected time off, whether for an afternoon or a month, due to personal reasons, the company is understanding and allows the person to continue to working at White Lotus. "Maggie," a seamstress, believes that White Lotus chooses to focus on supporting people's individual needs: "White Lotus works to accommodate people because of the belief that people are not disposable." Everyone at White Lotus operates on a very personal level with one another and is intimately aware of each other's emotions and needs, much like within a close-knit community.

Work as Community

The homelike atmosphere of White Lotus, where employees have the ability to express themselves freely, is sustained by an extremely supportive network and community among the employees. White Lotus presents an example of how a woman-dominated organization can lead to a more community-centered workplace. The network of White Lotus is rooted in the friendship ties that exist among the employees. Many of the employees were friends before working at White Lotus, and friendship networks are the primary way

that new employees are recruited and hired, adding to the interconnectedness of the company. "Karl," a futon maker, says, "It's a really social place. . . . I live with three of the other people that work here, and a lot of the people that work here are either friends with one another or housemates or roommates. There is much more interaction between people. . . . Here everyone just gets along." Because some of his co-workers have also become his roommates, for Karl work and home life truly overlap, not an uncommon occurrence for White Lotus employees. At White Lotus, people are both friends first and also make new friends while working at the company. "Ella," a sales person who knew only one person at White Lotus before she started working there, started to develop friendship ties with other employees immediately after starting work at White Lotus.

The people act very easily and friendly with one another. . . . I have made a lot of good acquaintances, people I can just hang out and sit and talk with. Karl pulls out the newspaper, and we will sit and talk about articles in the paper and stuff. It's nice because everyone here acts on a very human level. . . . I think it makes relations a lot better.

The friendship element remains an important part of the functioning of the organization and facilitates a cooperative culture based in assisting others and working together.

The strong social ties that bind the employees together influence every aspect of the organization, including the way the work is structured. Individuals continually help each other, offering both their work knowledge and physical assistance. New sewers work under the guidance of the more senior seamstresses, who patiently demonstrate the various methods of sewing and often leave their own work to help a newer seamstress fix a mistake. When a shipment of supplies comes in, all of the employees (including the salesperson, the seamstresses, and the futon makers) leave their present tasks to help unload the delivery into the storage facility. Jane believes that the connection between the social and structural aspect of the work exists and says that "we are self-governing in the sense that we are all friends." The relationship between the collectivist nature of the organization and the friendship networks among the employees is strong and complementary at White Lotus.

The counterculture orientation of the employees also creates connections among the employees, and they often see themselves as somehow separate and different from others outside the company but similar to one another. The feeling of being different brings the employees together in a very deep way, and they seem grateful to have found others who are like themselves, adding to their strong connections. Maggie expresses this sentiment best: "We are a tribe. . . . We are like family and have many of the same thoughts and ideas." People's roles in the company often appear to be similar to roles in a family. Jane admitted that within her management role she functioned much "like a mom" because she truly cared about the other employees' wellbeing and honestly wanted to help them in any way possible with their work or their personal lives. Jane also revealed that White Lotus overall has a "familylike structure, where someone is always holding your hand when you start working here."

The family metaphor appears in much of the interactions at White Lotus and complements well the metaphor of the home used by employees to describe their workplace. However, the family metaphor here is not used to describe a paternalistic organization as has so often been true in past studies of workplaces. The metaphor of family is not imposed by the owners of the company or the managers but is something that the workers themselves have used to describe the relationships among co-workers, not between themselves and the company. The culture of White Lotus is not paternalistic, nor is it a pure ideologically purposive community driven by a social goal or ideal in the manner of most cooperative and collectivist organizations. Instead, its culture can be best described as a voluntary community of friends, bound by countercultural identification and connected by a woman-centered environment.

The employees of White Lotus are young (between 18 and 28), from middle- to upper- class backgrounds who also see themselves as challenging the dominant culture. Because of their youth, they view White Lotus as a transitional place of employment, where they can earn some extra money while in college or pursuing other goals, such as music or art. This has proven to be a problem for the company because it leads to a high turnover rate and a somewhat lower level of productivity. Working for the company provides only a limited income, but because of the workers' class status many of them do not rely solely on their wages and receive financial assistance from their parents. This privileged status allows them to choose their place of

work based on social or community factors as opposed to solely monetary factors. Some onlookers may be critical of this situation because this less exploitative work environment is only available to those who are members of the middle or upper class.

Despite the privileged status of the employees at White Lotus and the strong workplace community that this allows them, there are still problems. As with any close community of people, the high level of interconnectedness and interpersonal relations often leads to conflict. When asked to describe the negative aspects of working at White Lotus, Jane replied, “People problems. For example, people sometimes stop speaking to each other. . . . Personal lives sometimes interfere with work.” Maggie also refers to people problems in reference to this question when she says that “at times, we get on each other’s nerves and personal lives intermix.” Despite the occasional people problems, almost all of the employees expressed a sincere pleasure in working closely with others at White Lotus.

Many of the employees claimed that they chose to work for White Lotus, and they have chosen to stay there, because of the friendly social relations among the employees. Evan expressed this sentiment best: “Coming here, and I mean this in the nicest possible way, it’s not like work. You are working, but you are surrounded by friendly, loving people, and the atmosphere is wonderful. . . . 90% of the reason that I like working here is because of the people.” Delia also says that she has gotten to know her co-workers and feels that the relaxed and friendly atmosphere is an important reason for why she is satisfied with working at White Lotus. Indeed, all of the employees I interviewed focused on the benefits of the casual environment and congenial people. In relating her reasons for working at White Lotus, Ella said, “I wanted something locally where it was really laid back, and I knew I could have some fun, working with people that are really cool and stuff. . . . I knew a lot of the people who had worked here, and they said that it was a good place to kinda collect yourself and figure out what you doing.” The psychological benefit derived from the community-based workplace culture within a homelike environment remains a very significant aspect of the White Lotus experience for its employees.

Women’s Impact and the Role of Gender

The culture and environment of White Lotus stem largely from the woman-centered history and philosophy of the company and the continued dominance of women among its workers. This is something that the employees seem very aware of in their discussions about the reasons behind White Lotus’s unusual atmosphere. Jane, who was very much responsible for influencing the culture of the company, expresses it this way:

Just realizing that life goes on outside of the workplace is directly due to women or women’s ideals. . . . White Lotus is about ideals that women exemplify and embrace more than men . . . I take for granted that [White Lotus] is a woman’s world because to me that is how it is supposed to be.

Repeatedly, employees referred to White Lotus as a “woman’s place” or a “place with a woman’s edge.” Specifically, they were speaking about the warmth, friendliness, and openness of White Lotus as well as the emotionality easily expressed by employees. Amy says that the entire store has a “womanly feel” and that “customers walk in, and they know that it is mostly women there.” She is referring to the homelike atmosphere of the store, with the bright and comfortable front showroom, the company cat lounging around and the “happy clutter” of personal items strewn around the store. This environment influences everyone, not just the women workers but also the customers and the male employees. Evan expresses his perception of White Lotus’s womanly environment: “I have this running joke that I have never told anyone. Coming here brings out the feminine side of me.” When asked to explain further what femininity he was referring to, he replied, “It definitely takes a certain personality or nature to work here, even a gentleness, because everyone who works here is cool, very nice, but they are also very gentle, whether in manner or speech or the way they handle themselves.” The gentleness at White Lotus is very evident and culminates from the warm, friendly, family-centered culture and home environment. Organizational researchers have often attributed this type of feeling or presence within a place to the influence of women, who because of socially constructed gender differences have been responsible throughout history for sustaining the home and family at a very

personal level. White Lotus presents an example of a company created by women, with women continuing to make up most of the employees, that has a nurturing and communal culture.

Women's influence at White Lotus extends beyond the emotional and cultural because women have also decided the manner in which the company is managed and organized. Emily, manager of White Lotus for over a year, sees women's influence being expressed through their management styles.

Maybe there is less ego involved, but I definitely think that the way that we work and the way that we run here is based in a large part on the fact that women are in charge . . . The way that White Lotus is structured and the way that you are free to, like, think the way that you want to think and express yourself and not be afraid of someone telling you that you are wrong has a lot to do with women running it.

Managers relate easily with the workers, as if there is not a status differential. Jane, in particular, had an extremely relaxed manner and friendly demeanor in dealing with employees, even when she was giving instructions or correcting behavior. Maggie, another White Lotus manager, argues that "women are much more communal" and that "the fact that there are predominantly women at White Lotus has helped with the flexibility of the organization." Here Maggie is discussing women's influence on the open and accepting culture along with the flexibility of the work schedule. It is through women's continued impact on White Lotus that a connection to the feminist history of the company is maintained. However, the conceptions of gender and feminism within the organization have changed a great deal since the founding of the company.

The advancement of women workers and the creation of a feminist company motivated the founding of White Lotus by Lydia and Tammie in the early 1980s. Out of their motivations came a very woman-focused company, employing entirely women, many of whom were lesbian women. The organization held a more separatist view of how a feminist organization should be structured, with women comprising the membership. As the company became more successful, the principle extended to helping women learn the skills needed to run a small business. The focus remained on feminist ideals of advancing women workers, and the small group of women who first worked at White Lotus held these ideals in the highest regard. They also saw the need for being an environmentally friendly company that used organic materials, recycled waste, and educated consumers on the importance of protecting the environment. Being founded in 1981, White Lotus was one of the first truly green small businesses, which today have become much more common and popular. The environmental aspect of the company flowed easily out of its feminist principles but never overran them. When Phil and Ann bought the company, they sympathized with both missions of bettering women and protecting the environment and did not impede either mission from continuing to be articulated and advanced. Still, they are not as present within the company as Lydia, the founding owner, had been, and they have allowed the employees to really develop their own vision of the company and what its ideals should be. What has resulted has been a change in the company's ideals, beginning in many ways with the change in ownership and the manager Jane's less separatist vision of the company that led her to begin hiring men.

For White Lotus, the move from a more militant and separatist feminist company to a less ideologically purposive company with a significant number of male employees remains one of the most important issues in the company's evolution. Along with the workers' maintenance of a homelike environment and a community-based culture, they have created a workplace that is not for women only and have worked to incorporate men into the organization. At the same time, however, the perception exists among employees and the owners that White Lotus is not negating its past feminist principles. Instead, they see the organization's conception of gender evolving in a way that still supports women, while at the same time supporting men. The gender distribution of the company reflects this, with 11 women and eight men as employees.

The workers at White Lotus are intently aware of gender issues and remain very expressive about how gender operates within their organization. Many of my interviews and informal discussions with employees focused on the ways in which the individual person along with the overall company perceived gender and feminism. Jane, the person most integral in changing the gender ideals of the company, says, "I was raised a feminist so I consider myself to be a post-feminist." She explains this further by adding that the culture of White Lotus, although in many ways cultivated by women and their influences, is one in which men can and do feel comfortable. Jane's notion of post-feminism is still feminist in that she believes in the

advancement of women, but it is distinctive from the feminism of White Lotus' founders because it is not separatist and works on integrating men. Other employees at White Lotus remain less willing to identify themselves or the company as feminist. Ella distinguishes herself and White Lotus from feminism as a whole. When asked if she thought White Lotus was a feminist company, she replied, "Um. I don't know. To me, I have a lot of negative feeling toward the word feminist." Again, feminism is rejected because it is associated with separatism and a desire to elevate the status of women above that of men. Delia expressed the organization's current gender philosophy in terms similar to Ella's: "White Lotus is a woman-friendly environment, but it is not really feminist because now it is just equal." The notion of current gender relations being equal at White Lotus reappeared often in discussions about gender, and employees often distinguished this present equal status from the more separatist philosophy of the past. White Lotus may be identified as a post-feminist organization because of its struggle to redefine itself in a manner that still holds true to its feminist past. This redefinition could be viewed as a degeneration of the organization and a loss of its feminist ideals. It could also be viewed as a more positive move toward a more open and developed organization, where women and men both challenge traditional gender roles and create a community of equals.

Many people contrasted what they knew about the company's feminist history to the present perspective on gender. Although there is a general respect for the history and traditions of White Lotus, employees also remain somewhat critical and even ridiculing of the strong feminist separatism of the early women who founded the company. Karl, when asked what it is like to be a man working at White Lotus, replied, "Jane would tell me that I was very lucky I was working here because before, back in the day, even none of the girls working here wouldn't be allowed because it was only lesbians working here, and she would say that now and again to bust your chops." For the current employees of White Lotus, having both men and women working together for the company and concentrating less on gender differences and more on creating a countercultural community of both men and women who interact is believed to be a better and more desirable arrangement.

The gender relations at White Lotus reflect the beliefs and ideals professed by the employees. The relations between women and men can best be described as relaxed, congenial, and even playful. This fits well into the home/family metaphor used to describe the company, because the employees deal with each other on a very emotional level, as family members do. They work to combat the dominant socialized gender roles by having a culture where both men and women are comfortable and can find commonality despite their differences in gender by working to establish nontraditional gender ideals and roles. Evan expresses gender at White Lotus most clearly: "In terms of gender relations, it's all cool. Everyone is friends with each other." I found this to be true in my observations of the interactions between women and men. In meetings men did not dominate the discussions, and the women appeared very comfortable expressing themselves and their opinions. Also, in the social interactions between women and men there was never any tension or a sense that men wanted to have control. If anything, women seemed in control and often teased the men about the women's greater numbers and higher level of control.

Still, the gender question must be confronted, if for no other reason than the company's history. When the issue comes up, it is dealt with in a very friendly and even teasing manner. Emily, in speaking about the men who work at White Lotus, expressed that it takes a certain type of man to work for the company because of the playful environment. "We definitely joke around a lot, especially with the men, like, 'Oh, you guys are just men, and you are lowly.'" . . . [The men] handle it really well. It is kind of refreshing for them to not have to like tiptoe around female issues or any kind of issues." Maggie confirms this culture of playful teasing: "There is definitely not a gender problem, but we tease the men a lot." She jokingly adds that it is because "for the first time for a lot of the women here, it is like 'there are more of us, and we are in charge!'" Emily says that this culture of teasing exists because of the openness of the workplace culture and community among the workers.

We are not PC [politically correct] here. . . . Like, we don't mince words, and we don't feel that we need to say the right thing. We are open about everything, about women's issues, about lesbians' issues, about everything. . . . No one gets offended here. . . . We know that

we are all supportive of any type of alternative lifestyle, even when we rip on people and stuff like that.

The openness of the employees with each other around issues of gender creates a new conception of the company's feminist mission, an alternative one where women and men work freely together to build a community at their workplace.

One could argue that the feminist ideals of the company are being compromised by the entrance of men into the workplace and the move away from maintaining an organization that focuses on women's differences. Still, the influence of women and their culture continues to shape White Lotus as an organization. Despite the presence of male employees, women continue to serve in all of the management roles, learning the skills of running a small business and advancing themselves for future endeavors. The advancement of feminist principles has not been co-opted, but instead has been reformulated to mean the inclusion of men into a very woman-centered culture and a woman-run company. The inclusion of men has not meant sacrificing the values of the organizations because it still remains "a place with a woman's edge." Now there are just men in that place alongside the women.

Conclusion

The most striking finding of this research remains the depth of the alternative workplace culture created by the young people working at White Lotus and its ability to provide them job satisfaction. It is a culture that is thoroughly enriched by the feminist history of the company and the humanistic and environmentalist ideals that the organization works to uphold. The White Lotus workplace exists as a home for the workers, where they can feel completely free to be themselves and can easily relax in a comfortable environment with their co-workers. The homelike atmosphere is complemented by a strong community and friendship-based bonds among the workers, who emotionally support one another and spend time just enjoying each other's company. The influence of women is also very evident at White Lotus and adds to the homelike atmosphere of the workplace and strong community ties among the co-workers.

The research presented here concurs with the findings of previous studies where women's organizations and female-dominated workplaces create nurturing and supportive environments. White Lotus shares many cultural attributes with both women's organizations, but it remains different because as a company it attempts to create a profit and is not purely socially or politically motivated like the feminist organizations so often studied in women's or gender studies. However, White Lotus does maintain some ideological motivation with its commitment to advance women workers and to protect the environment.

Through the course of its history the ideology of White Lotus has become less focused and more diffuse. The company has evolved from a more militant and separatist feminist organization to a less ideologically purposive company where men work as well as women. The changes in the conceptions of feminism at White Lotus can be viewed as an evolution from a feminist company to a post-feminist one, where both women and men flourish and traditional gender roles are transcended (Walker 1995, Whelehan 1995, Else-Mitchell and Flutter 1998). The workers of White Lotus no longer strongly identify with one particular social movement, as was true in the past with the founders' connection to the separatist strand within second-wave feminism. Now employees connect more with a counterculture or alternative lifestyle, as opposed to a social movement. This ideological transition at White Lotus may attest to a larger social phenomenon, as many social movements dissolve or diversify from social agendas to personal politics.

Whether the transition occurring at White Lotus is viewed as progressive or degenerative for the functioning of the organization or the upholding of its ideals, one conclusion remains clear. The culture of this alternative, woman-led company reveals the benefits, particularly for young workers, of having a workplace that cultivates self-expression and community building. The workers at White Lotus are extremely satisfied with their workplace and have managed to maintain their company and create quality products. The situation at White Lotus is somewhat unique in that the company is small and creates a specialized handmade product, making the company more suitable for a nontraditional system of work and a casual, open workplace environment. However, the principles behind the culture of White Lotus that deal with individuality and community are important for all workers. Larger companies are beginning to see the incorporation of the cultural aspects of alternative companies in their workplaces, especially as they become

less hierarchical. As organizations consist increasingly of women workers, this new workplace culture may become more evident and may even become the dominant environment among all places of work. More community-like relations between employees and a more relaxed homelike workplace environment lead to happier and more satisfied employees. This type of workplace also appears to cultivate creativity because it encourages workers to express themselves more fully. A new workplace culture of greater openness and comfort benefits workers by providing them with outlets to express their emotions more fully. The “feminization” of workplace culture with greater connection between co-workers and increased self-expression need not benefit only women workers but may lead to greater overall employee satisfaction.

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