ENGAGING ACKER: TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE GENDERED ORGANIZATION

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The purpose of this paper is to explore Joan Acker's system of gendering processes and to assess the potential of this framework to help researchers better identify those activities in and around organizations that maintain, support, or oppose their gendered nature. It is anticipated that a thorough understanding of these processes will be instrumental in effecting change.

Introduction

"What does it really mean to say that an organization itself, or an organizational policy, practice or slot in the hierarchy, is "gendered"? In simpler terms, how do we know a gendered organization when we see one? This question is an important one, not only for the sake of theoretical and conceptual clarity, but also because the lack of precision with which the concept has been defined in much empirical work has potentially profound implications for the prospect of meaningful social and organizational change" (Britton, 2000, p.419).

The notion of social structures and social processes as gendered is not a new one (Acker, 1990, 1992b; Cockburn, 1985; D. L. Collinson & Hearn, 1994; Ferguson, 1984; Game & Pringle, 1984; A. J. Mills, 1992; A. J. Mills & Tancred, 1992; Wicks & Bradshaw, 1999) and has evolved significantly, to the extent that it has become quite commonplace to speak of organizations as gendered (Britton, 1997, 2000; Townsley, 2003).

When acknowledging that organizations are inherently gendered (Acker, 1990, 1992b; Britton, 1997, 2000; Albert J. Mills, 1988), it is important to clearly define what is meant by 'gendered organizations'. Two such definitions will be used for the purposes of this paper:

"To say that an organization, or any other analytic unit, is gendered means that advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through and in terms of distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine" (Acker, 1990, p.146).

"To say that organizations are *inherently* gendered implies that they have been defined, conceptualized, and structured in terms of a distinction between masculinity and femininity, … and will thus inevitably reproduce gendered differences" (Britton, 2000, p.419).

It is precisely this patterning and structuring in terms of distinction between male and female that leads to overt and latent discriminatory practices in organizations. Much research has been done

on the 'genderedness' of organizations, as related to the issues of the presence of gendered structures, policies, and procedures, as well as the outcomes of such. For example, the gendered nature of organizations often result in "qualitatively different career experiences and outcomes for women and men" (Rindfleish & Sheridan, 2003, p.299) as is demonstrated by the fact that women are still underrepresented in senior executive positions (Olsson & Walker, 2003). Similarly, studies have demonstrated that the genderedness of organizations contributes to lack of career progress and glass ceiling effects for marginalized groups (Fletcher, 1998). As a result, we know what gendered organizations look like and we know the impact on disadvantaged groups (i.e. job segregation, under representation of disadvantaged groups in management, glass ceilings, mommy tracks, etc.). This leads us to yet another important line of inquiry which investigates why or how organizations become gendered. Here it is argued that without knowing how or why gendering occurs, it becomes difficult to effect change (cf. Mills, 2006). This paper argues that it is perhaps time to consider a new approach in our efforts to understand the 'how' and the 'why'. Specifically, it is proposed that Joan Acker's (1992b) system of gendering processes may prove a fruitful heuristic in this quest for a better understanding of the gendered organization.

Why Study Gendered Organizations

> "A better understanding of each of the levels at which organizations and occupations are gendered and the specific contexts and methods through which some groups are advantaged over others may well provide insight into the mechanisms that could be used to begin to encourage and build less oppressively gendered organizations" (Britton, 2000, p. 431).

As stated previously, researchers seem to agree that organizations are indeed gendered. Further, there appears to be agreement that this 'gendering' should in some way be better understood in order to create more equitable work environments. As stated by Britton (2000) "In any case, if one can identify those factors that are conducive to less gender segregation and inequality in organizational or occupational or labour force environments, then the possibility of replicating those conditions becomes much more realistic"(p.423). Significant strides have been made in this direction. For example studies have examined the gendered nature of professions such as law, medicine, banking, clerical work, and teaching. Other studies have focussed on specific organizations (Helms Mills, 2002; Albert J. Mills, 1994, 1998). These studies have been instrumental in narrowing the focus to policies, practices, symbols, and interactions that serve to shape the genderedness of organizations and have moved forward our understanding of the interplay between gender, power, and privilege in organizations. It has also been demonstrated that the case study format, often used in these studies, provides us with a rich soil from which to grow our understanding of the practices and processes that result in power and privilege along gender lines (Silverman, 2000).

In 1994, Lewis and Morgan suggested:

> "…There is growing recognition of the need to see the relationship between gender and organization in dynamic terms, each influencing the other within the limits of particular historical or social contexts. One strand in this more fluid kind of analysis is the

exploration of the ways in which people understand their organizational lives in gender terms, the ways in which understandings of gender and sexuality are deployed on a day-to-day basis in order to make sense of and to shape organizational and managerial processes" (p.643).

Clearly, they identified that it was time to understand how gendering processes are developed, maintained, and changed over time. This is supported by Nikki Townsley (2003) who, in her more recent review of gendered theories, suggests that we must focus "on the dynamic processes, performances, and practices imbued with and constitutive of gendered meanings" (p.620). If we are to accomplish such an undertaking, it is imperative that we begin to look at gendering processes (as well as gendered outcomes).

As one of the more compelling, "systematic attempt(s) to bring together the findings of research on the perpetuation of gender inequality in organizations and social institutions" (Britton, 2000, p.429), Acker's work provides a possible heuristic for the examination of gendered organizations. Her article, *Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations*, was published in 1990. In it, she describes five gendering processes. Subsequent articles on gendering processes, *Gendering Organizational Theory* (1992b) and *From Sex Roles to Gendered Institutions* (1992a) also describe gendered organizations in terms of sets of processes and serve to further problematize the notion of gendered organizations and support the notion that these gendering processes serve as catalysts for the creation and reproduction of gendered organizations.

The purpose of this paper is to explore Joan Acker's system of processes and to assess the potentiality of this framework to help researchers better identify those activities in and around organizations that maintain, support, or oppose the gendered nature of organizations. It is anticipated that it is through understanding of these processes that successful change can be addressed. Specifically, this paper proposes that Joan Acker's (1990; 1992b) framework of gendering processes offers a heuristic that may enable researchers to understand gendering processes, thereby contributing to their reduction or eradication.

Acker's Gendering Processes

In her 1990 Article, *Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations*, Acker identifies that there are five general categories of processes that lead to gendered organizations. They are as follows:

Gendering Practices / Structures

The first set of processes is described as the production of gender divisions; specifically, "ordinary organizational practices produce gender patterning of jobs, wages, and hierarchies, power and subordination" (Acker, 1992b, p. 252). Within this set of processes, it is important to note the "evidence that hierarchies are gendered and that gender and sexuality have a central role in the reproduction of hierarchy" (Acker, 1992b, p. 253).

Gendering Cultures

Acker's second set of processes is described as "the creation of symbols, images, and forms of consciousness that explicate, justify, and, more rarely, oppose gender divisions" (Acker, 1992b, p.253). Evident in our public and private lives, these symbols, images, and forms of consciousness serve to shape societal norms and values. One can analyze the effects on both a societal and an organizational level. For example, organizational symbols and slogans emphasizing strength, speed, or power help to create an environment that values characteristics traditionally associated with 'maleness'. Similarly, pop-culture icons help to shape societal understandings of what it means to be 'male' or 'female'.

Gendering Interactions

Acker's third set of processes are described as the "interactions between individuals, women and men, women and women, men and men, in the multiplicity of forms that enact dominance and subordination and create alliances and exclusions. In these interactions, at various levels of hierarchy, policies that create divisions are developed and images of gender are created and affirmed" (Acker, 1992b, p. 253). Moving to a lower level of analysis, this category emphasizes the importance of individual level interaction as a 'gendering' instrument.

Internal Gender Constructions

The fourth set of processes centers on the "internal mental work of individuals as they consciously construct their understandings of the organization's gendered structure of work and opportunity and the demands for gender-appropriate behaviors and attitudes"(Acker, 1992b, p. 253).

Creating and Conceptualizing Social Structures

The final set of processes are centered around organizational logic and the gendered substructures that are reproduced in daily organizational activities and the writings of organizational theorists (Acker, 1990). This organizational logic manifests itself in "material forms in written work rules, labor contracts, managerial directives, and other documentary tools for running large organizations" (Acker, 1990, p. 147). Seen as fundamental, ongoing processes that encompass and influence the other four processes, these processes require study at an entirely different level of abstraction (i.e. the study of the logic inherent in and affected by organizations and the people within them).

Engaging Acker

Although oft cited and well-regarded in the literature, little has been done empirically to support or refute the significance of the proposed processes as a set (Britton, 1997, 2000). However, some studies have effectively identified the presence and impact of individual processes (see Benschop & Meihuizen, 2002; Hultin & Szulkin, 2003; Kuhlmann & Matthies, 2001; Rutherford, 2001; Tienari, Quack, & Theobald, 2002), thus providing support for the efficacy of individual elements of Acker's framework.

Several other studies have effectively analyzed individual levels of Acker's gendering processes without identifying them as such. For example, much work has been done focussing on the gendered structures of organizations without acknowledging them as one of Acker's sets of processes (see Acker, 1990; Calás & Smircich, 1992; D.L. Collinson & Hearn, 1996; Connell, 1987; Martin, 1996). Similarly, much work has been done on gender and organization culture (see Brewis, Hampton, & Linstead, 1997; Fletcher, 1995; Wicks & Bradshaw, 1999). Despite this, Dye and Helms Mills (2005) indicate that relatively few have attempted to address the last three stages of Acker's framework and most efforts have been centered on the first two sets of processes. Exceptions include a study by Olssen and Walker (2003) which looks at internal gender constructions and a study by Britton (1997) which looks at Acker's fifth set of processes, gendered organizational logic. This relative dearth of research focussing on these levels of analysis strengthens the possible utility of using Acker's framework in its entirety, as these gaps will be addressed.

Few studies have looked at multiple levels of Acker's framework (for exception see Lewis & Morgan, 1994), and fewer still, if any, have done so using Acker's framework in its entirety. Although, Acker "problematizes the processes as distinct and separate catalysts for the 'gendering of organizations'" (Dye & Helms Mills, 2005, p.5), she acknowledges that the processes do interact and are, in practice, "parts of the same reality" (Acker, 1990, p.146). Dye and Helms Mills (2005) concur and posit that the five gendering processes do not exist in silos and are more interdependent than typically credited. Indeed, is not difficult to anticipate how gendering processes at one level may influence or be influenced by processes at another level. For example, gendered organization structures that result in job segregation and gender disparities between an organization's hierarchical levels would clearly impact the processes employees use to determine their own gender identities at work. Similarly, interactions between men and women, men and men, and women and women would also impact internal constructions of gender identity. As such, it is perhaps more useful to look at the dynamics of and between the five sets of gendering processes.

The need for such a holistic approach is not new. For example, Mills and Chiaramonte (1991) contend that, "analysis of gendered acts cannot divorce the context of such acts from their interpersonal representations. It is theoretically inadequate to address gender discrimination *within* given public (e.g. organizations) or domestic (e.g. family) settings without taking into account the integral role of the setting itself" (p. 386). In terms of Acker's framework, this claim would deem it inadequate to study the phenomenon of job segregation by gender without examining gendered communications and internal gender constructions. Mills and Chiaramonte (1991), more than a decade ago, contended that, "Research should be aimed at exposing the complex interrelationships between organization and gendered identity, with a view to changing and eradicating gender discrimination". This supports the need to view Acker's framework in its entirety and emphasises an important gap in the extant literature.

Acker's framework also provides the opportunity to study gender and potentially discriminatory practices within context. As indicated by Mills (2002), "to understand the gendered subjectivities of the actors involved we need to understand the discourses in which they were located and the relationships in which they were involved. To do otherwise is not only to judge a particular period by our standards alone (Thompson, 1977) but to misjudge the nature of some of

the processes under study" (p. 300). For example, studying one overt discriminatory phenomenon (i.e. the fact that women were expected to leave their jobs after marriage), within one set of processes, provides a mere snapshot that, if judged by modern standards, appears contemptuous. However, given an understanding of other processes (i.e. organizational logic and internal gender constructions), this phenomenon is given new meaning. Once again, the possible efficacy of Acker's framework becomes apparent.

Significant attempts to understand gender in organizations have been framed within the organizational culture paradigm (Gherardi, 1995; Maddock, 1999). Although generally effective and responsible for a better understanding of gender in organizations, this paradigm is not without its limitations (A. J. Mills, 2002). Specifically, the plethora of definitions of organization culture (Hofstede, Neuijen, Ohavy, & Sanders, 1990), coupled with the lack of agreement in the field, makes synthesis of our understanding of gender in organizations difficult (A. J. Mills, 2002). As well, it has been asserted that the notions of organization and organization culture themselves are in fact gendered (Hearn, 2002; Maddock, 1999). Acker's gendering processes may have the potential to allow us to deconstruct the notion of the 'masculine organization' and may provide a 'less-gendered' framework from which to view gender in organizations.

Concluding Remarks

Several arguments have been presented for the possible utility of Acker's framework in aiding in the understanding of and subsequent possible elimination or reduction of gendering processes inherent in organizations. To this end, it is suggested that Acker's (1992) five gendering processes be used as the lens through which organizational practices can be identified, categorized, and used for comparison.

In closing, let us return to the definition of the gendered organization:

"To say that an organization, or any other analytic unit, is gendered means that advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through and in terms of distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine" (Acker, 1990, p.146).

Clearly, if we wish to understand something so complex, with its multiple layers, actors, and interpretations, we must choose a framework that is comprehensive in scope, yet narrow enough to capture the phenomenon of interest. Similarly, the chosen framework should be conducive to the study of relationships within and between the various elements. It is anticipated that Joan Acker's framework of gendering processes may prove valuable in the attempt to understand the gendered organization. Time and further study will tell.

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