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There are many different viewpoints and discourses that lay claim to understanding the nature of gender. Few topics have generated as much interest within the social sciences, as well as in the popular media. In the spirit of Kurt Lewin, we know that the theories we hold have practical implications for how we live and act. For this reason, it is useful to explore the background of these theoretical foundations as a way to introduce the articles in this issue and relate them to the ongoing gender debates in organizational and social science. After briefly summarizing the essentialist view, sex role theory, and social constructionist theory, I will summarize the thrust of the four articles in this journal, frame them within the context of the constructionist perspective, and suggest how they add to this important debate.

Some have argued from an essentialist view of gender. In effect, this view holds that the dichotomous biological categories of male and female mark the essential difference between men and women. Thus boys by biological nature are more aggressive and girls more nurturing. Sociobiological theories, such as Tiger's (1969) popular study, *Men in Groups*, which emphasize the innate aggressiveness and competitive nature of men, fall into this category. Following this argument, social structures and cultural practices in which men are more likely to hold positions of power, are simply mirroring human nature. This is one in a line of recent arguments – including arguments for the heritability of IQ and the racial basis of intelligence – that demonstrate that social inequality is biologically determined.

A body of research that goes further in including the influence of social forces on gender has been sex role theory. Following the influence of Talcott Parsons, this perspective emphasizes the social expectations and stereotypical character of the male and female sex role. While making contributions regarding the influence of social expectations in guiding behaviour, it is still lacking as an explanatory framework. In a powerful critique, Connell (1987) points out that sex role theory tends to ignore questions of power differences between men and women; ignores the dynamic processes by which gender relations are contested and negotiated; reifies expectation, exaggerates consensus, fails to appreciate alternatives to the stereotypical norms, and does not concern itself with historical change. In short, sex role theory tends to accept gender as dichotomous categories that are historically stable and replacing biological determinism with a kind of cultural determinism.

Another approach, the one adopted in the articles in this journal, views gender as a human invention, much like language, that organizes social life. This constructionist view argues that gender is a social institution that has produced historically variable sets of norms and expectations regarding how one ought to behave, decide, think, how one should relate, where and how one should work. Gender is a dynamic concept, the meaning of which emerges from within a contested field of ongoing relational dynamics. Masculinity and femininity achieve meaning within patterns of difference. Symbols and markers associated with these categories signal differential exclusion, which groups are similar and which are preferred. Physical strength, for example, is associated with masculinity in this culture, and is dependent for its meaning on a definition of weakness that is associated with femininity.

These differences are symbolically and elaborately marked through early socialization. We are taught from a very early age to separate from one another and expect different behaviours. As Thorne (1990) points out in her penetrating study of children at play, children are taught to produce gender arrangements actively. Gender relations are seen in such activities as "forming lines, choosing seats, teasing, gossiping, seeking access to or avoiding particular activities" (Thorne, 1990, p. 157). In her study, the two sexes are extensively separated. Classroom organization, playground location and play activities are gender typed. Games, competition, informal teasing and gossiping reinforce their sense that girls and boys are opposite and in conflict. Commonalities are ignored in favour of chronically marking gender boundaries. Connell remarks, "If the difference is natural why does it need to be marked so heavily?" (Connell, 1987, p. 80). And Gayle Rubin writes, "Far from being an expression of natural differences, exclusive gender identity is the suppression of natural similarities" (Rubin, 1975).

Difference, of course, usually implies power. Gender is a "site of difference", that constructs relations of domination, exploitation, subordination, marginalization, and resistance (Roper and Tosh, 1991). The boundaries, norms, and rules that guide gender create what Connell (1987) calls a gender order. The gender order, however, is not a stable structure, but can be conceived as a historically dynamic process in a constant condition of change. There is no monolithic, stable masculinity, for example. At any given cultural and historical moment, some images of masculinity are hegemonic, some are marginalized. What is deemed hegemonic masculinity is in relation to marginalized and subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to the prevalent concept of femininity. One of the dynamics of a gender order based on hegemonic masculinity that valorizes strength, unemotional logic, detached and instrumental reason (Seidler, 1989) is that marginalized genders are associated with femininity. Women and gays, for example, are seen as weak and emotional. When the dominant group is upheld as the norm, what we often fail to notice is how the dominant group evolves in comparison to other conceptions of masculinity and femininity within the structure of inequality.

This order shows up in all social institutions, including the family, the school, the state, and organizational life. The implications of this bias are vast and beyond the scope of this article, but it has been well documented how the gender order is implicated in the division of labour (see Acker, 1990) in which women are encouraged to assume emotionally supportive roles; similarly, the gender order is implicated in relations of power and opportunity where the "glass ceiling" effect is well documented (Connell, 1987; Lorber, 1994).

Gender is a powerful institution with rules and patterns of expectation regarding what is "normal". Most of us learn to comply with these rules and experience them as natural and common sense. However, these structures have no validity other than through the daily practices and actions that people engage in. The constructionist view holds that human beings are agents, whose actions and practices either accomplish or challenge the taken-for-granted gender order. Humans behave in ways that are appropriate to these learned norms, or they resist and rebel against them, or they transform them. What they cannot do is ignore them. Thus, gender is neither a biological necessity nor a stable role set that determines behaviour. Human beings actively accomplish, or "do gender" (West and Zimmerman, 1987) continuously – in the way we talk, the way we walk, the way we shake hands, the way we dress.

It is within this context that the articles in this issue can be more fully appreciated. These authors, each in their own way, illustrate that gender is not a stable or monolithic institution, but a dynamic set of patterns. They address the question of how the structures that constrain and facilitate practice can themselves become objects of transformation.

Toni King reminds us that simply breaking through the glass ceiling is not the only battle that awaits those who have been excluded. In her article, "Witness us in our battles: four student projections of black female academics" she contends that when black women enter the academic profession, they are subject to subtle role expectations that remain invisible and unarticulated to the majority projecting them. In the spirit of Zinn *et al.*'s (1986) powerful critique of feminism as too exclusively focusing on gender to the exclusion of the dynamics of race and class, King argues that black women professors often become the target of students' unmet needs through four role projections: the good mother, the degraded authority, the exception, and the ally in marginality. King relays stories and "battle scars" of black women professors who have been the targets of such fantasies.

As the author explores each of these roles, it becomes clear that these projections are not just individual bias, but are embedded within larger social-historical scripts. For example, students' expectations that these women will act as the "good mother" are linked with the image of the black woman as "mammy".

Some of these scripts have become so tacit and commonplace that the professors themselves internalize them and collude with these expectations. Such a compliant stance, while understandable, is dangerous. Often other men and women of colour fail to challenge these oppressive stereotypes. As one of King's informants put it, it becomes important to "watch (your) back". Sadly, within

oppressive social institutions, those who should be allies turn against one another.

King proposes a radical change agenda. She insists that black women must make a deliberate choice not to collude with these role strategies and interrupt these strong expectations even if refusing to co-operate is risky and takes considerable energy. A refusal to collude, however, if it remains only a negation, will not change existing structures. By committing to articulate her own feelings and encouraging others to do the same, she stays connected, is able to stay "playful" and flexible, and more fully human with the students and colleagues who need to learn about the effects of their projections. Such a move is essential if change is to occur – to stay humanly connected rather than simply withdraw from others. She concludes that it is essential healing for black women to tell their stories, to listen to one another, and to create theories that explore and give voice to these often unnoticed experiences.

Cliff Cheng's article, "Multi-level gender conflict analysis and organizational change" is a testimony to how often we are unconsciously "doing gender" when we think we are doing something else. His analysis speaks to the pervasiveness of gender dynamics in everyday life and the fragile nature of face-to-face interactions when gender is embedded within an ensemble of power differences. As part of an organizational ethnography, he explores a seemingly "normal" conversation between a man and a woman employed in an organization. Even individual utterances implicate agents in a social history of gender relations. This exchange demonstrates Bakhtin's (1986) notion of heteroglossia, the idea that every interaction is a relationship between two individuals in appearance only. Words carry whole perspectives that reverberate with a myriad possible meanings that both reflect and reproduce power relations.

One man's descriptive comment ignites a spiral of meanings far greater than the literal words themselves, recalling Ricouer's famous dictum that the text's career escapes the finite horizon lived by the author. Through uncovering the multiple layers of meaning inferred through various shifting social and historical standpoints, we see how deeply gender is implicated in own's self-identity. As Cheng explores the layers of this misunderstanding, he experiments with the implications of varying subject positions – previous relationships, family background, concepts of masculinity and femininity, class and racial membership, authority relations at work – demonstrating that one cannot escape a horizon of learned gender patterns.

In Cheng's micro example, the woman doubts her attractiveness and worth; the man wonders about his strength and decisiveness. The conversation implicates many strands of gendered expectations including the woman's jealousy towards other women deemed attractive by modern conventions, her suspicion of men's *real* motives (all he's interested in is sex), the man's self-doubts about manliness. As Foucault (1972) points out, one's identity is dependent on the forms of discourse available, what the social order defines as normal. Hegemony is reproduced through discursive forms and media images of cheerleaders and

beauty queens as part of the surveillance that defines and orders what is normal and ideal for women.

These various imagined implications create real consequences: they create barriers to genuine dialogue between the man and the woman, and apparently contribute to tension in the relationship between the two women as well. Neither can convey the meaning they intend nor control how it is construed. The tragedy in Cheng's ethnography is that both are unable to bridge the gap that they have created – like characters in a Chekhov play in which figures go on talking but never communicating.

"Solidarity and praxis: being a change agent in a university setting" by Mary Boyce relates the author's experience of "coming out" and publicly declaring her difference in a setting that espouses conservative gender norms. In this academic context, she discovers that people form tacit assumptions about who she is, what her values are, and who she lives with. Most submit to the social institution of gendered expectations regarding normalcy that render a privileged position to heterosexual dominants. To stand up against this force and interrupt this expectation requires courage to speak one's voice. For Boyce, witnessing another's disclosure was an inspiring moment that forged a resolve and provided an alternative script for how one could relate. This moment interrupted her sense of isolation and inspired her to find her own voice. Her decision to speak up and interrupt others' assumptions becomes a catalytic experience in her personal development. She is now able to see herself as courageous rather than simply marginalized and invisible.

Similarly, this is a learning moment for those who observe such disclosures. Witnesses suddenly become conscious of their tacit assumptions and the pain that others experience when rendered invisible. This reminds us of John Dewey's dictum that learning is fundamentally a social event – to learn is to see the social consequences of one's unaware patterns.

"Three women's stories of feeling, reflection, voice and nurturance: from life to consulting" by three collaborators known as Spirit Hawk is a courageous, revealing exploration into personal transformation and social change. To interrupt dysfunctional processes requires the courage to speak one's voice, but where does this voice come from? Some transformation must occur, some decision not to use the language of the oppressive social structures that one is negating. Each of the three women collaborators shares compelling stories in which she recounts moments of critical self-insight as a result of personal crisis.

Each of these personal crises – experiencing divorce, surviving cancer and a hysterectomy, being the victim of rape, the death of a husband, competing in an unsupportive environment – is implicated with what it means to be a woman within a gender order in which women are denied access to many of the resources men take for granted. What makes these crises growthful epiphanies is the personal decision not to avoid the deep feelings of loss, pain, and resentment, but to explore those feelings deeply. These personal decisions have political implications: such reclaiming of personal power becomes the basis of much of their work as change agents. When members of client organizations experience

distress and organizations suffer from dysfunctional routines, these women do not attempt to avoid, placate, or smooth over others' pain. Rather they make room for others to explore their feelings and to tell their painful stories. Having more fully experienced the feelings associated with pain and loss, they are better able to stay present with others and allow them to explore their own experience. Creating a supportive holding environment so that people can articulate their pain allows them to stay open to inquiry, suspend judgement and more fully reclaim their power over the oppressive condition.

Summary and conclusions

One of the unfortunate consequences of positivist research that documents and describes social structure is that it can give the impression that the world being described exists independently of the participants' practices. Actors are often seen as passive. The researcher is simply discovering and registering the real world rather than having any complicity in the discovery or in any way altering it. Researchers often collude with oppressive practices and speak "of" and "for" the other while "occluding ourselves and our own investments" (Fine, 1994). bell hooks passionately urges researchers to attend to their location within the social order and whether their voices pose resistance and/or propose hope for possible liberation:

> Within the complex and ever shifting realities of power relations, do we position ourselves on the side of colonizing mentality? Or do we continue to stand in political resistance with the oppressed, ready to offer our ways of seeing and theorizing, of making culture, toward that revolutionary effort which seeks to create space where there is unlimited access to pleasure and power of knowing, where transformation is possible (hooks, 1990, p. 145).

The authors of the articles in this issue adopt the feminist standpoint tradition of giving voice to themselves and to the actors they study. They treat the personal as theoretically and politically enlightening and they pay attention to the "politics of location".

Subjective experiences are not unitary, but ambiguous, fragmentary and contradictory – a familiar theme to postmodernists. Narrative approaches to research are important because they challenge the Enlightenment conception of the autonomous, rational self. Stories allow us to see how people interpret experience, how they make sense of everyday social life, how they show themselves to themselves. Narrative approaches to research also bring the researcher into closer engagement with participants. Researchers grapple with unwieldy material – interviews, observations, introspections – and then recontextualize and reconstruct in descriptive accounts that seek to preserve the vitality of lived experience.

In this sense stories are important vehicles for giving voice to those traditionally invisible, marginalized, or stigmatized. The articles in this journal, in refusing to hide the authors' and participants' subjective experiences, reveal the researchers themselves transformed and empowered by the mere act of sharing stories.

By presenting stories of actual experiences, each of the articles in this issue problematizes the validity, morality, and necessity of the gender order. They depict individuals making choices to challenge what others have learned to experience as normal. Taken together, these articles demonstrate that the gender order is a dynamic structure. The authors, and the people they write about, suggest some of the dynamics that occur when one attempts to change the taken-for-granted structures and patterns.

One theme that emerges from these pieces is the importance of calling attention to oppressive practices and the refusal to comply with norms that render one invisible or distorted. While the authors relay some of the painful consequences of experiencing marginality, they refuse to stay victimized. They negate the oppressive practices that marginalize those who are different, and hold out the possibility that those who promote these practices are open to learning and changing.

What are the conditions that make these occasions for learning and change? As change agents, these authors imply that it is necessary to confront and disclose power inequities, forms or injustice, and make oppressive patterns explicit. But more importantly than what is to be protested, these authors make a passionate argument for *how* such confrontations should be constructed: they are occasions not to separate from and chastise those who have complied with these practices, but while articulating a critique, also imagining a way to make deeper connections with those one is interrupting. To follow Mary Boyce's story, "coming out" is a metaphor of authenticity, a metaphor for everyone who risks going against unthinking habit, patterned expectations, institutional norms, and social oppression in all of its forms. However, as these authors use such occasions to create more authentic bonds, "coming out", as depicted in these stories, is really a "going in" to others' worlds, an opportunity to be seen anew, to dislodge the taken-for-granted assumptions that marginalize those who are different. In this sense, there is a spirit of optimism in these pieces.

Central to this transformation is the authors' experiences of "going through" crisis episodes with feeling and reflection. As Spirit Hawk argues, these experiences, when reflected on, not only forge a stronger sense of identity, but also allow the individual to approach others with openness and vulnerability. They support others to experience a similar awakening. In this sense, these essays and studies are themselves interventions into the gender order. By sharing their stories and experiences, they inspire hope that it is possible to overcome the consequences of a gender order that "suppresses natural similarities". Our hope is that they create space "where transformation is possible".

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