

# Gendering Organization Topics

Questions about women and men in organizations have been important objects of study in sociological, psychological and organizational research since the 1970's. It was in 1977 that Rosabeth Moss Kanter, in her now classical book *Men and Women of the Corporation*, stressed the notion of the socially constructed gender in contemporary organizations and management. Since then, the notion of gender has swirled in the widespread community of organizational scholars. For a decade, a number of articles and books have addressed gender topics in studies of organization and management. Notwithstanding, in our view gender research is still searching for its status and position. It is struggling with comparing itself to other established research domains and with stating its central questions in comparison with those of earlier established, dominant disciplines.

Why then this great interest in gender studies in management research today? There are several reasons for this. Besides the nowadays more explicitly expressed demand in western societies for equality between the sexes, there is also a need for gender studies that connect to changing conditions for contemporary organizations. Gender research is seen as a possible way to find alternatives to organizational change that answer the need for adaptation to new requirements caused by changing values and ideals in work life, new working styles and new types of organizations, like net-work organizations. Also, the internationalization of corporations has increased the need for cross-cultural knowledge. After 1980, when Geert Hofstede published his research report *Culture's Consequences*, dealing with organizational cultures in a number of countries, the question of masculine and feminine values has been raised in all western society. According to Hofstede, Finland was depicted as representing more feminine values than the other Nordic countries.

It is natural that an increasing number of working women has resulted in more women managers. However, women still represent a minority in executive positions, in management teams and on boards of directors. While in the 1970's there was only one woman manager out of 12 in Finland, in 1993 every fourth manager was a woman (Erja Seppänen, Tieto aika 7/1997). The change in female representation among managers is slow. The phenomenon of glass ceilings still exists, and it puts a halt to a woman's career when it has reached a middle management position. Also, women managers appear only in certain sectors of the economy. In all the Nordic countries the work-force is still extremely segmented according to gender, and more than half of the Finnish work force works in gender-homogeneous contexts, contexts in which almost all colleagues are either women or men. This leads to a phenomenon of "women leading women" and "men leading men".

Sex is a biological classification of humans into men and women, whereas gender is a cultured knowledge that differentiates them. To understand what gender means is to understand its cultural dimensions. Thus, feminine and masculine genders consist of the values and ideals that originate from culture. The gender classification of men, women, male and female as a biological or cultural definition is far from easy to handle in research and everyday life.

In the discourse of socially constructed gender there are, in our view, at least three pitfalls and temptations. One is a tendency to exaggerate a black-and-white difference between male and female. Even if the categories themselves are useful as cultural concepts, contemporary research discusses different masculinities and femininities shown as nuances inside the two categories. However, the notion of different masculinities and femininities does neither signal an attempt to

pour water into a discussion – thereby putting a stop to the entire discourse – nor does it flag a need for political correctness and “proper” politeness towards male and female representatives. It does, however, direct research orientations to domains that are unconstrained by the black-and-white statements about gender. We may study men and women as fundamentally different beings and as proxies for the cultural classes of male and female. It is easy to see why this happens. A black-and-white classification of human beings is attractive because it is simple and it is part of everyday language. If it is our aim to discover differences between, for example, men and women, we will most certainly find them; it is always possible to find methods that are able to distinguish differences. We propose that instead of looking for differences, a more fruitful way might be to connect questions concerning gender to other, organizationally relevant phenomena, such as recruiting practices, team-work problems or cross-cultural issues. Accordingly, the study of gender questions in organizations and management does in no way imply an exclusion of studies on how companies gain success or are productive. Choosing gender as a research topic will not entail the exclusion of earlier knowledge about organizations. A more fruitful way is to elucidate the many invisible ways in which gender, in fact, is involved in the studies of organizations. Much of current literature on organization and management is unaware of gender aspects. However, much of this literature can be re-interpreted, thus bringing the gender aspect to the surface. A first step in this endeavour is to consider that the “mainstream” of organizational research often has implied “malestream”. Mills’s study *Organization, Gender and Culture* (Organization Studies, 1988, 9/ 3) is a case in point. Furthermore, the gender category is often overlooked in research reports. For example, in classical Hawthorne studies men and women reacted in quite a different way in the research situation than what was presented in the research reports. Mainstream reactions were reported, while aspects of gender were swept away.

A second temptation when doing gender research is to unconditionally embrace normative statements, prescriptive recommendations and political actions brought about by a societal demand for change. In the same way as we, as organization researchers, do not make universal recommendations for enterprises how to manage a corporation or prescribe an ideal management style, it is impossible to categorically state that women are better managers than men. What is required of a capable manager and good management differs according to organizational context, and “female management” as a universal category certainly fails to be an answer to each and every management issue. Empirical research needs to grasp the impact of gender in the many different situations faced by organizations, management and the work force.

Gender studies might also come across a third temptation, which is to overlook all other categories but gender. There are other categories of human beings that are often connected to gender and therefore necessary to mention in order to understand how organizations are gendered, such as (cross-) cultural categories, race, age, educational background and experiences. Gender is produced and reproduced in organizations in many ways. For this special issue we have selected articles originating from both organizational and sociological research disciplines. In this way we can see how the various branches of gender research are intertwined.

Albert Mills, in his article *Practice Makes Perfect: Corporate Practice, Bureaucratization and the Idealized Gendered Self* raises questions about the character of bureaucracy and its relationship to gendered subjectivities. The starting point is that organizational discourse has a powerful impact on the notion of womanhood, manhood and sexual orientation. He argues that Weber’s notion of rationality, described as the ideal-typical bureaucracy, captured a particular form of male-dominance in time – a particular socializing trend. In a post-structural reading of

the history of a specific bureaucratic organization, British Airways, he finds that the shape of male-dominance has changed over time, and to some degree also the gendered contexts, although the organizational realities remain largely the outcome of (contested) male-dominated world views, and that discrimination against women has continued but in different ways and form, some of which might be classified as a step forward, others, however, as a backlash.

Elisabeth Wilson presents in *Exploring Gendered Cultures* an implementation of a methodology for exploring gendered organizational culture. She makes a distinction between the investigation of gender cultures, where culture is explored solely in terms of gender, and gendered cultures, e.g. the extent to which all cultures are gendered. Her study shows the challenges of empirical work in the area. It also proposes solutions to questions raised by empirical approaches. In the four organizations studied, gender comes alive and becomes visible.

In Michael Berry's article *Speaking Culturally about Personhood, Motherhood and Career* gender is related to cross-cultural issues and the meaning of being a mother and a wife varies between two countries with differing cultural settings and social policy. The article speaks of how these nuances are revealed only when the phenomena of meaning are looked upon in a sensitive way, comparing, finding differences and similarities, and trying to understand the phenomena in a way typical of ethnographic approaches. The author argues that it is inaccurate to make general statements concerning gender, as if they were appropriate for describing gender issues in cultures of different societies.

Culture as an explanation for gender discrimination appeared, somewhat unexpectedly, as an important issue in a study by Barbara Czarniawska and Marta Calás. Their article *Another Country: Explaining Gender Discrimination with "Culture"* reports a study in which short stories on discrimination of professional women were interpreted by students from different western societies. The authors found that gender discrimination was often interpreted as a phenomenon of discrimination characteristic of another culture than that of the students. The authors conclude that expelling gender discrimination to something that happens in "other countries", often the Third World, might be a pervasive practice which helps western societies to immunize themselves against one of their own persistent injustices.

Finally, we wish to explain why we – two female professors in the field of management and organization – decided to edit this special issue. We believe that our choice to edit an issue with gender topics to some degree is a consequence of our female sex, and our feminine gender. But first of all, we share the experience of having organized the SCOS conference (Standing Conference on Organizational Symbolism) in Turku, Finland in June 1995. This conference included a session about gender research with several interesting studies on gender and organizations. We wanted to give the authors of some of the papers presented at that session the opportunity to introduce themselves to another audience, that is to the readers of this special issue.

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*Iiris Aaltio-Marjosola*

*Guje Sevón*