

Reflections on Joan Acker's Influence on Us and on her Legacy: A Dialogue

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## Abstract

In reflecting on Joan Acker's legacy and her influence on us, we had the dialogue we reproduce here. We hope it shows our admiration and gratitude for her work.

Key words: Acker, dual agenda, gender equity, relational practice

### Introduction

It was a beautiful summer day in Maine. We were sitting on Joyce's porch overlooking the ocean and talking about our contribution to Joan Acker's Gedenkschrift. We exchanged histories of our work from way back, and mused about our thoughts on gender and how Acker had influenced them. At one point, we decided that this is what we wanted to write, these histories and these musings. But how to do it? So we invented some questions that would capture what we had been discussing. And thus this dialogue was born.

We have been friends, colleagues, and collaborators ever since Joyce joined the Xerox Project research team in 1991. The Xerox project was part of a research effort supported and initiated by the Ford Foundation, with the help of consultant Rhona Rapoport, which sought to look at gender equity in organizations in a different way. They didn't want to change women or teach them new things, nor did they want to change people's attitudes to women. And they knew that family friendly policies, though present in most progressive companies, including Xerox, were not really working. They wanted to go deeper, to identify and then work to change the underlying organizational assumptions and work practices that made it hard for women to succeed and rise to the top in organizations. Lotte had been working on work-family issues for some time and had a similar perspective that she called "Learning from Diversity". This approach, which was detailed in her 1993 book *Breaking the Mold: Women, Men, and Time in the New Corporate World*, was very much in line with what the Ford Foundation wanted to explore. So they asked Lotte to work on the Xerox part of their research program; she asked long time colleague Deborah Kolb to join her and Deborah invited Joyce to participate.<sup>1</sup> Joyce used the Xerox material for her PhD dissertation, which was published in her 1999 book *Disappearing Acts: Gender, Power and Relational Practice at Work*.

Along with co-authors Rhona Rapoport and Bettye Pruitt we published the results of this work and the method of organizational change we devised in our 2002 book *Beyond Work-Family Balance: Advancing Gender Equity and Workplace Performance*. This work also appears in the fully revised 2006 version of Lotte's 1993 book, now called *Breaking the Mold: Redesigning Work for Productive and Satisfying Lives*, as well as in numerous articles by us and our colleagues.

Joyce brought a more nuanced understanding of gender to the team than the rest of us had. She was working on a dissertation proposal to explore the definition of "real work" from a critical,

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<sup>1</sup> The other members of the research team were Maureen Harvey, Leslie Perlow, and Robin Johnson, with help from the late Susan Eaton.

feminist-poststructuralist perspective to which Acker's concept of the gendered organization was central. This perspective and our deliberations led to the concept of the "dual agenda" of equity and effectiveness, and to the founding in 1994 of the Center for Gender in Organizations by Deborah Kolb and Deborah Merrill Sands at the Simmons Graduate School of Management. Joyce has been a Distinguished Fellow of that Center ever since and Lotte, also an affiliate faculty fellow, is now professor emeritus from MIT's Sloan School of Management. We both continue to write and have collaborated on a number of articles.

What follows are the responses to the five questions we devised to frame our dialogue.

### Dialogue

1. How did you come to Acker's work (i.e. what had you been working on previously and what was your understanding of gender?)

LB: I have always been interested in issues of women and work, but my understanding of gender was non-existent at the beginning. I remember a Daedalus conference in 1963 called *The Woman in America* (later issued as a book) and I do remember wondering why there should be such a conference, clearly one wouldn't have a conference on the man in America. But that was the limit. In fact I rebelled against the notion, proposed by Erik Erikson and David Riesman at that conference, that women engineers, say, would do their work any differently from men. At that time even Alice Rossi agreed. Her famous essay on androgyny came from that conference. My own contribution had to do with the structural position of men and women. Women, I declared, had a basic choice: should they work or not, but if they decided on work they were very restricted on what kind of work they could choose. This wide, then narrow pattern of choice was just the opposite for men. They had no initial choice, they had to work, but after that their choices were wide open. But I never questioned why these patterns existed to begin with, only what their consequences were. And when in 1969 I had the opportunity in England to work with Rhona and Robert Rapoport (who actually were the pioneers in bringing the study of work and careers together with the study of the family) I again looked at couple patterns and had data to show that the combination of a man with a traditionally high career orientation married to a woman in the traditional role of a high family orientation was actually not the most satisfying one. But again, I didn't question why these traditions existed.

Without having any sense of gender to explain any of this, I was struck by Rosabeth Kanter's structural explanation of women's inequality in her 1977 book, *Men and Women of the Corporation*. That was a real aha for me and combined with my being in the Organization Studies Group at MIT's Sloan School of Management, got me thinking about organizations and their role. Which led me in 1984 to outline a set of traditional organizational assumptions that worked to disadvantage anyone with family responsibilities – but it was anyone, and there was still no understanding of gender dynamics.

JKF: I first read Joan Acker as part of my doctoral work in the early 1990s. Years earlier I had read Jean Baker Miller's *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (1976) which was a critique of mainstream theories of human development. Miller argued that the exclusion of women's

experience in the development of these theories had led to an inadequate understanding of human growth. She offered a relational theory of development that she claimed was more representative of the growth process for all people. Her analysis of gender was intriguing and when I started my doctoral work in organizational behavior I decided to work on applying the tenets of relational theory to work and organizations. At that time most work on gender in the management literature was essentialist, seeking to identify innate sex differences between men and women. I was bothered by these essentialist notions of gender and relieved to find theory more in line with Miller's perspective when I was introduced to postmodern ideas about discourse and the production of knowledge. My first exposure to Joan Acker was her 1989 book on comparable worth where she deconstructed the Hay job evaluation criteria to expose the devaluing of relational work and the skills it takes to do it. The linking of two ideas -- one, that the devaluing of certain skills and behavior is deeply embedded in the structures of organizational life and two, that this devaluing was rooted in the gendered nature of the separation of spheres -- profoundly affected my understanding of the phenomena I was seeking to explore. Her crystal clear analysis and the accessible way she presented these complicated ideas was a breath of fresh air and gave me a solid footing as I waded into Foucault and other poststructural perspectives on how power is exercised through discourse.

2. What role did the Acker 1990 article play in your work during the 1990s?

JKF: The idea that organizations are gendered and that structures and routines that appear to be "gender neutral" are actually deeply gendered, became the foundational lens for my work. I did not understand all the practical applications of this lens however. In fact, when Deborah Kolb and Lotte Bailyn invited me to join the research team on the Ford Foundation project to study work and family issues at Xerox I at first declined the invitation because I did not see it as relevant. It was only on reflection that I realized that my topic of interest – how the gendered dichotomy of separate spheres undergirded the devaluing of relational aspects of organizational life and was a key aspect of gendered organizations – would manifest itself most clearly in work/life issues. Luckily for me, I reconsidered in time and they accepted me onto the project. I feel foolish admitting that it took me some time to see the link between elegant theoretical concepts like gendered dichotomies and what I thought of as the more mundane issue of work/life conflict. But I think it points to a larger issue of a theory/practice divide that continues to plague the field.

The Ford Foundation project was the ideal medium for the melding of several different theoretical perspectives that were to bridge this common divide. Lotte brought a powerful lens of diversity as a catalyst for change with a laser-like focus on specific work practices. Diversity from this perspective meant people who did not meet the ideal worker image because they had family responsibilities, but the addition of a focus on gendering processes within organizations highlighted gender dynamics as an equally important phenomenon of interest. This led us to trying to understand what Acker described as the organizational logic embedded in assumptions about good work and ideal workers.

I did my dissertation research as a part of this project and I used Acker's theory of gendered organizations and the gendered nature of the separation of the public and private spheres of life

to explore the definition of ‘real work’ in this engineering environment. Her analysis of the Hay classification scheme as an example of a specific mechanism through which relational work was devalued in organizations was a guidepost. It signaled to me that I should be looking to identify how the underlying logic might manifest in concrete, everyday practices and routine interactions the implications of which the participants themselves might be unaware.

LB: I did not read the Acker article at the time it came out and it was not referenced in the 1993 version of my book *Breaking the Mold*. Indeed, I do not think I would have understood it at that time. I had developed the idea of learning from diversity and using difference as a catalyst for change, but did not yet grasp the role that gender dynamics played in the interplay between work and family. It was not until my connection with Joyce in the Xerox project, that I began to understand gender in the way Acker had outlined it in 1990. So, in the output of that work as well as in the 2006 version of *Breaking the Mold* Acker is definitely referenced.

3. How did you draw on these ideas in your subsequent work?

JKF: I originally drew from the work of Jean Baker Miller to understand how society devalued the relational through its association with the feminine and as a result paid a great cost in that its understanding of human development was inadequate. Joan Acker sharpened that focus and helped me see how those ideas might play out in work organizations. Although Acker did not specifically address the cost to organizations of their gendered nature – or the effectiveness benefits of uncovering these gendered practices -- this focus was implicit in Lotte’s work. Lotte was looking at work practices that could be made more effective by examining the problems encountered by people who were different from the norm of ideal worker. Adding gender dynamics to this focus was a natural next step.

My research benefited from the melding of these three streams of thought. I set out to find evidence of the existence of a relational logic of effectiveness that I hypothesized might be invisible even to its practitioners because it violated what Acker proposed was the gendered nature of the organizational logic underlying norms about competence and what constitutes good work. I found evidence of this alternative logic in something I identified as relational practice, a way of working that was beneficial to the work but was not seen as such. Instead, the value of relational practice was devalued and dismissed through what I called “disappearing acts”. These were specific mechanisms – the misattribution of the motive underlying relational practice; the limits of organizationally strong language to describe it and the association of relationality with the feminine – that acted to render this alternative logic of effectiveness (and its benefits) invisible because it fell outside common understandings and definitions of real work. The costs to organizations of continuing to devalue this way of working were clear. But there were also equity implications. Because of its association with stereotypical images of femininity these disappearing acts had a differential impact on women who were both expected to and punished for acting from a relational logic of effectiveness.

LB: In our intervention attempts at three sites in the Xerox Corporation, as well subsequently in other companies, Joyce’s understanding of gender, based on Acker and Miller, began to permeate our work. I was still concerned with changing organizational practices in such a way

as to make it easier for all employees to integrate their work with their family and personal lives. But now I began to understand the gender dynamics behind the way organizations had evolved and how their assumptions and practices were gendered – i.e. favored a male identity with masculine characteristics. As we worked on these issues and combined our perspectives, we arrived at what we have come to think of as the dual agenda. We found that changes in organizational practices that help employees integrate their work with their personal lives are synergistic with, and do not interfere with meeting business and work goals. In fact, and counterintuitively, we saw that gender equity and work effectiveness not only can but must work together both for the sake of the employee as well as the business.

#### 4. How did that initial work evolve?

JKF: Our initial work did not take into account Acker's perspective on intersectionality. Although in her 1990 article she suggests that gender and class are inextricably linked the concept of intersectionality was not something I picked up on in my work on relational practice nor did the team incorporate it purposefully in the dual agenda work we did on the Ford Foundation project. My work was later criticized for not addressing the intersection of gender and race. This prompted me to rethink my methodology and my intentional focus on gender as the social identity characteristic of interest. It wasn't until years later when I heard Acker speak on 'regimes of inequality' that I began to appreciate the interlocking systems of oppression that maintain current power dynamics in organizations and began to incorporate that into my understanding of my research findings. More recently, the field of intersectionality is beginning to expand Acker's perspective of regimes of inequality in work organizations toward a more comprehensive conceptualization of intersectionality that calls for an exploration of the interlocking systems of disadvantage *and* advantage in organizations. Although this is an extension of the intersectionality lens Acker offered, it builds on the comprehensiveness of the image invoked by her use of the word 'regimes' to suggest forces that are not simply intersecting but interlocking in ways that are inseparable. We believe that it this distinctive language and imagery that best articulates the methodological challenge of studying the impact of social identity on organizational phenomena.

LB: As I finally read and learned to understand Acker's notion of gendered organizations and gendered work practices, I realized why seemingly gender-neutral organizational practices can have a differential impact on men and women – usually to the disadvantage of women. Though our initial work at Xerox emphasized – at their request -- work/family equity, this broader emphasis on gendered assumptions allowed us to identify work practice change beyond changes in times of work – i.e. beyond just the introduction of flexible work arrangements. These included things such as changes in the scheduling of nurses in a health center, changes in the allocation of tasks between underwriters and administrative assistants in a bank, the development of a new template to clarify the demands of work down the hierarchy in the financial division of a car company as well as a change in the requirements of a supervisory job in a manufacturing firm. Without Acker's understanding of how these deeply embedded assumptions manifested themselves in organizational routines, our dual agenda interventions would have remained much more on issues of flexibilities of time and place.

We developed an intervention scheme based on this dual agenda. We created a template for culture change interventions that would enhance equity and effectiveness, and documented it in our book (with Rhona Rapoport and Bettye Pruitt) *Beyond Work-Family Balance: Advancing Gender Equity and Workplace Performance*.

#### 5. What is relevant about Acker today?

LB: Despite the 5,981 citations<sup>2</sup> to her 1990 article, most research and most interventions in the work/family domain have not incorporated Acker's nuanced understanding of gender and of gendered organizations. This mainstream work deals with work/family conflict and enrichment and investigates how men and women differ. It also deals with family policies, supervisor attitudes, and other aspects of the workplace environment, all important and informative topics. But what's often missing is a probing investigation of the masculine gendered character of organizational procedures and practices. And this is where Acker's perspective is critical if we want to attain gender equity in the workplace. Without it, equity interventions tend to focus on symptoms without understanding their underlying causes – and it is understanding the gendered dynamics inherent in these underlying causes that Acker has contributed to the field. Not incorporating this key insight will make it much more difficult to reach the goals of substantive change we all share.

JKF: I agree. Not only is Acker's perspective largely missing from the work/family domain but also from more general discussions of gender in the workplace. Even when systemic, organizational forces related to gender equity are given a nod, most prescriptions for change stay at the individual level of analysis, focused, for example, on advising women to lean in, get a mentor or develop skills like negotiation in which it is assumed they are deficient. It is reassuring to note that some of the most recent examples of this individualistic, essentialist approach are being challenged in the popular press with op-ed pieces that point out the cultural assumptions about good work and good workers that are at play. But much more is required. Indeed, I believe Joan Acker's perspective is needed now more than ever. The costs of continuing to reify gendered norms of effectiveness and leadership behavior are becoming alarmingly clear. It is not simply a question of equity, as important as that is. Effectiveness, excellence, and the ability to meet the challenges of today's world are at stake.

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<sup>2</sup>As of September 21, 2017 on Google Scholar