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Editors' Picks: Feminism and Organization

Nancy Harding, Alison Pullen and Sheena Vachhani

Introduction and overview

Organization has offered a welcome home for feminist thought and writing over the past quarter century, rendering the choice of papers for this Editors' Picks on Feminism and Organization a difficult one. We read, reflected, discussed, paused and repeated this process. Selecting papers for inclusion reveals an academic bias for what 'should' be included, what we would 'like' to include, what debates 'need' to be revisited, and what papers 'open' up future discussion. Throughout the selection process, we acknowledged our biases and it is worth reflecting on that the three of us have talked, worked and published together. We came together for this project through connections to Wales, Alison and Nancy were born there, Sheena, Nancy and Alison had all lived there, and we had all worked together supervising and examining research students at Welsh universities. When we meet, it has been in Wales. And, whilst we have not written collectively before, we share a sense of connection through the places where we have lived, worked and loved. Our academic writing is often housed together. It is evident that we often edit and review each other's manuscripts. When we selected the papers for this Editors' Picks, we selected those that somehow spoke to us through the heart as much as the intellect, as well as highlighting central feminist tenets and important contributions for advancing feminism and organization studies at the level of feminist theory, methodology and practice. We somewhat shame-facedly include two of our own papers, but Sheena and Nancy over-rode Alison's objections against publishing her radical 'writing as labiaplasty' paper, and

Sheena and Alison refused Nancy's concerns about publishing Nancy Harding, Jackie Ford and Marianna Fotaki's review of the progress, or lack of it, of feminist writing published in *Organization*. After assembling, reading and discussing our selection of feminist papers published in *Organization* in the last 20 years we were struck by the narrative they weave. It speaks of a dynamic of optimism and learning how to effect change, to a realisation that those teleological dreams were mis-placed.

We start at a point where feminism had been established as both a theoretical/philosophical endeavour and as a political practice. Our first paper, by Debra Meyerson and Deborah Kolb (2000), explores the practicalities of feminist praxis. Meyerson and Kolb's 'Moving out of the armchair: developing a framework to bridge the gap between feminist theory and practice' is the first paper in a symposium of five articles in a special section of *Organization* devoted to lessons learned from a case study of implementing an equality initiative. Further unexpected complexities of introducing feminist practices are illustrated in our second paper 'Where feminist theory meets feminist practice: border-crossing in a transnational academic feminist organization' by Jennifer Mendez and Diane Wolf (2001). They point to how our fantasies of working together as feminists may be disrupted by those differences between women in general and feminists in particular that 'we' tend still to gloss over, despite the insights of intersectional feminism. Rebecca Lund and Janne Tienari's (2019) 'Passion, care, and eros in the gendered neoliberal university', our third paper, brings us up to date and shows how little has changed. We are still learning about what we need to do to effect change, even though we have learned so much about how to resist, as our fourth paper 'What have the feminists done for us? Feminist theory and organizational resistance' by Robyn Thomas and Annette Davies (2005) shows. Perhaps

our failures arise because we have not yet drawn sufficiently on the cornucopia of talents within feminist theorists and practitioners, as our fifth paper 'Is the 'F'-word still dirty? A past, present and future of/for feminist and gender studies in *Organization*' by Nancy Harding, Jackie Ford and Marianna Fotaki (2012) argues. Our final two papers suggest we need a new feminist politics, one angrier and more insistent on saying the unsayable, for we continue to be contained and thus diminished by the norms and taboos within which we unthinkingly conform. They cannot be challenged if we (our bodies, our language, our writing, our thinking) remain meek and quiet and contained, as our sixth paper 'Writing as Labiaplasty', by Alison Pullen (2018), shows. Nor can we develop a new feminist politics if we ourselves practise strategies of exclusion and othering, as shown in our final paper 'This girl's life', written by Saoirse O'Shea (2018).

It is perhaps no accident that the last two of the papers in this collection rebel against academic convention through writing which invokes embodied, affective, emotional, ethical and political responses. Feminist politics is needed more so in an era of right-wing extremism, populist politics and the fascism of Brexit, Trump and Bolsanaro, the conflict in Syria and Palestine, uprisings against corrupt governments in Lebanon and Chile, the growing wealth of the rich and increasing impoverishment of the poor, the gig economy, the growth of precarity as strong men insistent on their own interests rise to power, and as so many hard-fought for rights are being eroded by rampant global capitalism. Women are always those who suffer most in such hard times. Yet, we see women's role in resistance movements strong from the Indigenous feminists fighting for land rights and climate action, the #MeToo movement and women resisting everyday sexism in all its forms.

We offer the following selection of feminist papers for the politics they offer, their opportunities for reflections, and their call to arms when new battles against patriarchy must be fought.

Learning how to turn theory into practice

'Moving out of the armchair: developing a framework to bridge the gap between feminist theory and practice' by Debra Meyerson and Deborah Kolb (2000)

Volume 7, Issue 4, of *Organization* is unusual in that it includes a symposium in which five papers explore one specific project that had failed in its aim of changing the gender structures of one organization. All five papers are merit-worthy and each could have been included in this Editors' Picks, but we will focus on Meyerson and Kolb's (2000) paper that opens the symposium. It is a contribution to learning the difficulties of translating feminist organization theory into practical strategies within organizations.

Meyerson and Kolb held a 'dual value' approach that assumes that advancing gender equity will, at the same time, increase organizational effectiveness. However, academic theory does not necessarily translate easily into organizational practice. They immediately encountered problems as they negotiated their way into the company whose chief executive had given them access. Their ideas were too vague, the project too open-ended, and managers found difficulty in understanding it. The researchers' response was to carry out a local project that would make their theory more concrete, but again abstract ideas inhibited progress, as did differences between the researchers' agendas and theories of how to act. Meyerson and Kolb then sought advice from a lively group of feminists and

developed a framework to guide the next stage of the intervention. The authors deviated from their own principles to develop a framework with four frames:

1. a liberal individualist approach to 'equip the woman' (p. 560) through training and skills development but, vitally, organizational change processes must proceed at the same time to achieve systemic changes that support women's use of their new knowledge and skills;
2. a liberal structuralist approach: 'create equal opportunity' through eliminating structural and procedural values to women's success. The succeeding two decades since this paper was published have rendered such approaches quite familiar but again if implemented in isolation the systems of power that need to be changed remain intact;
3. a women's standpoint/advantage: 'value difference'. This frame focuses on valuing rather than eliminating difference, that is, valuing attributes that are traditionally regarded as female. This approach, Meyerson and Kolb observe (p. 562) reifies sex differences and reinforces stereotypes, and does not therefore dismantle the masculine standards against which women are measured;
4. a post-equity stage, of 'resisting and re-vising the dominant discourse'. This frame moves attention away from women to the general process of organizing itself. It assumes sex differences are socially constructed, and draws on Acker's (1990) identification of five main gendering processes in organizations. These are: formal practices and policies; informal work practices; organizational symbols and images; everyday social interactions; and internalizations and expressions of gender

identities.

Together these frames provide a toolbox for organizational change agents. It involves a diagnostic process in which academics and managers/change agents work together to identify causes of inequity. Possible experiments are then identified that are put into practice so as to learn what will work to bring about change. Finally, narratives are developed that allow participants to explain the processes to themselves in their own language. Through using examples from the organization, and analyzing them within the terms of the above framework, participants were able to recognize how the organization systemically discriminated against women. The action research project could thus, after several false starts, make progress.

We recommend that anyone interested in feminist organizational practice should read the other four papers in this symposium, and judge for themselves how much women's organizational positions have or have not changed in the succeeding two decades.

'Where feminist theory meets feminist practice: border-crossing in a transnational academic feminist organization' by Jennifer Mendez and Diane Wolf (2001)

Mendez and Wolf use a feminist 'situated knowledge' approach 'rooted in [their] positionality' (p. 725) to explore how transnational processes affect the power dynamics and decision-making processes within feminist philanthropical organization. They draw on their experiences of funding international feminist grassroots activists from the global South to travel to the US to work with graduate students and university faculty. Their aim

was to 'confront the border between feminist theory and practice' (p. 730). The authors illuminate how neo-colonialism permeates understanding and anticipations, including their own, of citizens of the global North towards those of the global South. This study shows how axes of domination, including those amongst women them/ourselves, influence interpersonal and organizational dynamics in largely unexpected and undesirable ways.

Numerous borders and the difficulties of crossing them challenged the aspirations of their programme. Importantly, they had not anticipated how deeply the programme would be imbricated within and through historical power relations, such that 'internalized neo-colonialism penetrated the very micro-processes of interpersonal relations in the program' (p. 732). Despite their alertness and best endeavours, the 'program's structure itself reproduced what has been a long-standing tradition: white people in the North controlling the allocation of resources to people of color in the South' (p. 736). That is, there were major borders between the hosts and the visitors.

Another border existed within the groups of visitors. Uncomfortable and destructive relationships were facilitated because of contradictory expectations of social distance, attitudes to age and other expectations brought from participants' very different social, geographic, cultural and class backgrounds. The organisers found themselves unable to escape from the power dynamics of race, class, age and nationality (p. 739). In other words, it is naïve to assume that women will get along with each other just because they are women, and colonialist to imagine that women from this vaguely described 'global South' are homogeneous. A final border existed between the university and the programme. Its bureaucratic systems contradicted and often made it very difficult to implement the programme's desired participatory democratic approaches, and the impossibility of

reconciling the demands of the programme with the demands of Mendez and Wolf's careers caused problems for the organisers.

The authors conclude that 'neo-colonial relations continue to exert a major impact upon the lived experience of women of the South' and that despite best intentions, micro-processes of global feminist projects may be subject to reproducing, albeit unwittingly, relations of domination and oppression. Their major feminist contribution to organization studies is that feminist literature from the global North 'has limited explanatory value when transnational processes and diverse cultural contexts are taken into account' (p. 743). It ignores the 'borders of power stemming from the history of colonialism' and the 'global, regional and local economic relations of domination [that] cross-cut the new world order, and play out in the core processes of organizations' (p. 743). Rather than looking at transnational, international and local feminist development organizations through romantic, uncritical lenses, it is necessary to acknowledge more openly such tensions as are outlined in this paper.

'Passion, care, and eros in the gendered neoliberal university' by Rebecca Lund and Janne Tienari (2019)

Writing almost two decades later, Lund and Tienari (2019) show how much remains to be learned. Rebecca and Janne respond to Bell and Sinclair's (2014) call to reclaim eros as energy rather than a sexualised commodity, through exploring 'the relationship between passion, care and eros in the neoliberal university'. Defining eros as 'longing for learning and making sense of the world, becoming a whole human being, and engaging with others in this pursuit and as actions that interrupt ruling orders' (p. 99), the authors point to how

it is no 'mean feat' to experience eros in contemporary, managerialised, surveilled, competitive universities. Eros exists independently of such a workplace: it is 'manifest as longing' and 'represents an act of identifying, subverting, and surpassing dominant quality and excellence standards, as well as gender stereotypes and hierarchies' (p. 99).

This paper employs a feminist standpoint epistemology and institutional ethnographical methods to explore the experiences of junior female academics in local settings¹. The authors demonstrate the tensions between becoming the 'ideal' academic with a secure, tenured position, and the passionate pursuit of those interests that first attracted many of us to an academic career. Career success requires that junior academics be identified as having potential, and potential is equated with 'a particular form of aggressively passionate masculinity, which thrives on the individualization, intensification, and self-monitoring in neoliberal academic work' (p. 109). Thus, 'within the neoliberal university, eros in the form of uncontrolled energy and longing has little space to flourish' (p. 109).

The argument so far is familiar: the managerialised, neoliberal university in exerting ever greater control of academic work is squeezing out what many of us love about our work. What makes this paper unique is its use of passion and eros. Passion is gendered as masculine, while eros is female, although these do not relate to biological sex but to ways of behaving and being (for example, a female can pursue passion, a male eros). However, Rebecca and Janne argue that it is easier for men to practice the kinds of (passionate) masculinity desired within universities. There are consequences. Care can be sacrificed to the pursuit of papers in US journals.

To practise eros is thus to resist. Resistance may take various forms: pursuing research for its interest rather than its possibility of being published; aiming to publish in journals that may not be highly ranked; writing books and book chapters; or refusing to write in English. That is, eros implies doing work that does not count but that points the way towards possible different futures. It may involve rejecting valorized forms of writing, to ‘write differently’, and acknowledging emotions and vulnerability.

Eros thus ‘appeared not only as energy but also as longing for knowledge, growth, and engagement with others in the pursuit of harmony between the sense of academic self and action’ (p. 112). It challenges managerialism’s rule. Rebecca Lund and Janne Tienari thus do academics a great service by showing that the pull towards eros that many of us experience is not unusual and does not render us odd. It may, indeed, be the norm, albeit a norm currently smothered under the suffocating weight of the blanket of neoliberal managerialism.

We have come so far, given so much but there is much more that feminists have to offer

‘What have the feminists done for us? Feminist theory and organizational resistance’ by Robyn Thomas and Annette Davies (2005)

‘What have the feminists done for us?’ asked Robyn Thomas and Annette Davies. Their reply is that feminist theoreticians offer new ways of conceiving of one of the most

important concepts within critical analyses of organizations: resistance. Since the influential work of Harry Braverman, resistance had been conceived as a dyadic relationship between two or more actors, one more powerful than the other, in which cause/effect relationships are studied. Thomas and Davies re-conceive resistance through a feminist lens. The authors adopt feminist theory's debates about the subject, object and outcomes of feminism to structure their analysis of the identity of the subject of resistance, to question what counts as resistance and to explore its effects. This leads them to understand that the subject of resistance is an 'eternally contingent yet vigilant' (p. 719) subject that is engaged in identity politics. The challenge to classical dyadic assumptions opens possibilities of recognising other forms of resistance than large-scale revolutionary change, such as forms of micro-politics of resistance. This paper thus anticipates, and contributes very meaningfully to, a theoretical shift in resistance theory.

Thomas and Davies's arguments are based on a qualitative study of social worker professionals/managers whose resistance to managerial demands were effected not only through confrontation with management but also through re-interpretation of dominant discourses. That is, Thomas and Davies' study shows how truths can be destabilized and subjectivities challenged through developing new understanding of normalizing discourses. This changes the direction of the researcher gaze and expands prospects for action through broadening the realm of the subversive. However, they question the ability of local level forms of resistance to impact upon and transform collective norms. This is a constant tension within feminism they write, but small changes can accumulate into much bigger changes. By following their advocacy of widening the definition of resistance and

recognizing its situated construction, and also through adopting an intersectional stance, it is possible to develop subtle, routine, micro and discursive forms of resistance. Thus feminist theory's contribution to organization studies through this paper is to 'change—and is already changing—the resistance landscape within organizational analysis' (p.733) through a micro-politics containing multiple voices and adopting a 'constant vigilance' towards 'the ways that micro-processes reflect and constitute power in action' (p. 733).

'Is the 'F'-word still dirty? A past, present and future of/for feminist and gender studies in *Organization*' by Nancy Harding, Jackie Ford and Marianna Fotaki (2012)

'Is the 'F'-word still dirty?' Harding, Ford and Fotaki asked. Nancy, Jackie and Marianna examined the status of feminism and gender theory in *Organization* over the course of its first 20 years. A crude headcount showed that male authors outnumbered female authors 2:1 over those 20 years, which perhaps echoed the proportions of women to men working in critical management studies. *Organization* was born during the era of third-wave feminism and, Harding et al found, harked back to second wave feminism but also in many ways was keeping pace with third-wave feminism. The journal, they concluded (p. 53) 'fairly well represented' women's voices and feminist perspectives, and compared well with similar journals such as *Human Relations* and *Organization Studies*. However, this conclusion was tempered by the observation of feminism's marginality in the journal, with 'feminist theory used overwhelmingly by female authors, suggesting "feminism" may be something of a ghetto in which (essentialized) women can be safely contained' (p. 53).

Moreover, they observed the paucity of papers drawing on the work of major feminist theorists, with grand male theorists dominating, despite the fact that feminist theorists share similar concerns as authors who publish in *Organization* and who have developed sophisticated theories that could push forward thinking about oppression, exploitation, identity, and power, amongst other important topics within our discipline.

Harding, Ford and Fotaki then provide brief overviews of 'just a few' feminist theoreticians, to introduce their work to *Organization's* readership. These include Judith Butler, Donna Haraway, Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray, all names no doubt familiar to readers of this Editors' Picks', but not to *Organization's* wider readership. Nancy, Jackie and Marianna then discuss three bodies of feminist *theory* that could take critical management and organization studies in new directions. These include intersectionality theory, a politics of recognition, and an illustration of how feminist interpretations of more general bodies of work, in this example, the Greek myths, could generate new insights. The authors chose topics and theorists that had enthused them individually or jointly, to illustrate the rich treasure trove of ideas to be found in feminist thought. They conclude by advocating not only a more determined use of feminist theory and ideas within organization studies, but also the potential of organization studies to inform feminist theory. That is, why has our discipline not developed theories that would inform feminism more generally, given the fundamental place of work and workplace relationships in every-day lives? This question remains to be answered.

In 2012 there was much feminist work remaining to be done.

It is time to get angry

'Writing as labiaplasty' by Alison Pullen (2018)

Of the feminist papers we admire in *Organization*, two of the most recent, Pullen (2018) and O'Shea (2018) are the most personal and political, taking us back to the familiar feminist slogan that the personal *is* political. Pullen's feminine, embodied, dirty writing challenges the reader to put on her metaphorical shoes and coat and become subversive and transgressive. Without subversive activities women will remain clinging by the tips of their fingers to the inadequate public place inadequately assigned to us. Pullen argues that this can be done through writing, writing that touches, that promotes an ethico-political relationship between writer and reader.

Writing that challenges the neoliberal university which can restrict how women write and what they write about is called for. Writing is resistance against the stultifying conformity within which academics work, and against the violations of publication systems that demand conformity. This form of writing is mimetic of women's bodies: the woman's body is made shameful through attempts to govern and control them; women's writing, unless it is corralled within the straitjacket of masculine, scientific writing, becomes undisciplined (literally without discipline) and uncontrolled.

But how can we write liberational texts if we have no language with which to write, and

no ways of articulating the bodies from which we write? We have vaginas, labia, vulva; our bodies are leaky and demanding and have desires that exceed and betray us (Angel, 2012), but we cannot say ‘fanny’ or ‘vagina’ and we often disguise their musky scent and conform in body and writing. Alison suggests that women have learned to control our bodies, and subject ourselves to ‘hygiene management, corrective surgery and so on’ (p. 125). This is why writing and labiaplasty are equivalents: we have taken the knife to our bodies in the interests of conformity, and we take similar knives to our writing, cutting away at it until all its leakages are controlled. ‘Subsequently, it appears that as a female academic, I only exist by the violence conducted to me’ (Pullen, 2018, p. 125), for ‘writing as labiaplasty... mutates women’s writing and it renders woman mute’ (p. 126).

But these are difficult words to write and speak. Pullen writes about her own experiences of trying to speak them, and how they can only be spoken (at least for now) in the safe public spaces occupied by organizational feminists and friends. Breaking the taboos of speaking renders one oh so vulnerable. It takes courage to speak them outside of ‘open, generous relationships with each other’ where our embodied encounters resist ‘the epistemic violence between members of our community’. Quoting a sympathetic reviewer: women ‘are told to know our place, awaiting penetration’ (p. 128).

Pullen’s embodied writing thus aims ‘to rupture the epistemic containment that continually oppresses’, and against which such writing from the body mobilises the required politics and ethics. Rather than a politics of equality and diversity, this is a politics that is against containment – containment of the tongue, the body, the psyche, the multitudinous cuts that

imprison us in prisons we may only partially comprehend.

'This girl's life' by Saoirse O'Shea (2018)

Our final choice of paper is Saoirse O'Shea's 'This girl's life'. It explores how the heterosexual matrix affects people such as O'Shea who are labeled medically as transsexual. The relationship between trans politics and feminism can be difficult, sometimes toxic. We have chosen O'Shea's paper because it viscerally reveals the violence of refusing to understand or to live peaceably. It sang to us, because we live within a particularly unhappy zeitgeist, the era of Brexit, Trump and right-wing populism, when populations have become radically divided and unable to listen to and hear, let alone understand, each other. Saoirse writes lyrically of the effect of such politics on the embodied self. Any attempt to summarize her writing loses its affect – it must be read in its entirety.

Here are the more prosaic reasons why we recommend the paper be read. It challenges the essentialist assumptions, or rather assumptions of essentialism, that have long bedeviled relationships between feminism and trans studies. In Saoirse O'Shea's words: 'Not wanting a penis does not make me female just as having one does not make me male' (p. 9) and, as 'non-binary, I don't regard myself as "male" or "female" and my gender is not defined by the presence or absence of my penis. It's just another body part but one that a cisgender society routinely focuses on to organize binary sex/gender' (p. 10). Saoirse's writing thus takes us back to the original feminist critique of sex/gender as socially constructed on the basis of biology and takes us forward in refusing essentialism and points towards

possibilities of being neither male nor female but something freer.

We do hir paper a disservice by pointing out that, like several other papers in this ‘picks’, Saoirse O’Shea’s challenges conventional notions of methodology, while also contributing to a feminist-inspired move to challenge academic writing conventions. Xie demonstrates the difficulties and complexities of living and writing as a non-binary person within a heterosexual matrix that organizes the world into binaries. Hir arguments undermine many of our carefully constructed theories of sex and gender. The paper is educational, informing the reader about transgender through definitions of various terms. It interweaves analysis with a series of painful memories, often lyrically written, that show the violence of gender. It is this violence that merits repeating and emphasizing: gender damages, scars, punishes, subjects, subjectifies, violates. It is necessary to escape from gender if this violence is to be avoided, although that seems impossible, as O’Shea shows. Xie aims to think of gender beyond a strict binary but finds that xie fails utterly, because ‘everything here keeps returning to that binary’ (p. 15). Xie finds it impossible to ‘talk about trans folk [outside] a cis-normative dominant society’ (p. 15). Xie asks ‘can we think “gender” without conflating it as cisgender?’ (p. 15), or can we somehow ‘highlight what it means to “simply *be*”, and what makes us human rather than focus on categories that separate and make some lives unliveable?

O’Shea thus throws a challenge to us all. The first challenge to anyone who has read this far is: go and download hir paper and read it. Its power is lost in a summary: it requires reading in its entirety.

The second challenge is: where do we go from here? As we alluded throughout this Editors' Picks, feminist organization studies have gained considerable momentum in the pages of our journals, whether manuscripts overtly name feminism or not. It has not been an easy journey to get feminist work published, let alone read, engaged with and cited, even though there have been major advancements in diversity and inclusion writings across academic journals. As we move forward, acknowledging the struggles between feminist writers requires further space, as well as turning to those silent voices whose writings have not yet eventuated. The intersectional struggles against hegemony in our academic institutions and journals requires constant work, and this is exhausting work which requires collective action by men and women who can bring about change. *Organization* is one of the few journals where feminist research doesn't have to be justified, and we look forward to the pages of the journal being flooded with feminist papers that: embody the differences between feminist theory and practice; critique capitalism and related hegemonies; introduce feminist philosophers that enable history to be re-read through women; develop feminist methodology; present empirical accounts of feminist organizing and organization; demonstrate feminist activism against patriarchy; and present feminist writing.

Editors' Picks references

Note: Following Barbara Czarniawska and Guje Sevón we use first names as a way to resist gendered referencing which privileges men and mask women's contributions.

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ⁱ This most recent paper in our list demonstrates how methodolatry's grip has extended through the 21st century. Mendez and Wolf (2001) and Thomas and Davies (2005) could devote very little space to discussing their research methods and theoretical or epistemological location, whereas Lund and Tienari devote approximately 15% of their paper to methodology. Our final two papers resist these demands and perhaps demonstrate how methodolatry inhibits the articulating of important arguments.