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Gendering organizational analysis // Review

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Abstract (Article Summary)

The collection is organized into four parts: a critique of older models of organizational analyses for failing to take gender into account, the proposition that feminist perspectives offer more adequate approaches to organizational analyses, examples of the application of feminist perspectives to organizational research, and finally, some examples of contemporary expressions of feminist perspectives in organizational analysis. The editors, in their introductory overviews for each of these four sections, wish the reader to understand that these are important and pathbreaking articles.

The first article by Acker and Van Houten argues that where women are concerned, the arrangement of roles within organizations and the social interactions among them are based on the assumption of male domination. In reviewing the findings of the Hawthorne studies and Crozier's studies of French government workers and workers in an industrial bureaucracy, the authors point out the failure to note adequately the greater controls exerted over women by the (male) Hawthorne researchers in contrast to their control of male subjects, and the male dominance in the sexual division of labour in Crozier's studies. However, having made the point, it remains unclear how, in taking this into account, the main thrust of the interpretations of the data would have been altered. The fact that women were in more dependent and routine jobs in both instances could be interpreted as heightening what the original researchers believed were the effects of authoritative control. The article suggests how gender relations can reinforce organizational controls but it does not reveal how the original interpretations of the data might be changed had there been more explicit recognition of sex differences in job allocations. Nevertheless, the basic message of the article is well taken: "organizational structures and processes are influenced by sex [differences]" (p. 27).

In response to a second finding on the positive relationship between organizational commitment and readiness to condone immoral behaviour on its behalf, the authors assess the meaning of commitment and find it to be a uniquely male concept, at least as it is used with respect to organizational behaviour. Citing the work of Gilligan, they inquire whether this is an instance of male reasoning which involves resolving moral dilemmas by invoking an "abstract conceptual hierarchy of rights, seeking to be impartial and fair" (p. 230). Women, it is argued, see things in a contextual manner where the "primary imperative is to be responsible to others and caring to maintain the web of connections. Actions are justified with reference to their impacts on others" (p. 230). The authors wish to challenge the concept of organizational commitment, relegating it to the concept of domination and control, "associated with male rationality since the philosophies of the Enlightenment" (p. 230).

Full Text (2920 words)

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While this collection of articles can be read with an eye to refining one's understanding of organizational dynamics, most of the articles and the editors' introductions project a strong critical stance toward these dynamics as well as toward past organizational analyses. The critiques follow from feminists' perspectives and in most cases, the organizational imagery is that of the industrial organization, or in one case a government bureaucracy, all of which are assumed to be dominated by males.

The objects of criticism waver between the issues of relative justice between men and women within organizations versus the idea that since organizations themselves have been male creations, male dominance is necessarily embedded in them. (It follows from this latter view that Hegel's praise for the fair and non-arbitrary nature of the bureaucracy is now seen to be myopic at best.)

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The second article in this section, a review of organizational research by Tancred and Campbell, attempts to emphasize the minor role played by women researchers in the past, relative to men. The assumption is that men have relegated women to these tasks. Absolute numbers of authorship would seem to support their case but we would have to assume that women had the same motivations and objectives as men (an issue which some authors in subsequent articles question) and if they did, the argument would still not be complete without a comparison of proportions of significant research publications between male and female researchers relative to their actual numbers. Sadly, very few of us, male or female, make startling research discoveries as Kuhn elegantly pointed out years ago.

Hearn and Parkin offer a useful, though by now rather dated, review of literature (1983) on how gender is treated in four theoretical perspectives, each of which support a typology first offered by Burrell and Morgan in 1979. This is followed by a brief overview of feminist critiques and then a brief examination of what feminist perspectives might have to say about (1) work and the division of labour, (2) the issue of authority and power, and finally (3) the role of sexuality within the organization. The article ends with each author offering "implications for men" (Hearn) and "implications for women" (Parkin).

The three articles in part two offer examples of "feminism as radical organizational analysis." The gist of the first article by Burrell is that organizations desexualize roles and thus are a form of repression and control in the interests of "capitalist production." Nevertheless, workers offer resistance to this repression. Burrell is concerned with acts of sexuality rather than simply the gender - based division of labour. It is difficult to know what to make of this article inasmuch as social organizations and, in a broader sense, cultures, are defined by restrictions dealing with time and place of a variety of activities including sex. It is also hardly the case that such forms of control are unique to capitalist production. Interpretation of the author's intent is further obscured by the current sensitivities regarding the inappropriateness of sexually - tinged behaviour within the organizational setting.

Mills, in his article, draws upon the contributions of Hearn and Parkin (above) and offers a call for a "materialist but woman - centered approach." Employing what he takes to be an Althusarian approach, Mills argues that male domination in gender relations contributes to an "over - determination" of class in oppression and this is further reinforced within organizations. This is then wedded to the idea of a male - dominated culture within organizations.

Grant and Tancred offer a feminist perspective on state bureaucracy, arguing that the subordinate position of women exists in two ways: in the "relatively powerless positions" women fill within the bureaucracy and in the similarly powerless positions occupied by units designed specifically to represent women's concerns (e.g., the Canadian

Advisory Council on the Status of Women). This is largely an interpretive piece and the observations sound true, but, particularly with respect to advisory bodies, one would like to have some evidence about just how powerless they really are. (One might ask if these interpretations would also apply to women's studies centres in universities.)

They close their paper with a ringing flourish: "women must be dignified by the recognition that they do not merely constitute yet another potentially dissident force but a massive societal category whose importance must be grasped through placing gender at the center of any understanding of state structures" (p. 127). This might give some post-structuralists pause and may not ring entirely true for many ethnic and racial minority members.

The four papers in part three are more centrally focused on research findings. Gutek and Cohen report on the relevance of the gender mix at work in determining the degree to which there is a spill-over of sex-linked behaviour from the larger social environment to the organizational-work environment. Shepard describes the tensions and difficulties endured by women managers and professionals as they face the continual uncertainties of whether their sexual or organizational status provide the primary cues for how they are accepted in the work organization. In contrast to Burrell's lament of the desexualization of organizations, both Gutek and Cohen, and Shepard would argue that the absence of desexualization results in severe tensions in the organizational life of women and works at their distinct disadvantage.

Benson's paper on the "clerking sisterhood" provides a descriptive account of the historical changes in the role of women department store clerks. These changes have not resulted in a linear decline of skills nor has it meant the absence of active control by the women over their own work environments but the prospects for the future, she claims, cannot be predicted from these discoveries.

The final paper in this section is especially noteworthy. Based on other research findings, mostly in Australia, the author, Clare Burton, highlights the systematic way standards for measuring competency differ according to gender. Despite all organizational safeguards regarding equity, the author points out that the discretion that exists in actually assessing individuals is subject to male bias. For example, she cites one review of research findings that revealed that "good female performance is perceived as due to effort, and good male performance as due to ability" (p. 191). In this case, "ability," she argues, carries the connotation of continued career advancement while "effort" assumes that it is situationally determined. Citing other authors, she notes that even effort itself is "perceived as diagnostic of men's ability, and compensatory of women's lack thereof" (p. 191).

The final section, part 4, presents four statements about the feminist perspective. Calas offers a post-structuralist critique of existing research which fails to take into account the experience of minority group women, Hispanic women in particular. She raises important points about the relevance of context of participants' identity and experience, but in following this through to a post-structuralist ending she offers only a stance of suspicion regarding any writing or research on organizations and offers the wan hope that a "conclusion" will be written by a "community of scholars, deciding in whose 'times,' 'races,' and 'voices' we will be inscribing Hispanic women in organizational research and theory in years to come" (p. 221).

In the second paper in this section, Calas and Smircich offer examples of what feminist approaches might contribute "for more socially conscious organizational research and theorizing." Citing first the abiding critical stance of poststructuralism and then noting how that can be used as a sort of insurance policy against the absolutism of feminism, they recast interpretations of findings from two studies. Regarding the findings that relative wages in any given occupation tend to drop as the proportion of women in that occupation increase, Calas and Smircich would ask for a consideration of questions regarding "what institutional mechanisms devalue women." Further, they would ask why women have not been able to "positively influence the financial conditions of their workplaces" (p. 229).

In response to a second finding on the positive relationship between organizational commitment and readiness to condone immoral behaviour on its behalf, the authors assess the meaning of commitment and find it to be a uniquely male concept, at least as it is used with respect to organizational behaviour. Citing the work of Gilligan, they inquire whether this is an instance of male reasoning which involves resolving moral dilemmas by invoking an "abstract conceptual hierarchy of rights, seeking to be impartial and fair" (p. 230). Women, it is argued, see things in a contextual manner where the "primary imperative is to be responsible to others and caring to maintain the web of connections. Actions are justified with reference to their impacts on others" (p. 230). The authors wish to challenge the concept of organizational commitment, relegating it to the concept of domination and control, "associated with male rationality since the philosophies of the Enlightenment" (p. 230).

Although the authors don't make the connection, this second interpretation would seem to answer the questions associated with the first critique. The answer might look something like this: women are devalued in organizations because they don't see the world as men do and men created organizational structures and they continue to dominate them.

There are two troubling questions that follow from this article. If it is true that the liberal tenets of commonality are dead since they are male inventions (although who knows what influence females had on these ideas?) then what shall

be the common ground of discourse? Second, to make the claim that women indeed have a different moral sense from men (the findings of Gilligan versus Kohlberg) can hardly be acceptable to a poststructuralist, for within that framework claims to universality cannot be permitted. At what point is post - structuralism to be invoked against such absolutist assertions?

The third paper in this last part by Bell and Nkomo is a modest piece on conceptualizing identity and a proposal to use biographical accounts in studying how women make and remake their lives. The authors propose that identity be viewed as a mix of elements of gender (both in its social definitions and biological manifestations -- again the work of Gilligan is cited as evidence that women and men differ in their thought and moral reasoning), race, ethnicity, and class.

The final paper, by Acker, provides an historical overview of developments in research from the feminist perspective and offers a useful proposal for "elements" in a "theory of gendered organizations." These include inquiries into gendered processes -- such as gendered divisions of labour, gendered symbols and forms of consciousness that justify such divisions --, patterns of interactions among participants in organizations and the role gender and sexuality play in them, and the way individuals consciously construct their understandings of organizational structure and behaviour within it; gender and sexuality as organizational resources, e.g., as elements in the deployment of labour; and gendered substructures of organizations, e.g., the assumption that work in productive organizations takes precedence over family obligations and hence is more conducive to male employees. Acker closes her article by outlining action that can be taken in correcting the gender - based imbalance of power in work organization.

If nothing else these articles reveal the diversity in assumptions and approaches of the "feminist perspective." But it may be well to keep a few points in mind in assessing these presentations. (1) It is not often clear whether the basic polemic is against the assumption that organizational structures are male creations and hence inimical to female interests, or whether it is against the fact that males seem to monopolize the exercise of power in otherwise gender - neutral structures. (2) It is often not clear how the distribution of power is to be made more equitable if it is also claimed that women view the world in significantly different ways. (3) It is probably worth pointing out, or perhaps in deference to post - structuralists, "entertaining the notion," that the liberalism which is frequently derided as a male creation, has provided the philosophical justification for the legitimacy of feminism. If these assumptions are to be abandoned, what will serve as a common ground of understanding, or in poststructuralist parlance, our mode of discourse?

Finally, (4) the idea of insidious male domination is a not - too - subtle leitmotif in all these articles. But there is danger in assuming that males have always played a dominant, powerful role in relation to women and that aside from a few exceptions, it is only in recent years that women are challenging this. (Where were the sons' mothers in this drama?) Such a view denies the possibility that this may be an historical distortion or, at the least, that there may be far more subtle forms of exercising power between the sexes; that the issue is not so much power as it is the shifts in social realms over which authority is established (how many males have been told of their incompetence in their attempts to play a larger role in the family unit?). One does not need to be a poststructuralist to entertain these possibilities.

On this last point there may be another story to tell. For example, it is at least plausible to consider that the concept of the "family wage," instituted in the late nineteenth century, had a power - depriving effect on males. While males trudged off to meaningless work, wives remained at home to manage the family, its finances, and its consumption. (Caricatures of the consequences of this division of labour can still be seen in the comic strips of "Andy Capp" and "Blondie.") From the employers' point of view married males were more responsible citizens than unmarried males. Employers may have preferred unmarried females over married females, not because of a double standard but because females were viewed as the agents of stability who, before taming the irresponsible male and managing the family with four or more children, could serve as ideal employees. Those women schooled in the Kelley - Girl mold of secretaries and clerical workers might have thought that they brought to the male - infected organization some civilizing influence.

There is the very real possibility that males thought they were working and making sacrifices for the status and welfare of the family (Coser, 1990; Halle, 1984:53 - 73) and that while there may have been a male rebellion against that responsibility (expressed in the message of the Beat generation of the 1950s; see Ehrenreich, 1983), the entry of women into the workplace further weakened the justification of employment for the male and deprived him of the mythology of his important and necessary role as principal breadwinner, a myth supported by the likes of women who opposed the Equal Rights Amendment in the United States in 1982.

Considerations like the above may or may not be "true." But they are at least plausible and, now, inundated as we have been by the strong incriminating messages from the feminist perspective (and the use of the epithet, "male - stream"), they may even promote more sensitive comparative research on gender relations in organizations and hopefully trace the shifting grounds of these power - imbued relations. This would go a long way in helping us understand the current tensions in the relations between female and male.

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