# THEORIES OF GENDER IN ORGANIZATIONS: A NEW APPROACH TO ORGANIZATIONAL ANALYSIS AND CHANGE[1]

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## ABSTRACT

*This chapter presents a framework for understanding gender and organizational change. We consider three traditional treatments of gender and discuss the limitations of each as a basis for organizational analysis and change. We then propose a fourth approach, which treats gender as a complex set of social relations enacted across a range of social practices in organizations. Having been created largely by and for men, these social practices tend to reflect and support men's experiences and life situations and, therefore, maintain a gendered social order in which men and particular forms of masculinity dominate (Acker, 1990). We provide numerous examples of how social practices, ranging from formal policies and procedures to informal patterns of everyday social interaction, produce inequities while appearing to be gender-neutral. Drawing on previous research and our own three-year action research project, we develop an intervention strategy for changing gender relations in organizations accordingly.*

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* Order of authorship is alphabetical; we produced this chapter in full collaboration.

**Research in Organizational Behaviour, Volume 22, pages 103–151.**
**2000 by Elsevier Science Inc.**
**ISBN: 0–7623–0641–6**

## INTRODUCTION

There can be little doubt that women have made progress in raising the height of the glass ceiling – that invisible barrier that prevents some groups from ascending to the highest-level positions in organizations. Recent statistics show that the number of Fortune 500 companies that have at least one woman among their top five earners has doubled since 1995, and, for the first time, over half of these companies have more than one woman corporate officer (Catalyst, 1999a). The data also suggest, however, that the progress toward equity has been slow, partial, and superficial. In Fortune 500 companies, women hold only 11% of board seats and just 5.1% of the seven top titles – Chairman, Vice Chairman, Chief Executive Officer, President, Chief Operating Officer, Senior Executive Vice President, and Executive Vice President. In addition, only 7% of corporate officers holding line jobs, which are those most likely to lead to leadership positions, are women. Top earning women earn only 68 cents in salary and bonus to every dollar their male counterparts earn (Catalyst, 1999a). The data also indicate that it is almost exclusively white women who have made these advances. Although 12.1% of women in the U.S. workforce are African American, they constitute only 6.6% of women managers. Women of color hold far fewer corporate officer positions in Fortune 500 companies than do white women. Women managers of color earn 58 cents to every dollar white men managers earn, which is also less than men managers of color earn (Catalyst, 1999b).

Not only has women's progress been slow and restricted primarily to white women, those who have progressed have often done so by assimilating, however uncomfortably, into predominantly male organizations (Ely, 1995a). The organizations themselves have changed little, and women who ascend to top positions tend to be relatively disempowered (Martin & Meyerson, 1998). Moreover, there is ample evidence that neither sex roles nor relations between men and women within the home have changed appreciably (Hochschild, 1989), which limits the level and kinds of changes that can take place at work.

What explains the tenacity of these disparities? Why has the large number of organizational efforts to recruit and advance women failed to result in substantial gains for women? Why do women remain relatively powerless at work? We propose that the answers to these questions lie in organizations' failure to question – and change – prevailing notions about what constitutes the most appropriate and effective ways to define and accomplish work, recognize and reward competence, understand and interpret behavior. These unquestioned work practices support deeply entrenched divisions and disparities between

men and women, often in subtle and insidious ways. We argue further that the failure of organizations to change prevailing work practices is due in part to the limited conception of gender traditionally used to define and address problems of gender inequity. This limited conception of gender also results in solutions that do little to broaden men's opportunities to participate at home or to relieve men of the burdens they face in the traditional masculine role.

In this chapter, we review three traditional approaches to gender and organizational change, outline the shortcomings of each, and propose an alternative approach. (See Table 1 for a summary.) We based our approach on a broad range of theoretical and empirical work, and illustrate it with examples from our own and others' research.[2] Despite the considerable insights we have gained from our analysis, our proposed alternative remains at the level of theory, supported by empirical observations but as yet largely untested.

## THREE TRADITIONAL APPROACHES TO GENDER AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

The burgeoning literature on feminist theory and feminist treatments of organizations suggests a variety of ways to classify different approaches to gender and the 'gender problem' in organizations (e.g. Calas & Smircich, 1996; Ely, 1999; Harding, 1986; Tong, 1989). In our typology, we identify three traditional approaches as well as a fourth, non-traditional approach (Kolb, Fletcher, Meyerson, Merrill-Sands & Ely, 1998). This typology is rooted in the distinctions we see among different conceptions of gender and the resultant courses of action organizations have taken to address the problem of gender inequity. We conceptualize each approach as a 'frame' for understanding what gender is and why inequities exist between men and women at work. Implied within each frame is a vision of gender equity and an approach for achieving that vision.

### *Frame 1: Fix the Women*

The first and perhaps most common approach to gender equity stems from a liberal strain of political theory, which posits that individuals rise and fall on their own merits. From this perspective, gender is an individual characteristic marked by one's biological category as male or female. Sex-role socialization produces individual differences in attitudes and behaviors between men and women, which have rendered women less skilled than men to compete in the world of business. These socialized differences account for inequalities between men and women in the workplace. Accordingly, if women developed

appropriate traits and skills, they would be better equipped to compete with men. They would advance at rates comparable to men and would assume a proportionate share of leadership positions. Within this frame, organizational interventions designed to eliminate sex inequality eradicate socialized differences by strengthening women's skills to give them the wherewithal, as individuals, to perform on a par with men. Women are the sole targets of such efforts.

***Table 1.*** Approaches to Gender Equity and Change

| | Definition of Gender | Problem Definition | Vision of Gender Equity | Approach To Change | Benefits | Limitations |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Frame 1<br><br>Fix the Women | Socialized sex differences | Women lack skills, know-how to 'play the game' | No differences between men and women; women are just like men | Develop women's skills through training, mentoring, etc. | Helps individual women succeed; creates role models when they succeed | Leaves system and male standards intact; blames women as source of problem |
| Frame 2<br><br>Value the Feminine | Socialized sex differences; separate spheres of activity | Women's skills not valued or recognized | Differences recognized, valued, preserved | Diversity training; reward and celebrate differences, 'women's ways' | Legitimates differences; 'feminine' approach valued; tied to broader diversity initiatives | Reinforces stereotypes; leaves processes in place that produce differences |
| Frame 3<br><br>Create Equal Opportunities | Sex differences in treatment, access, opportunity | Differential structures of power and opportunity yield less access, fewer resources for women | Create level playing field by reducing structural barriers, biases | Policies to compensate for structural barriers, e.g. affirmative action, work family benefits | Helps with recruiting, retaining, advancing women; eases work-family stress | Has minimal impact on organizational culture; backlash; work-family remains 'woman's problem' |

***Table 1.*** Continued.

| | Definition of Gender | Problem Definition | Vision of Gender Equity | Approach To Change | Benefits | Limitations |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Frame 4<br><br>Assess and Revise Work Culture | System of oppressive relations reproduced in and by social practices | Social practices designed by and for white, heterosexual, class-privileged men appear neutral but uphold gender as fixed, ranked oppositions | Process of identifying and revising oppressive social practices; gender no longer an axis of power | Emergent, localized process of incremental change involving critique, narrative revision, experi-mentation | Exposes apparent neutrality of practices as oppressive; more likely to change organization culture; continuous process of learning | Resistance to deep change; difficult to sustain |

According to this approach, educating and training more women for business and professional careers is key to easing the difficulties organizations have had recruiting them into positions traditionally held by men. These efforts produce an enhanced applicant pool and create a pipeline of qualified women to fill these positions. Executive training programs, leadership development courses, networking workshops, and assertiveness training programs that focus on helping women develop the skills and styles considered requisite for success are representative of this approach (Hennig & Jardim, 1977; Powell, 1987). These interventions, which are aimed at 'fixing' women, are the ameliorative strategies organizational researchers commonly recommend to create greater equality in the workplace (for review, see Ely, 1999). Typically organizations use these strategies as their first response to difficulties they experience promoting and retaining women at the same rates as men.

Extensive organizational and psychological research on sex differences, in which sex is a predictor of such attributes as leadership style (for reviews, see Eagly & Johnson, 1990) and negotiation skills (e.g. Stevens, Bavetta & Gist, 1993; Kolb & Coolidge, 1992) is rooted in this general perspective. Yet those who have conducted meta-analyses of sex difference research typically conclude that such differences are minimal at best (e.g. Eagly & Johnson,

1990). Consequently a number of scholars have urged social scientists to abandon this line of inquiry (e.g. Epstein, 1988; Mednick, 1989). Moreover, women have not made significant inroads into their respective fields despite the fact that they currently constitute nearly 50% of graduating law and medical school classes and hold nearly 38% of MBA degrees granted annually in the U.S. (AACSB, 1999; Epstein, 1993). While better education has unquestionably increased the number of eligible women in 'the pipeline', and training programs have helped women develop valuable skills and play the game as well as – or better than – many men (Heim, 1992), the glass ceiling persists (Benokratis, 1998; Valian, 1998). In addition these interventions are typically predicated solely on an understanding of the needs of white women in the managerial and professional ranks, as if those needs coincided with the needs of all women in the organization. This bias is likely reinforced by an overemphasis on sex differences, which have been more fully developed and explored between white, middle-class men and women, as the primary means to understanding the role of gender in organizations (Nkomo, 1992). This has left other women to fend for themselves and places additional stresses on race and class relations in organizations, especially among women (Blake, 1999). Finally, these interventions can also have a negative impact on gender relations by generating backlash among men who see these programs, at best, as providing unfair advantages to women and, at worst, as causing an erosion of the organization's talent pool (e.g. Tsui, Egan & O'Reilly, 1992).

Interventions recommended in this frame purposely leave existing organizational policies and structures intact and are meant to assimilate (some) women with minimal disruption to the status quo. We argue that the limited and sometimes negative impact these interventions have had is due largely to this fact. As others have noted, unless change efforts challenge existing power arrangements in organizations, people from traditionally under-represented groups will remain marginalized in tenuous and often untenable positions (Cox, 1993; Thomas, 1991; Thomas & Ely, 1996).

### *Frame 2: Value the Feminine*

The second approach to gender we have identified exists in nearly perfect opposition to the first. Although its conception of gender remains socialized differences between men and women, its proponents argue that these differences should not be eliminated, but rather, celebrated. According to this perspective, 'women's difference' from men, in particular, their 'relationship-orientation' (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986; Gilligan, 1982), which has traditionally marked them as ill-suited for the hard-driving, task

orientation of the workplace, in fact, constitutes an effective and much-needed management style (Calvert & Ramsey, 1992; Fondas, 1997). Women have been disadvantaged because organizations place a higher value on behaviors, styles, and forms of work traditionally associated with men, masculinity, and the public sphere of work, while devaluing, suppressing, or otherwise ignoring those traditionally associated with women, femininity, and the private sphere of home and family (e.g. Collinson & Hearn, 1994; Fletcher, 1999; Kilbourne, Farkus, Beron & Weir, 1994). The goal of interventions developed from within this frame, therefore, is to give voice to a women's perspective, to articulate and exonerate women's ways of being. It envisions a revised social order in organizations, one that would celebrate women in their feminized difference rather than devalue them as "imperfect copies of the Everyman" (Di Stefano, 1990: 67).

Interventions suggested by this approach include consciousness-raising and training to make people aware of the differences between women's and men's styles, skills, and perspectives; to point out the ways in which feminine activities, such as listening, collaborating, nurturing, and behind-the-scenes peacemaking, have been devalued in the public sphere of work; and to demonstrate the benefits of these activities. Rosener (1995) has been a strong and vocal proponent of this view, arguing further that capitalizing on 'women's advantage' can strengthen a company's competitive advantage in its global markets.

Although many corporations have undertaken the kinds of gender-awareness programs this approach recommends, usually under the rubric of 'valuing diversity', there is no evidence that simply recognizing something as valuable will make it so (Fletcher & Jacques, 1999). Rather, feminine attributes are valued only in the most marginal sense, since they stand in contrast to the organization's norms, which continue to reflect some version of masculine experience. Moreover, critics of this approach have suggested that it can actually reinforce sex stereotypes and the power imbalance between men and women (e.g. Ridgeway, 1997). Calas & Smircich (1993), for example, have argued that the case for the 'feminization' of management fails to alter the relative status and value of these traditionally female activities. Rather, it does little more than reinforce women's appropriateness for performing what are essentially the 'housekeeping' duties of management, tending the corporate fires on the home front, while men are out conquering the global frontiers and exercising the real power in today's multinational corporations. Thus, this approach may simply create and justify an ever more sophisticated form of sex segregation at work. Others (e.g. Epstein, 1988; Mednick, 1989) have urged social scientists to abandon notions about women's unique qualities and

contributions, based on the lack of quantitative empirical support for sex differences.

In addition, feminist theorists of gender have pointed out that the attempt within this approach to preserve 'women's difference' is also problematic because it does so at the expense of women's transformation and liberation from the oppressive conventions of femininity (Di Stephano, 1990: 77). Indeed, some have argued that a fundamental flaw of this approach is its failure to recognize that the feminine itself has been partly constituted by its existence within the male-dominated social structure it ostensibly seeks to oppose (Fletcher, 1994). Its proponents have mistakenly taken the meanings that have come to be associated with women under certain oppressive conditions of history to inhere in the real nature of women themselves. This refusal to criticize the feminine assumes that women are not in some ways damaged by their social experience. Ironically, if proponents of this view were to examine too critically the oppressive structures that give rise to this highly exalted, woman's point of view, they would invite a question that subverts their central premise: What would happen to woman's point of view if these oppressive structures were destroyed? Hence, the wish to celebrate woman's goodness would seem to require the perpetuation of her subordination (Ely, 1999; Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1988).

Finally, like the preceding frame, this one fails to incorporate other aspects of people's identity. Organizational interventions based on a Frame 2 understanding are predicated on particular, dominant images of feminine and masculine, those that are heterosexual, white, and class-privileged. They not only fail to challenge the hierarchical valuing of these categories, they are erroneously based on particular versions of masculine and feminine as if these were universal, enacted in the same way with the same meaning across all groups of men and women. As a result, this approach also targets a limited group of women.

### *Frame 3: Create Equal Opportunity*

The third approach to gender equity focuses on structural barriers to women's recruitment and advancement. From this perspective, gender is still framed as differences between men and women; however, these differences result, not from socialization processes, but from differential structures of opportunity and power that block women's access and advancement. These include hiring, evaluation, and promotion processes that not only reflect sexist attitudes toward and expectations of women, but also reward men's structural position over women's (Kanter, 1977; Reskin, 1988; Ridgeway, 1993; Strober, 1984). For

example, differences in the composition of men's and women's social and professional networks gives men greater access to information and support (Podolny & Baron, 1997; Burt 1992; Ibarra, 1992; Kram, 1986; Morrison, White & Velsor, 1987). Professional and managerial women, who are more likely to be in token positions, are subject to increased performance pressures, isolation from informal social and professional networks, and stereotyped role encapsulation (for reviews, see Konrad & Gutek, 1987; Konrad, Winter & Gutek, 1992; Martin, 1985). Similarly, women's under-representation in the upper echelons of organizations has had a negative effect on women both at those levels and lower down in the organization (Ely, 1994; 1995a). These problems contribute to the sex segregation of occupations and workplaces, which, in turn, both accounts for and justifies pay and status inequalities between men and women (England, 1984; Kanter, 1977; Pfeffer & Davis-Blake, 1987; Reskin & Padavic, 1994; Reskin & Roos, 1990; Ridgeway, 1997; Strober, 1984). The goal of interventions in this frame is to create equal opportunities for men and women in the organization by dismantling these structural barriers to equality.

Interventions designed within this frame are largely policy-based. They include a number of familiar remedies, such as: instituting affirmative action programs that revise recruiting procedures with the aim of increasing the proportion of women in positions traditionally held by men; establishing more transparent promotion policies to ensure fairness (Acker & Van Houten, 1974); instituting formal mentoring programs to compensate for men's greater access to informal networks (e.g. Kram, 1986; McCambley, 1999); constructing a range of possible career paths to provide alternatives to 'up or out' internal labor market practices (Schwartz, 1989); and introducing flexible work requirements and other work-family programs to accommodate the disproportionate responsibility for dependent care, which typically falls to women (Hochschild, 1989; Kossek & Block, 1999; Lewis & Lewis, 1996; Raabe, 1996). All of these policy-based programs are designed to eliminate or compensate for structural barriers that make it more difficult for women to compete with men.

These interventions have undoubtedly helped improve the material conditions of women's lives. In particular, they have helped organizations recruit, retain, and promote more women in entry and middle levels and, to a lesser extent, senior levels as well. This, in turn, has increased the number of role models and same-sex mentors for women and decreased the constraints and stresses of tokenism, creating an environment that is more hospitable to women (Crosby, 1999). Nevertheless, they have provided no panacea. Some of these efforts have facilitated little progress and, in some cases, have even caused

regress (Bailyn, 1993). For example, formal mentoring programs have generally not proved successful in giving women useful connections to influential colleagues (Chao, Walz & Gardner, 1992). In addition, while flexible work benefits might be on the books, many resist using them for fear that doing so will hurt their careers or create backlash (Rapoport et al., 1996). These programs are typically implemented as accommodations to women, and sometimes only as a device to placate and retain individual women who have proved their worthiness (Hochschild, 1989). Using these programs in this way can reinforce sex stereotypes, or generate backlash among men who feel excluded from such benefits and resentful of the extra work they feel they must do to compensate for labor losses these programs incur. Backlash against affirmative action has gained momentum as well, and even its proponents warn of the negative impact affirmative action can have if perceived as an excuse for lowering standards (Heilman, Block & Lucas, 1992; Heilman, Simon & Repper, 1987). All of these interventions attempt to change structures that produce inequality without corresponding interventions into beliefs that legitimate the inequality. Without the latter form of intervention, gender inequality will play out in alternative structural forms (Ridgeway, 1997). Finally, as with those efforts undertaken within Frames 1 and 2, many of these efforts – especially those aimed at promotion and retention – have tended to assist only certain women: those who are white and relatively class-privileged. In a recent survey of women managers of color in Fortune 1000 companies, for example, the vast majority of respondents reported that while their organizations were increasingly gearing their recruitment efforts toward women of color, parallel efforts to promote and retain them have lagged (Catalyst, 1999b). Thus, as in the first two frames, race, class, and other aspects of identity, when considered, are rarely more than add-on concerns, despite many scholars' conclusions that these aspects of identity shape women's experiences differently from the way they shape men's (Cox & Nkomo, 1990; Nkomo, 1992).

We conclude that, although interventions recommended by this approach, unlike the previous two, target organizational policies and structures, their impact on gender inequities is limited. Implementing policies that accommodate existing systems does not fundamentally challenge the sources of power or the social interactions that reinforce and maintain the status quo.

A number of scholars has traced the shortcomings of these three approaches to their roots in different strands of liberal feminist theory, pointing to these theories' limited conceptions of gender as at least partially responsible for organizations' inability to achieve fully their gender equity goals (e.g. Meyerson & Kolb, forthcoming; Calas & Smircich, 1996). In particular, the

interventions derived from liberal feminist theories, though responsible for important changes in organizations, are not sufficient to disrupt the pervasive and deeply entrenched imbalance of power in the social relations between men and women. To augment these efforts, we depart from these more traditional approaches and introduce a fourth frame for understanding and addressing the problem.

### *Frame 4: A Non-traditional Approach to Gender*

Frame 4 is distinguished by its conception of gender and its grounding in a different set of theoretical and epistemological positions.[3] From this perspective, gender is neither an individual characteristic nor simply a basis for discrimination. Rather, it is a complex set of social relations enacted across a range of social practices that exist both within and outside of formal organizations. Here we focus our attention on the social practices, ranging from formal policies and procedures to informal patterns of everyday social interaction, within formal organizations. These social practices tend to reflect and support men's experiences and life situations, because they have been created largely by and for men (Acker, 1990; Bailyn, 1993; Martin, 1996; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Now taken as the *sine qua non* of organizational life, they appear to be gender neutral. These social practices, however, maintain a gendered social order in which men and particular forms of masculinity predominate, because they grow out of the conditions that characterize men's lives. The intervention strategy implicated in this conception of gender is one that continuously identifies and disrupts that social order and revises the structural, interactive, and interpretive practices in organizations accordingly (Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000). There is no identifiable endpoint of this approach; rather, the process of change it advocates is both means and ends.

Below, we explicate further this conception of gender, the formulation of the problem of gender inequity that grows from it, the vision we developed as an alternative, and the approach to change we propose to achieve that vision. Throughout, we draw on existing literature as well as our own and others' research (Rapoport et al., 1996; Coleman & Rippin, forthcoming; Kolb & Merrill-Sands, 1999; Merrill-Sands, Fletcher & Acosta, 1999; Meyerson & Kolb, forthcoming) to illustrate how gender operates from a Frame 4 perspective.

### *Conception of Gender*

Within Frame 4, gender is the set of social relations through which the categories male and female, masculine and feminine, derive meaning and shape

experience. These categories are situated within and grow from specific social, political, and historical conditions, and are influenced in part by all other social relations, including class, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, age, and sexual identity. Thus, gender is neither static nor universal; its meaning and consequences are socially constructed (e.g. Acker & Van Houten, 1974; Wharton, 1992). Nevertheless, it appears from what we know currently that gender has been constituted more or less by relations of power: "Gender relations have been (more) defined and (imperfectly) controlled by one of their interrelated aspects – the man" (Flax, 1990: 45). The particular form this imbalance of power takes among actors is shaped by other social relations, such as race, class, ethnicity, and so on, as well as the social, political, and historical circumstances within which actors are situated.

The social relations that constitute gender are manifest in concrete social practices that act to preserve – or challenge – male ascendancy. We refer to these social practices as 'gendered'. In organizations, they include at least four categories of social phenomena that either uphold or contest the value of (some) men above women, masculine above feminine, thereby either reinforcing or challenging traditional interpretations of what it means to be male or female. These social practices build the mechanisms that produce and justify the allocation of resources, information, and opportunities into the culture of organizations. The four categories include: (1) formal policies and procedures; (2) informal work practices, norms, and patterns of work; (3) narratives, rhetoric, language, and other symbolic expressions; and (4) informal patterns of everyday social interaction. We derived these categories from other classifications of gendering processes (Acker, 1990), as well as our own fieldwork in organizations. Because they contain both oppressive and resistive possibilities, these social practices constitute the analytical categories we use to assess gender relations in organizations, and are the avenues for organizational intervention and change.

This approach represents a radical reframing of both gender and the role organizations play in shaping it. Within this frame, it is not sex difference per se that is focal, but rather, the often subtle, seemingly neutral organizational processes that lead to differentiation. We turn now to the problem of gender inequity this conception of gender implies.

## FORMULATION OF THE PROBLEM OF GENDER INEQUITY

The problem of gender inequity from the fourth frame perspective is rooted in traditional notions of male and female, masculine and feminine, as fixed

categories distinguished by a series of putatively natural, hierarchically-ranked oppositions. In Western organizations, these oppositions are defined by the prototypical white, Western, heterosexual male experience in contrast with the prototypical white, Western, heterosexual female experience. They include: public-private, individualism-collectivism, reason-emotion, mind-body, competition-cooperation. In Western cultures, the first term in each pair is deemed a universal feature of maleness and, in alleged accordance with the dictates of nature and reason, is more highly valued and generously rewarded than its opposite term, a universal feature – by default if nothing else – of femaleness. Although the particular content of the pairs appears to be culture- and history-specific, their oppositional, hierarchical structure appears to remain universal, with men and masculinity, however defined, in the privileged position (e.g. Levi-Strauss, 1962). This conception of gender as *difference* undergirds the approaches advocated in the first three frames; in the fourth frame, it lies at the root of the problem.

According to Frame 4, the representation of gender as oppositions both originates in and preserves male privilege. Its status as fixed in universal truth obfuscates the interests it serves and perpetuates the myth that organizational and social arrangements are gender-neutral (Flax, 1990). Central to this conception of gender is the notion of work as part of the public domain in which particular men – those who are white, heterosexual, Western, and class-privileged – and the particular forms of masculinity associated with them 'naturally' reign. Many workplace social practices thus tend to favor these men without question and often in subtle and insidious ways. The first three frames miss this, leaving these more subtle and insidious sources of inequity intact.

These workplace social practices include *formal policies and procedures*, such as work rules, labor contracts, managerial directives, job descriptions, and performance appraisal systems. They also include *informal practices, norms, and patterns of work*, such as the organization's or work group's norms about how work is to be done and what kinds of relationships are required to do it, the distribution of roles and responsibilities, the information people receive about how to advance in the organization, and the organization's tacit criteria for competence, commitment, and 'fit'. Many of these practices implicitly or explicitly place a higher value on the prototypical male, masculine identity, or masculine experience (Bailyn, 1993). Job descriptions for positions of authority that call for masculine-gendered traits, such as aggressiveness, independence, and competitiveness, without consideration of other traits that may be equally or more relevant to the job requirements, are one example of a formal procedure in organizations that is oppressively gendered. Tenure clocks in academia, which coincide with women's 'biological clocks', are

another. An example of an informal practice that is oppressively gendered is using unrestricted availability to work as evidence of one's commitment to the organization, which disadvantages women, who, as the traditional caretakers of home and family, typically have more demands on their time outside of work. The informal practice of using geographical mobility as a prerequisite to upward mobility is also gendered because, although applied equally to men and women, it is more limiting for women, who are more likely to be in dual career situations than men. These social practices, which recognize and reward committed, hard-working employees, who seek aggressively to advance their own and the company's goals, seem gender-neutral, even honorable, on the surface. As these examples suggest, however, a closer look at the gendered nature of these practices reveals an implicit gender bias that reflects and maintains women's relative disadvantage.

*Narratives*, and the *social interactions* within which people construct and convey them, can also take oppressive forms and play a crucial role in the gendering process in organizations. This notion is based in our understanding of reality as socially constructed, maintained, and modified, in large measure through the stories organization members tell about particular persons or events, and the sense they make more generally of what goes on around them (Barry, 1997; Ewick & Silbey, 1995; Ford & Ford, 1995; Weick, 1995). This sense-making occurs interactively, often in conversation with others in both formal settings, as in hiring and evaluation, and informal settings, as in everyday social interactions (Ridgeway, 1997). It produces narratives that represent and construct what people 'know' about organizations, themselves, and each other. These narratives embody general understandings of the world that by their repetition come to constitute that which is true, right, and good. Yet because narratives often depict specific persons existing in particular circumstances or address concrete matters of immediate concern, the general understandings become the 'ground' in the narrative against which the particular and concrete are 'figure'. Hence, these general understandings typically remain unacknowledged and unquestioned.

Other unacknowledged social norms specify the rules for interacting and participating in these constructions. These include who speaks and who listens, whose questions and contestations are legitimate, and whose interruptions are allowed. To the extent that these social and political aspects of narrative production remain concealed, narratives enact and draw on unexamined knowledge claims, without displaying them or opening them to challenge or testing.

Narratives, therefore, are not just stories or statements related *within* social contexts nor are social interactions simply the vehicle for relating them; they

are social practices that are *constitutive of* social contexts. They reproduce, without exposing, the connections of the specific story, persons, or 'facts' to the structure of relations within the organization. In this way, the unarticulated and unexamined plausibility of the narrative that fails to make explicit the gendered aspects of its content and construction sustains dominant cultural images of organizational life, images that come to be seen as "the natural and received shape of the world" (Camaroff & Comaroff, 1991: 23).

Narratives thereby construct and sustain all aspects of organizational 'reality'. For example, many organizations rely on oral histories about who succeeds, who fails, and why as their primary resource for selecting, assessing, and developing people for leadership roles (Martin, Feldman, Hatch & Sitkin, 1983). These narratives and the images they construct are gendered in unacknowledged ways, such as narratives of successful leaders that evoke images of an entrepreneurial, visionary, risk-taker. Such narratives typically fail to mention the support provided by an array of staff whose diligent attention to detail gives these 'leaders' the wherewithal to perform in those roles. As organization members construct and convey such narratives, norms for interaction and propriety keep the voices of these staff either silent or marginalized. Like other oppressively gendered social practices in organizations, this narrative tacitly appeals to a binary and oppositional logic that perpetuates the dominance and apparent neutrality of masculine traits and masculine experience – being entrepreneurial, visionary, and risk-taking – while devaluing the traits and experiences more typically associated with women – being attentive to detail, supportive, and behind-the-scenes.

These kinds of workplace social practices thus operate collectively and in clandestine ways to preserve male dominance by coding activity and assigning meaning as either superior (male, masculine) or inferior (female, feminine), while at the same time maintaining the plausibility of gender neutrality. Implicit in these social practices as well is the differential valuation associated with other identity-based distinctions, for example, race, class, and sexual identity, which anoint particular men and shape the particular forms of masculinity that dominate. These social practices create systematic distinctions between and among men and women, depending in part on their ability and willingness to conform to the dominant cultural images these practices uphold, distinctions that serve to justify disparities in the material conditions of their lives (Reskin & Padavic, 1994). Hence, these social practices constrain and limit opportunities not only for women, but for many men as well. Identifying these social practices and documenting their effects on women's and men's experiences forms the basis of an analysis of gender inequity from within Frame 4.

### *Origins and Consequences of Social Practices that Produce Gender-based Inequities*

Table 2 depicts oppositional representations of gender, which we call 'gendered themes', manifest in organizations' social practices to produce gender-based inequities. These themes are imported into organizations from the larger culture in the form of masculine-feminine dichotomies. For purposes of illustration, we identify three of the most pervasive themes in Western culture and describe how each is implicated across a range of social practices, often with consequences for both gender equity and organizational effectiveness. We then explore organizational narratives, a particular type of social practice that pervades these themes. These narratives disguise the gendered nature of other practices by legitimating them as simply 'the way things are'.

*Theme 1: Public-private*

Perhaps the single most pervasive gendered theme in modern organizations today is the split between public and private domains of activity and knowledge (Bailyn, 1993). This split is predicated on and upholds the notion of a sexual division of labor in which men's capacity for instrumental work in the public sphere is naturally complemented by women's ability to manage the expressive aspects of family life in the private sphere (Conway, Bourque & Scott, 1989; Elshtain, 1997). In accordance with this opposition, idealized images of workers and parents rest on idealized images of manhood, achieved through one's status as provider, and idealized images of womanhood, achieved through one's status as mother, respectively. Thus, as many have observed, the concepts of 'worker' and 'man' are inextricably bound, as are the concepts of 'parent' and 'woman', a condition that is both reflected in and sustained by the structure and culture of most workplaces (Acker, 1990; Holcomb, 1998). In many organizations, this theme is manifest prominently in narratives and images that portray the ideal worker as someone who is willing and able to put work first, above all other commitments and activities in life (Rapoport et al., 1996). A variety of ostensibly gender-neutral social practices helps to uphold this image of the ideal worker. These include crisis-oriented work patterns and chaotic work routines, which are disruptive, make it difficult to plan or bound time commitments, and demand that people be constantly present at work and available to deal with unanticipated events and their consequences as they arise. Using time spent at work to measure one's contribution and commitment to the organization, either formally, as in performance appraisals, or informally, as in managers' assessments of employees' promise, reinforces this image of the ideal worker, as do public actions and declarations that uphold 'committed'

***Table 2.*** The Fourth Frame: Gendered Themes, Social Practices, and Outcomes

| Gendered Theme | Examples of Social Practices | Gendered Outcomes | Unintended Organizational Consequences |
|---|---|---|---|
| Theme 1:<br><br>Public–Private Dichotomy | Narratives of ideal worker as one able to put work first; crisis-oriented work patterns; norms intended to maintain illusion of workplace as asexual. | Women, who carry disproportionate responsibility for dependent care, perceived as less committed; obfuscates sexuality as dimension of heterosexual male power | Perpetuates inefficient use of time; encourages crises; little time for planning and reflection; rewards behavior that may not be associated with competence or task |
| Theme 2:<br><br>Individualism–Collectivism Dichotomy | Narratives, images that portray competence as heroic individualism; rewards for producing immediate, visible results; lack of recognition and rewards for collaborative, developmental (i.e. 'relational') work | Heroic individualism associated with men/masculinity; 'relational' activities associated with women/femininity; differential rewards for men and women performing heroic and 'relational' activities | Allows heroes to create roles for themselves that may be unnecessary or irrelevant to business demands; discourages developing others, planning, building systems and infrastructure |
| Theme 3:<br><br>Male Identity–Female Identity Dichotomy | Narratives that portray men and women as fixed, stereotyped opposites; evaluations, perceptions that invoke sex stereotypes, penalize people when they fail to uphold them | Women do not fit masculine image, so do not fit model of success; women ignored or devalued when behave stereotypically feminine; denigrated when behave stereotypically masculine | Relies on narrow set of criteria for model of success and who fits it; suppresses broader range of styles and approaches that could inform and enhance work; increases dissatisfaction and turnover among those who do not 'fit' |

workers as those who are willing to put family obligations second to work obligations. We are reminded here of Martin's (1990) report of a senior woman in one corporation who scheduled a C-section for the delivery of her baby so

that she could attend an important meeting. Her action and, more importantly, the public praise she received within the company for her action, are examples of social practices of this sort.

Although these social practices are ostensibly gender-neutral in that everyone is similarly subjected to them, they penalize people who cannot be available for work all the time and thus have a differential impact on women and men. Because they tend to bear disproportionate responsibility for home and family, women, on average, have less flexibility to work the long hours many companies require without feeling they are abdicating responsibility on the home front. Thus, women appear to be less committed and are more likely to be unavailable when 'needed'. In addition, when the need to respond to crises diverts women from their primary tasks, they fulfill the negative stereotype that they are less task-oriented than men. They are, therefore, more quickly judged in negative terms than their male counterparts behaving in the same manner (Jamieson, 1995).

These social practices are especially advantageous to relatively high-income, married men, whose spouses are less likely to be employed outside the home, relative to single women or to married/partnered women and gay men of all income levels, whose spouses/partners are more likely to be employed. At the same time, low-income women, who are often women of color, and who, if single parents, are likely to be the sole supporters of their family, suffer disproportionately from such practices. Their higher-income, typically white woman counterparts, who have the economic wherewithal, can choose to hire people to help with their child-care and household responsibilities (see Coleman and Rippin, forthcoming, for further discussion of the impact of these kinds of social practices on low-income women).

As the foregoing analysis suggests, the problems that the public-private split presents for women are typically understood as problems concerning time and the allocation of time between work and family. This is because this is how white, middle- and upper-middle-class women experience the problem most obviously and acutely. As we have just done, we can describe how race and class oppression increase, in an additive fashion, the burdens women of color experience in this regard. It is also important to recognize how race and class oppression interact with gender to produce qualitatively different experiences of the public-private split in organizations. When examined through the lives and circumstances of women of other racial, ethnic, or social class backgrounds, the manifestations of the traditional separation of public and private spheres become more complex and multifaceted. Hurtado (1989) has suggested that for low-income women of color, the notion of 'the personal as political' is old news and does not galvanize their political consciousness in the

same way it has for many middle- and upper-middle-class white women. This is due to their experiences of the government constantly intervening in their private lives and domestic arrangements through, for example, welfare programs and policies. Hence, she argues, the relationship between public and private, though still clearly gendered, is qualitatively different for these women. Others have noted that because the private sphere of family and community often provides a refuge for men and women of color from the racism they experience in the public sphere of work, gender relations in communities of color are structured differently from gender relations in white, middle- and upper-middle class communities. Bell (1992: 371) notes, for example, that the "experience of racial oppression serves as a powerful bond between black men and women. Black women understand the devastating effects of racism on black men" and "feel compelled to protect, or at least not add to, [their] already fragile status." Black women are subject to a 'code of silence' that discourages them from speaking out against sexism or sexual harassment at work when the victimizer is a black man. Referring to the ambivalence felt within the black community during the Clarence Thomas–Anita Hill controversy, Bell (1992: 372) explains, "Women who speak out are perceived [within large segments of the black community] as co-conspirators of white men. They provide the white power structure with ammunition that can be used against black men." Thus, to speak out is to wield a double-edged sword. This makes the public–private split even more complicated for women of color, who must navigate much more carefully than their white woman counterparts between the two spheres.

Sexuality at work is another aspect of gender relations that is shaped by the notion of public and private as distinct spheres, again with different consequences for organization members depending on their sex, race, class, and sexual identity. The supposed separation of public and private spheres fosters the myth that people can control their experiences and feelings by compartmentalizing them: sexual feelings and expressions belong in the private sphere. Although statistics on dating and 'sexual talk' among co-workers attest to the reality that sexuality is far from absent in the workplace (Gutek, 1985), taboos against these behaviors have made it difficult to develop policies and norms that might govern a more realistic and constructive role for sexuality at work (Thomas, 1989). In the absence of such policies and norms, sexuality remains a largely unacknowledged, yet pervasive, aspect of social processes in organizations that appeal to and uphold the masculinity of those in power – white heterosexual men. Thus to treat the personal, sexual dimension as an anomalous incursion of the private sphere into the public is to overlook strategies of power and control in which sexuality is an important dimension (Pringle, 1989).

These strategies of power and control are evident in a number of asymmetries that characterize different groups' experiences of sexuality at work. First, because women are typically in subordinate positions, dependent on men for their continued employment, it is up to women to market their sexual attractiveness to men and not vice-versa. Thus, women are often perceived as inappropriately using sex to their advantage. In fact, however, women are much less likely than men to initiate sexual encounters and are more likely to be hurt by sex at work (Gutek, 1985; Gutek & Dunwoody, 1987). Second, although some women do use sex as an advancement strategy, however dubious or ill advised, it is not an option that is equally available to all women. Those who conform to conventional images of beauty and who share private sphere relations with those in power – young, conventionally attractive, white, heterosexual, middle- and upper-class women – are more likely both to reap its benefits and to incur its costs. Third, even when an individual woman does benefit from using this strategy, her conformity to traditional gender roles reinforces oppressive gender arrangements and can have detrimental effects on women's credibility more generally. Finally, the norm that organizations must appear to be sexless is problematic for those suspected or known to be other than heterosexual (Hall, 1989). The sexuality of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people, for whom simply *to be* is to be in violation of this norm, must "remain within the darkest penumbra, sealed away from any illuminating awareness" (Hall, 1989: 125). These asymmetries suggest that social practices that uphold the prevailing ideology of sex and work as separate make more sense from the perspective of heterosexual men than they do from anyone else's (Pringle, 1989).

Feminists' attempts to remove sexual forms of oppression from the workplace have also had some unintended ill effects attributable to Western culture's investment in the notion of a public-private split. In the interest of banishing sexuality from the public sphere, courts and companies have responded to feminists' concerns by singling out sexual advances as the essence of workplace harassment directed toward women. While clearly an advance over a time when courts insisted on the traditional view of sexual relations as a private phenomenon, not amenable to public scrutiny, the emphasis on sexual advances as the quintessential form of harassment not only ignores non-sexual forms of gender-based hostility at work, it encourages the protection of women for the wrong reasons (Schultz, 1998). "Rather than emphasizing the use of harassment law to promote women's empowerment and equality as workers, it subtly appeals to [men in positions of decision-making authority] to protect women's sexual virtue or sensibilities" (Schultz, 1998: 1729). As Schultz has noted, the 'benefits' of this sexual paternalism are

"limited to women imagined to possess the sexual purity that renders them deserving of protection. Such protection historically has been reserved for white, middle-class women, who did not upset the gender order by abandoning the domestic sphere for wage work or politics . . . . [E]ven being an older, married woman who aspires to a male-dominated occupation is sufficient to remove a woman from the court's protection" (1998: 1729). These efforts to protect (some) women thus stem from and affirm notions of the private sphere as women's right and proper place.

Finally, some feminist organizational scholars have argued that the separation of public and private is, in itself, disempowering because it removes sexuality as a potentially positive resource for women and others at the margins of organizations (Cockburn, 1991; Pringle, 1989; Vance, 1984). The priority given to the dangerous and coercive aspects of sexuality has led to an anti-sexual stance, potentially precluding women's exploration of what it means to be a sexual subject rather than object (Pringle, 1989). Although admittedly hard to know what a 'free' choice in the context of male power would be, these scholars urge women to reintroduce to organizational life their bodies, sexuality, and emotions on their own terms (Cockburn, 1991). They argue that attempts merely to drive sexuality from the workplace leave the ideology of separate spheres and the myth of male rationality effectively intact and unchallenged (Pringle, 1989).

In addition to their consequences for gender equity, social practices that arise from the split between public and private domains may also produce less than optimal consequences for organizations (Bailyn et al., 1997; Kolb & Merrill-Sands, 1999; Merrill-Sands et al., 1999). For example, unbounded time demands on employees, especially when coupled with crisis-oriented work patterns, can lead to the inefficient use of time, which, in turn, reinforces a chaotic, unpredictable work environment. Thus, the unbounded demands on people's time ironically both reflect and can reproduce a situation in which employees are still unable to fulfill their responsibilities effectively. In addition, despite the long hours, this kind of work environment leaves little time for planning and reflection, and people, therefore, have little opportunity to learn from their mistakes (Coleman & Rippin, forthcoming).

*Theme 2: Individualism-collectivism*

A second gendered theme in Western organizations is the tension between an individualistic and collectivistic orientation in which the individualistic invariably prevails (Gergen, 1994). This split is a clearly gendered one in that the former is associated with men and masculinity, and the latter with women and femininity (Connell, 1987; Meyerson, 1998). It is deeply rooted in Western

culture and, many have noted, woven into the fabric of most Western organizations (Hofstede, 1984). It is predicated on beliefs in individual achievement and a meritocratic system of reward and stratification. In many organizations, this theme is manifest most prominently in narratives and images that portray competence as heroic independence, and collaborative and developmental activities as tangential – nice, but not necessary – to the effective functioning of the organization. A range of formal policies, informal practices and work patterns reinforces these images. These include social practices that support and sustain individual heroism as the most effective strategy for getting ahead, such as informal recognition and formal rewards for self-promoting 'stars', but not for behind-the-scenes builders and planners. Similarly, demands for immediately visible results can encourage heroics, as can ambiguous roles, responsibilities, and lines of authority, which allow people to define problems that fit solutions they can heroically provide (March & Olsen, 1976). In organizations with these social practices, collaboration, team-work, capacity-building, smoothing difficulties, and developing others is often invisible work (Fletcher, 1999; Jacques, 1996). Narratives about success and failure that celebrate heroic individuals for resolving crises and solving pressing organizational problems are popular, reinforcing people's belief that they will rise or fall on their own merits.

Practices that differentially value individual heroics and collaborative building activities can lead to gender inequities because these domains are gendered. In Western cultures, heroic behaviors are consistent with the traits people tend to associate with masculinity: strong, assertive, independent, self-sufficient, risk-taking. By contrast, building behaviors are consistent with the traits many associate with femininity: collaborative, consultative, inclusive, non-hierarchical, supportive, and concerned with relationships. Despite the increasing recognition of the importance of these more feminine characteristics in Western management circles (Fondas, 1997; Rosener, 1995) and the espoused valuing of these attributes in some organizations, building activities are ignored or implicitly discouraged in organizations that promote heroic behavior, especially, as some have observed, when women are doing them (Fletcher, 1999; Jamieson, 1995). This may be because the actions and interactions involved in developing a team, developing people's skills, and working behind the scenes for a group's success are considered 'natural' behaviors for women and are therefore not considered a developed competency when women do them (Fletcher, 1998; 1999). Calas & Smircich (1993) have speculated further that efforts to 'feminize' management simply reinforce traditional sex roles at work, since they justify a division of labor in which

women managers tend to the companies' more mundane domestic affairs while the men explore the higher pay-off, more exciting global frontiers.

The devaluation of support activities relative to more visible, individual acts of heroism further disadvantages members of racial and ethnic minority groups, who tend to engage – even more often than their less scarce white woman counterparts – in a range of behind-the-scenes support activities as token representatives of their groups. These include recruiting, mentoring, and serving as role models for other members of their group; providing resources and opportunities for them that the organization would not otherwise provide; and serving as group representatives on committees, task forces, and panels, often at the organization's request. This work is rarely recognized as part of the formal responsibilities of one's job; it is extra work that these people perform over and above their regular responsibilities, which leaves them with less time to do work that 'counts' in the formal evaluation and reward system (Martin & Meyerson, 1998). Again, when sexism becomes entangled in racism, the consequences of the individualist-collectivist split can be qualitatively different, and disproportionately negative, for women of color. For example, relative to men of color and white women, women of color are especially burdened by obligations they feel to mentor the more junior members of their identity group (Murrell & Tangri, 1999). This is because their junior counterparts – women of color—are uniquely vulnerable to problems that can arise in cross-race or cross-sex career-enhancing relationships, whether with white women (Blake, 1999), men of color (Bell, 1992), or white men (Thomas, 1989). As a result, the relatively few women of color who occupy senior positions experience inordinate pressures to serve as role models and as mentors for these women and, therefore, pay an especially high price for the organization's failure to recognize and reward this kind of work (Murrell & Tangri, 1999).

These social practices may also have implications for the organization's effectiveness (Bailyn et al., 1997; Kolb & Merrill-Sands, 1999; Merrill-Sands et al., 1999). The emphasis on heroics, for example, independent of any rigorous assessment of the organization's needs, allows heroes to create roles for themselves that may well be irrelevant or unnecessary to the real demands of the business, thereby wasting both individual and organizational resources (Coleman & Rippin, forthcoming). In addition, an emphasis in the organization's culture on immediate results discourages people from spending time developing others or building the systems and infrastructure required to sustain and carry forward the organization's work. A self-perpetuating process thus occurs whereby the lack of adequate systems fosters a chaotic work

environment, which reinforces the felt need for immediate solutions, and in turn, encourages would-be heroes to provide them.

*Theme 3: Male identity-female identity*

A third, gendered theme is the opposition of male identity to female identity as mutually exclusive categories rooted and fixed in the presumably determinate categories of biological sex. In accordance with this opposition, woman is defined by what her opposite, man, is not; each person has only one gender and is never the other or both (Flax, 1990; Ridgeway, 1997). The binary and oppositional logic that underlies this conception of gender identity stems from and reinforces the idea of a true essence of femaleness, embodied within all women, and likewise, a true essence of maleness, embodied within all men. This theme often emerges in narratives about sex differences, which evoke narrow, idealized images of men and women as monolithic categories distinguished by a series of mutually exclusive, stereotyped traits. In Western organizations, these idealized images are the ones associated with white, Western, heterosexual men and women (Ely, 1995a). Whether the object of such narratives is to reduce sex differences, ignore them, deny them, or celebrate them, the presumption of fixed differences between men and women characterizes most talk of gender in organizations (Epstein, 1988). A range of social practices in organizations is imbued with these images. These include evaluations of performance, attributions of success and failure, and interpretations of behavior shaped by fixed, stereotyped expectations concerning men's and women's skills and deficits. They also include practices that penalize or criticize people for failing to uphold gender stereotypes, such as negative images associated with women who are seen as overly aggressive and men who are seen as overly sensitive.

These social practices implicitly or explicitly reinforce adherence to stereotypical sex roles and behaviors. In particular, they reflect expectations and criteria for success that are conflated with stereotypical images of white, Western, heterosexual masculinity and construed as antithetical to stereotypical images of white, Western, heterosexual femininity. Thus, if for no other reason than women are in bodies that do not fit this masculine image, they do not fit the operative model of success in many companies (Brenner, Tomkiewicz & Schein, 1989). As a result, when women fail to meet performance expectations that are based on masculine images of competence, their failures are construed as stereotype-confirming; they are less likely than their male counterparts to receive the benefit of the doubt and therefore have less slack within which they can maneuver to accomplish their goals. At the same time, when women confirm the more positive feminine stereotypes, as they do when they engage

in building work, they receive no kudos since feminine competencies tend to be ignored or devalued (Fletcher, 1999). Finally, reactions to people who do not fit these gender expectations are often asymmetric: for example, aggressively task-oriented women may be denigrated (Faludi, 1991; Martin, 1996), whereas relationship-oriented men are not (Van Vianen & Willemsen, 1992). In these ways, social practices that provide differential rewards and penalties to men and women for displays of stereotypical masculinity and femininity can place women in a series of double-binds and contribute to the greater difficulty they have in assessing and achieving their potential. As a result, many organizations remain stubbornly male-dominated.

As with social practices arising from the public-private and individualistic-collectivistic splits, the nature and consequences of these practices are also shaped by other aspects of identity. To the extent that social practices reinforce conformity to white, Western, heterosexual images of masculinity, it is not only women who suffer, but some men as well. For example, men's forays into traditionally feminine work are often celebrated, but only for those who have already established their masculinity (Faludi, 1999; Baker-Miller, 1999). This suggests that men who fail to conform to the conventional image of heterosexual masculinity may have less latitude to deviate from that image.

In addition, all women do not necessarily suffer from these practices in the same ways or to the same degrees. Women of color and working class or poor women, who by definition deviate from the idealized—white, middle- and upper-middle class – image of femininity, will likely suffer different consequences, depending in part on the ways in which their race, ethnicity, religion, class, etc., shape stereotypes, including sex stereotypes, about them. Stereotypic expectations about women of Asian descent as ultra-feminine, for example, put them in an even further polarized position than white women from masculine images of success. In addition, men may acknowledge a woman for her ability to act like men with such compliments as, "she kicks ass with the best of them" or "she's hard as nails," but these compliments cut two ways (Martin, 1996: 191), and they cut differently for different women. While they provide some positive recognition for a woman's ability to mobilize competitive masculinity, they also serve as strong reminders to white women that they have violated societal norms associated with femininity and thereby raise questions about their status as women (Ely, 1995a; Martin, 1996). By contrast, Hurtado (1989) suggests that women of color are sometimes granted a measure of leniency in their violations of feminine stereotypes. Since white men are less likely to see women of color as potential mates, they are less invested in their conformity to traditional gender roles. At best, she argues, women of color are simply invisible. At worst, when women of color violate

gender-stereotypes, perceptions of them may be distorted in ways that can be personally damaging and severely limiting to their careers. According to Bell (1992), black women, accused historically of being difficult, castrating, and overbearing, may be especially vulnerable in this regard. "Due to the legacy of slavery," she argues, "black women have never had the privilege of being submissive, docile, or fragile. Rarely, if ever, have black women been afforded the feminine characteristics attributed to white women" (Bell, 1992: 369). Institutionalized racism, which restricts opportunities for work among black men, as well high rates of black male incarceration, have forced disproportionate numbers of black women to assume the roles of family provider as well as family caretaker, and they are often the ones to whom other members of their communities look for leadership (Brown-Collins & Sussewell, 1986; Gilkes, 1980). Given these prospects, black women are taught from a young age to be self-reliant. Those who become professionals typically "know how to speak out for themselves, and they possess an inner confidence, because they know how to survive against the odds" (Bell, 1992: 370). Whites, however, have a tendency to distort these strengths, often interpreting black women who show competence, assertiveness, and self-confidence – the behaviors most organizations claim to value – as overly controlling, manipulative, and aggressive (Bell, 1992). Thus, the very characteristics that help black women to survive in work settings where they must contend with both racism and sexism – and that would bring kudos for white men – may limit their success in these same settings.

In addition to gender inequities, social practices that support gender identity as a mutually exclusive proposition may produce a number of negative consequences for the organization as well. These are due largely to the narrow set of criteria for determining who 'fits' the model of success and the often-circumscribed set of strategies that constitute the available ways for doing work. These practices suppress a broader range of styles and approaches that might be useful for operating, not only in diverse markets worldwide, but in organizations' core activities as well (Bailyn, 1993; Thomas & Ely, 1996). To the extent that employees find it difficult to conform to the image of the successful employee, or find it difficult to bring all of their relevant skills and insights to their jobs, important human resources are lost. Finally, turnover is often high among women who find these aspects of their organization's culture especially inhospitable. In a study of women lawyers in large law firms, for example, women associates in male-dominated firms were particularly vitriolic about the company's masculine definitions of success, expressed disappointment at the absence of feminine or female role models, and, as a result, felt demoralized (Ely, 1994, 1995a). In short, we suspect that this situation discourages and disempowers many committed, dynamic, and creative

employees, and instead reinforces models of success that may well compromise the company's effectiveness in the long-run.

*Maintenance of the gender status quo*

Finally, there are social practices that disguise the gendered nature of other social practices. These are primarily narratives – those symbolic representations, most often communicated through language – that people rely on to make sense of what goes on around them. They include narratives about gender, as well as competence and incompetence, commitment and lack of commitment, success and failure, that draw on gender distinctions or reinforce gendered themes explicitly or implicitly. Through the process of retelling, these narratives and the particular set of assumptions, preferences, and interests upon which they are based, become taken for granted by members of the organization, reified, "perceived as 'objective' and independent from those who created them" (Mumby, 1987: 119). Hence, they function to naturalize 'the way things are' in organizations and serve as powerful, but usually invisible, legitimating devices. Some organizational theorists have referred to these narratives as institutionalized myths, which construct as legitimate, neutral, and natural particular versions of reality that might otherwise be open to question (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Meyer & Rowen, 1977).

For example, in a study we conducted to identify the causes of senior women's high rates of turnover, senior managers in the company continually attributed women's failures to personal and idiosyncratic factors, without attention to the possible systemic factors at play (Ely & Meyerson, forthcoming). In doing so, however, they failed to state explicitly the set of assumptions that undergirded their understanding of the problem: that women and men are simply people, without gender identities, occupying the same cultural, historical, material, and political positions, subject to and participating in the same *neutral* organizational processes and *impartial* interpersonal interactions. These assumptions were therefore uncontestable. In this way, the narrative helped to sustain existing gender arrangements, and only the women themselves were implicated in their failures.

Although narratives are the predominant form of social practices that function this way, other kinds of institutionalized social practices can also serve as legitimating devices by precluding consideration of alternatives to generally accepted understandings of the way things are. For example, training programs for women that implicitly and narrowly define the company's gender problems as attributable to women's skill deficits can preclude consideration of alternative explanations, such as the gendered nature of the company's practices.

As with other oppressively gendered social practices, narratives and one's analysis of them are shaped in important ways by other salient aspects of identity, such as race and class. For example, one's understanding of how narratives neutralize and legitimate gender-oppressive social practices is limited to those narratives that conceal inequitable gender relations within the particular group of men and women in question. If an all-white research team analyzes gender relations by focusing on managers who are also all white, their analysis of gender relations in that company will likely take white, middle- or upper-middle-class experience for granted, as if it were the standard experience, in much the same way that organizations implicitly take male experience for granted, as if it were the standard. When the focal group in the organization or the research team is more diverse, it can become clearer how narratives neutralize and legitimate gender-oppressive practices in multiple and complex ways, for example, how they might be implicitly predicated on racial as well as gender distinctions. A study of race relations in a racially diverse law firm, whose mission was to advance the rights and interests of low-income women, is illustrative (see Ely, 1995b). In the course of data collection, the multiracial-multiethnic research team discovered a common narrative, repeated by firm members from various racial and ethnic backgrounds, about the unique contributions of women lawyers of color to the firm's success. According to the narrative, Latina and Asian-American women, who made up the majority of lawyers in the firm, "practiced law from their gut"; they knew "out of instinct" what the important issues were, and, based in their "experiential background as women of color," knew how to deal effectively with the firm's clients, many of whom were women of color. When analyzing the data, the African-Native-American member of the research team recognized this narrative as one that carried a dual message. On the one hand, it explicitly lauded and reinforced the value of women of color in advancing the mission of the firm. On the other hand, it had a way of implicitly undermining their value by suggesting that their ability to practice law rested more on their 'softer' intuitive skills of connection and empathy than on their 'harder' technical skills as trained, experienced lawyers, as if they had not all graduated from top law schools and passed the state's bar exam. The explicit, laudatory message in this narrative, together with the fact that all of the lawyers in question were women, served to obfuscate the gendered split between the lawyers of color and the white lawyers, a split the implicit message in the narrative tacitly reinforced. During the feedback session when the research team advanced this hypothesis, a woman lawyer of color in the firm confirmed and extended the analysis by explaining how she, as a woman of color, felt disadvantaged relative to her white counterparts, when it came time to assess people's candidacy for management roles in the firm. She

explained that she had internalized the narrative's implicit devaluation of women of color – partly in order to claim the competencies it explicitly conveyed about her group – and, as a result, felt less confident about her technical skills, especially in the areas of 'management' and 'finances'. As members of the all-white management team acknowledged, however, she was no less technically capable in management and finance than they had been when they took up the management roles of the firm. Thus, it was only by recognizing the racial overtones of the narrative about women of color practicing law 'from their gut' that the oppressively gendered aspects of it, which systematically disadvantaged the women of color, also became visible. As this example suggests, more diversity in a company can reveal more complexity and more nuance in its gender relations. Lack of diversity seems a particularly acute limitation in the identification of gendered narratives, however, since the neutralizing and legitimating functions narratives serve seem to remain more stubbornly opaque.

Once again, as with other social practices we discuss here, those that disguise the gendered nature of other practices may also compromise the organization's effectiveness and limit its potential for learning. By constraining the interpretation of events, these social practices legitimate and institutionalize particular courses of action as logical and rational, while obscuring others or causing them to appear "strange or lacking in sense" (Mumby, 1987: 114), courses of action that might, in fact, prove fruitful. As a result, organization members have a relatively narrow range of possibilities before them for organizing and accomplishing work, solving problems, and strategic planning. For example, organizations that suppress discussion of relevant aspects of people's cultural identities at work foster hostility and unproductive conflict between cultural identity groups and are less likely to realize the potential benefits of a multicultural workforce (Donnellon & Kolb, 1994; Thomas & Ely, 1996). Narratives are particularly insidious culprits in this regard, again, because their neutralizing and legitimating functions remain opaque, thereby protecting as 'truth' beliefs that might otherwise be open to question. Thus, to the extent that narratives obscure the gendered nature of organizations, they also obscure the ways in which gendered practices undermine both equity and effectiveness goals.

### *Vision of Gender Equity*

The vision of gender equity that grows from this understanding of gender and its role in organizational life is a process whereby organization members continuously identify and disrupt oppressively gendered social practices in

organizations and revise them accordingly. Because we are limited in our vision of a gender equitable state by the gender relations of which we are currently a part (Flax, 1990), we cannot anticipate what precisely a transformed, end-state looks like, and suggest instead that the process of transformation – of resistance and learning – continues indefinitely and itself constitutes the gender equity goal. The intent of this process is to locate and enact a vision of work and social interaction that is less constrained by gendered and other oppressive roles, images, and relations. It begins as organization members learn to question their own and others' deeply held assumptions about roles, work, and effectiveness, including what constitutes individual and organizational success. This leads to change in the way work is defined, assigned, executed, and evaluated. We anticipate that this process of reflection, learning, and change will eventually transform the organization, its members, and their relations with one another by challenging and redefining their sense of what it means to be male or female, masculine or feminine. By breaking down the hard oppositions traditionally associated with gender, this process will begin to reveal other, more fluid conceptions of identity and social organization. In this way, our goal with this approach is to resist and ultimately eliminate gender as an axis of power.

Our vision goes beyond gender equity, however. We propose that advancing gender equity objectives can often serve the organization's instrumental goals (Bailyn et al., 1997; Kolb & Merrill-Sands, 1999; Merrill-Sands et al., 1999; Thomas & Ely, 1996). This is because very often the same processes that create gender inequities also undermine an organization's effectiveness. Intervening in these processes can therefore have dual effects. Many of an organization's social practices are so deeply entrenched in beliefs and values long taken for granted as simply 'the way things are' that organization members assume them to be not only gender-neutral, but wise business practices. As our examples above suggest, neither assumption is necessarily the case, and we believe that the kind of questioning and examination we are advocating can reveal otherwise. Therefore, an analysis of gender from this perspective can also suggest ways for improving the organization's effectiveness.

*Frame 4: A Non-traditional Approach to Organizational Change*

Our analysis of gender and our vision of gender equity suggest the need for organizational change that is no less than revolutionary. Indeed, others whose analyses of the gendered nature of organizations parallel our own have called for a wholesale, radical restructuring of organizations as a way to advance feminist principles at work (e.g. Acker, 1990; Calas & Smircich, 1996). We too

call for a radical restructuring of organizations. The approach to change we advocate, however, is not a wholesale revolution but, rather, an emergent, localized process of incremental change (Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000). With this approach, any one intervention is an act of resistance, not intended by itself to transform the gender relations of the organization; instead, it is through a series of interventions, each designed to subvert traditional gender arrangements, that the possibility of organizational transformation exists (Meyerson & Scully, 1995).

We advocate a process of incremental change over the more broad-based, all-encompassing change some of our colleagues have urged for at least three reasons. First, as Weick (forthcoming) has noted, large-scale, organization-wide change efforts typically fail: diffusion tends to be uneven; significant short-term losses are difficult to recover; and organizations often relapse to their original state. Second, the kinds of changes we are advocating involve challenges to existing power relations and the dismantling of practices that have long been institutionalized as rational approaches to the organization's work. We believe, therefore, that change would be both politically and pragmatically difficult, if not impossible, to initiate – let alone sustain – if undertaken as part of a single, all-encompassing change effort. Finally, our analysis points to the deeply embedded nature of traditional gender arrangements and to the particular, concrete, and often idiosyncratic ways these arrangements manifest in different parts of the organization. Change therefore must be highly context-sensitive; emergent; in tune with local politics, constraints, and opportunities; and pervious to experimentation, reflection, and learning (Weick, forthcoming).

In developing our approach to change, we found direction from several traditions, including different varieties of participatory action-research (e.g. Agyris, 1970; Brown, 1985; Brown & Tandon, 1983; Rapoport, Bailyn, Fletcher & Pruitt forthcoming; Reason, 1988; Reason & Rowan, 1981) and feminist research methods (Reinharz, 1992). We found this work appealing for both political and epistemological reasons. With it, we share the goal of producing knowledge through a research process that increases participants' capacity for autonomous action and self-reflection (Coleman & Rippin, forthcoming). We also share its premise that research should be done *with* people, rather than *on* people, based on the notion that "the process of research and meaning-making is itself an intervention that changes the situation for those involved, and that should, as far as possible, be under their control" (Coleman & Rippin, forthcoming). A collaborative approach is justified on pragmatic grounds as well. Since the kind of change we envision requires in-depth understanding of the organization's culture, members inside the

organization must help identify and decipher the organization's cultural codes. The researcher, who attempts to take nothing for granted, can ask naive questions, such as why certain social practices exist, who gets ahead and why, and what various symbols mean. In the course of this questioning, internal members can learn to see their organization in a new light and to question their practices accordingly. Finally, we know that whatever we discover about the organization or about change cannot be useful to the organization unless there is an internal capacity to build on and make continued use of this knowledge after the researchers leave. The agenda for change that we envision is, after all, a process that requires ongoing efforts within the organization in order to sustain it. For these reasons, a central methodological requirement of our approach to change is collaboration between external researchers and internal organization members, such that the internal members not only support but also commit to participating actively in each phase of the project.

With our sense of the appropriateness of incremental change and the importance of collaboration firmly in place, we, together with four other colleagues, undertook a three-year, participative action research project in a large, multinational manufacturing and retail company to test these ideas and further develop our approach to change.[4] This project was one in a series of projects designed to develop participative action research methods for this purpose (Rapoport et al., 1996; Kolb & Merrill-Sands, 1999; Merrill-Sands et al., 1999). We jointly initiated this project with the CEO of the company, who had asked us to investigate the reasons for their high rates of turnover among senior women and for the dramatically lower representation of women in senior management positions relative to men and relative to women in middle management. (See Meyerson and Kolb, forthcoming; Coleman and Rippin, forthcoming; and Ely and Meyerson, forthcoming, for more detailed descriptions of this project.) Over the course of our work there, our team interviewed over 160 employees, many repeatedly, who represented virtually all functions located in headquarters; observed numerous team and organization-wide meetings; and examined much written material, including formal organizational policies and plans as well as less formal works in progress. We experimented with and tracked numerous change tactics and types of interventions in the various local projects that emerged over the course of our collaboration with this company. These took place in a range of functions across the organization, from top management at corporate headquarters to the shop floor of one of their manufacturing plants.

In sum, beginning with the notion that an incremental approach to change was most appropriate to our project and drawing on models of participative action research, previous, related change projects, and our own 3-year action

research venture, our research team refined a method for organizational change that would advance our vision of gender equity. That method involves an iterative process of critique, narrative revision, and experimentation. In the critique, the project team, composed of external researchers and internal organization members, surfaces social practices that appear to compromise both gender equity and organizational effectiveness. Narrative revision begins with feeding back the critique to other organization members and engaging them in new dialogues about gender, the organization, and its effectiveness. Finally, organization members experiment with new ways of doing work, explicitly articulating both the gender and business rationales for – and consequences of – these changes as they are taking place. The insights people gain from these experiences then provide occasions for altering or extending their critique and further revising their narratives, which, in turn, make it possible for them to consider and experiment with new, previously inconceivable courses of action. Our emphasis on revising narratives as a central feature of the change process is a unique contribution of our research team's work to the foundational work of our predecessors. Drawing examples from our project, we describe each of these phases in more detail below.

### *Phase 1: Critique*

The first phase of the change project is the critique of the organization. It begins after the researchers have negotiated the terms and scope of the work and secured the commitment of the appropriate internal, organizational partners, who will join them to form the project team.[5] The purpose of the critique is to identify oppressively gendered social practices in the organization, especially those that appear to compromise organizational effectiveness. The critique entails data collection and analysis. The project team moves back and forth between these two activities, as is common in traditional qualitative methods (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Miles & Huberman, 1984). A full range of data collection methods, however, both qualitative and quantitative, are appropriate to assist the team in constructing a detailed portrait of daily life in the organization, including one-on-one interviews, observations, review of documents, focus groups, and surveys. From these data, the team can learn the answers to such questions as: How do people accomplish their work? Who does and who does not succeed in the organization? What are the norms that govern social interaction? What kinds of work and work styles are valued and what kinds are not? What impedes and what propels the work process? As the portrait begins to take shape, the team also begins to explore whether and how the organization's social practices might be systematically gendered in

oppressive ways. The portrait and analysis should be sufficiently grounded in detailed accounts of organization members' daily work experiences to yield a comprehensive understanding of how the organization's social practices influence the work and non-work lives of its employees. This portrait is unlikely to depict a single version of reality; rather, it will more likely represent the multiple, often seemingly contradictory perspectives and experiences that coexist among different groups within the organization (Alderfer & Smith, 1982; Martin, 1992; Martin & Meyerson, 1988).

A brief description of some of the gendered social practices our team surfaced in the company in which we conducted our action research project is illustrative of the work a team undertakes during the critique phase of a change project. Working with our internal partners and using the data we jointly collected, we traced the roots of many gender inequities in corporate headquarters to a cultural pattern we referred to as the organization's 'underboundedness': their use of time was undisciplined, roles were unclear, and authority was ambiguous and easily eroded. People tended to respond to the underbounded culture in one of three ways. First were the 'reactors'. These were people who spent most of their time reacting to the endless crises that the organization's lack of structure inevitably created by putting out fires, trying to recover quickly, and scrambling to clarify misunderstandings and miscommunications. Because they were always in reactive mode, these people rarely took initiative in their work. As a result, their careers tended to stagnate. Second were the 'builders'. These people tried to build systems, structures, and teams to create the clarity they lacked and to develop deeper and more lasting competence in the organization. Much of this work was seen, at best, as uninspiring and, at worst, as a waste of time. Finally, there were people who became 'heroes'. Of the three strategies, only this one led to any measure of recognition or success in the company. Heroes applied quick solutions to problems to gain visibility. Because of the lack of clarity in the company, people were often able to achieve hero status by creating problems for which only they had solutions. Not surprisingly, this system of rewards perpetuated the underbounded culture of the organization. As we suggest above, this strategy – a quintessential expression of individualism – overwhelmingly favored men. Behaviors regarded as heroic were consistent with traits that are associated with masculinity and contrary to those associated with femininity. Men, therefore, could more easily and legitimately enact the hero role. In contrast, women were more likely to enact the less valued building strategy. Consistent with our analysis of gender identity, those women who attempted the hero strategy by asserting high profile solutions or otherwise assuming a high degree of visibility were scorned as 'self-promoting' and 'control freaks'.

Men who behaved in comparable ways were praised as 'passionate' and 'creative'. Finally, the public-private split also surfaced here, to the detriment of women, since the underbounded culture rewarded those with unbounded schedules, and those with unbounded schedules tended, more often than not, to be men.

We propose three criteria for assessing the gendered nature of an organization's social practices during the critique phase. First, it is important to assess the extent to which social practices may *have a differential impact* on: (a) men and women, (b) different groups of women, and (c) different groups of men. In our case above, rewards for those with unbounded schedules meets this criterion, since, although applied equally to men and women, it affected them differently as a result of the differences in constraints they experienced outside of work. Second, the team should consider whether there are social practices that *are differentially applied* to: (a) men and women, (b) different groups of women, and (c) different groups of men. A social practice that meets this criterion from our case above is the high value the company placed on heroic behaviors, but only when men behaved this way. Third, the team must identify which social practices, particularly narratives, *conceal the oppressive nature of other social practices* in the legitimating guise of neutrality. An example of this from our case is the labels people used to describe the behaviors of (men) heroes, 'creative' and 'passionate'. These labels seem gender-neutral until they are compared to the more negative labels people used to describe women enacting the very same behaviors. Thus, the narrative about heroes disguised the macho form this strategy took in this company and the way it systematically disadvantaged women.

### *Phase 2: Narrative Revision*

The second phase of the method our team used involves revising the organization's narratives (e.g. Barry, 1997). Narrative revision actually begins during the critique when, analyzing the data through the lens of Frame 4, internal partners on the project team begin to see a different reality and develop a different story about their own and others' experiences in the organization. Telling this story, relating their analysis, and inviting dialogue in formal feedback sessions with others in the organization then moves narrative revision beyond the project team. Internal partners are essential in helping to orient the feedback appropriately to targeted groups within the organization, generally beginning with senior managers, but convening a variety of groups across multiple sessions, including extended retreat formats when possible.

In these sessions, the team works with other members of the organization to learn new ways of understanding and naming their experience in light of the data presented and to begin to invent alternative images of work and social relations at work. This feedback process gives organization members their first opportunity to question previous understandings and consider new alternatives in public. Ideally, it enables marginalized groups to "name themselves, speak for themselves, and participate in defining the terms of interaction . . ." (Hartsock, 1981: 158), thus bringing to the fore voices that have been silenced and conflicts that have been suppressed. This process is not intended to generate a single, coherent alternative narrative, but rather to disrupt existing narratives that suppress, by failing to acknowledge, the range of experiences that exist in the organization (Kilduff & Mehra, 1997). Thus, revised narratives can appear fragmented and ambiguous (Bakhtin, 1981; Martin, 1992; Martin & Meyerson, 1998).

A primary purpose of feedback, therefore, is to interrupt existing narratives with new narratives that attempt to subvert prevailing notions of the organization's gender-neutrality. Leaving gender out of narratives about how people work and how the organization operates both reflects and contributes to the dominant cultural view that gender is irrelevant. According to Ewick & Silbey (1995), these are hegemonic narratives. The unarticulated and unexamined plausibility of the story that leaves gender out is its contribution to hegemony. For example, in our own case, the team offered alternatives to the standard explanations provided for women's relative lack of success, by systematically linking individual women's seemingly idiosyncratic experiences to the cultural, political, and social patterns of life within the organization. This alternative narrative made connections across individual women's experiences, locating the problem in the gendering processes of the organization, rather than in the characteristics of individual women. Thus, the construction and diffusion of this alternative narrative was itself an act of resistance to the status quo.

Because feedback challenges many deeply held beliefs about the neutrality of institutionalized social practices and the wisdom of the organization's current modus operandi, it often feels threatening, and many people will likely resist it. Indeed, the process of feeding back the critique to organization members is designed to surface and name suppressed conflicts that many would prefer to keep suppressed. It is important, therefore, to emphasize that the process of feedback does not *create* these conflicts; it only *surfaces* what was already there, so that the organization might learn and change (Gadlin, 1994). In addition, just as surfacing suppressed conflicts can take a toll on members of the majority, failing to surface them may be costly to those who have borne the brunt of them, and may also be costly to the organization as a whole. The

feedback sessions therefore should provide an appropriately contained environment, so that people can air their feelings and reactions, and the project team should be available afterward to discuss the analysis further. In feedback sessions and in these discussions, the analysis is often altered or extended as people offer their own experiences as either validating or invalidating evidence. Narrative revision is thus an ongoing activity over the course of change and is, in fact, a crucial aspect of the next phase.

### *Phase 3: Experimentation*

The third phase of the method involves experimenting with changes in the way work is defined, executed, and evaluated.[6] This can include changes in any of the social practices we identified above, from formal policies and procedures to informal patterns of everyday social interaction. The project team, which already includes members of the organizational groups targeted for change, together with any other key members of those groups, makes the decision about which social practices would be good candidates for change. They make these decisions based on two considerations. First, of those social practices identified in the critique as oppressively gendered, which appear to have the strongest link to gender inequities in the organization? Second, of these, which seem linked most closely to compromises in people's ability to be maximally effective? Clearly, not every social practice linked to inequities also compromises effectiveness, and, of those that do, some may be more clearly or more immediately compromising than others. For example, in our project, candidates for change were chaotic work patterns and rewards for heroic problem-solvers. These had negative implications for women, but also created disincentives for people to develop other people, build systems, prevent crises, and plan. Attending to business considerations in the decision about which of the many possible practices to target, and giving priority to those that have the greatest, clearest potential to enhance people's effectiveness, helps the team strategically to make choices about how to intervene. It also helps pragmatically by recognizing that organization members will be more interested in and find it easier to justify interventions that they can link not only to gender equity outcomes but to instrumental outcomes as well.

Calling these interventions 'experiments' is important for several reasons. First, people are typically less resistant to the notion of an 'experiment', which they can think of as a temporary trial rather than a necessarily permanent change. Second, it calls attention to these efforts as disruptions to the status quo, as deviations from institutionalized notions of what is 'normal'. Experiments are wedges that open opportunities for critical reflection,

dialogue, and learning. They provoke questions about alternatives, spark debate, and have the potential to surface previously suppressed conflicts (Kolb & Bartunek, 1992). Finally, an 'experiment' evokes the image of a test, and, in the spirit of action research, the interventions we envision serve as tests of the validity of the analysis that suggested them. Much like medicine, in which the reaction to a treatment confirms or disconfirms a diagnosis, the validity of these experiments lies ultimately in whether and to what extent people's experiences change in anticipated ways after they have undertaken the experiment. Thus, it is important that the project team identify concrete outcomes – changes they expect to see both in gender relations and in people's effectiveness – and to monitor these accordingly.

We do not envision any single experiment as providing the solution to the organization's problems. Instead, the possibility of transformation exists in a series of experiments, each designed to change a set of social practices that express and hold in place asymmetric gender relations. It therefore matters less that any given experiment be the 'perfect' intervention and more that the experiment be positioned and interpreted appropriately as part of a process of change meant to interrupt and transform existing gender relations. Understood this way, the experiment is but one intervention into the larger cultural dynamics that create inequities, and opens the way for additional experiments to serve as interventions into the same cultural dynamics. This is consistent with Weick's 'small wins' approach to change (Weick, 1984) and his recent theory of emergent change (Weick, forthcoming). According to Weick, the basic idea of emergent change is that as accommodations and experiments are "repeated, shared, amplified, and sustained, they can, over time, produce perceptible and striking organizational changes" (Orlikowski, 1996: 89: quoted in Weick, forthcoming). For example, one of the first experiments our team undertook as part of our action research project was to create penalties for being late and for running meetings over the allotted time. This in itself was only moderately successful. Yet, this experiment had a snowball effect on the practice of scheduling meetings because it was linked to the larger problem of the organization's unreasonable and unnecessary demands on people's time, which routinely put working parents in an untenable position. A norm evolved whereby meetings were scheduled only during regular work hours to avoid penalizing parents. (For other examples of this incremental approach to change, see Bailyn et al., 1997; Kolb& Merrill-Sands, 1999; Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000; and Merrill-Sands et al., 1999.)

In the course of this research, our team came to see that whether experiments hold, diffuse, and result in meaningful change depends largely on the sense-

making processes that accompany them. Thus, we invoke the previous phase of our approach, narrative revision, as a crucial and continuing part of this third phase. This is consistent with Weick's (forthcoming) perspective on change. He claims that in the course of a change effort "the role of the change agent becomes one of managing language, dialogue, and identity" (Weick & Quinn, 1999: 381). Similarly, our team learned that to approach the vision of gender equity we outlined above, members of the organization need consciously to construct alternative narratives about their change efforts. These narratives must make explicit how social practices that seem neutral contribute to the existing gendered order. Narratives need also to reveal how alternative ways of working will interrupt and revise that order and how they will open new possibilities for men and women. The change effort provides the occasion for conversations in which people reflect critically on the organization's practices and on their own behavior as they consider the ways in which these reinforce or resist oppressive gender relations. The experiments generated from and legitimated by this critique are interventions that change the material conditions of work. These changes provide further occasions for building narratives about what is possible for men and women and what is possible as meanings for masculinity and femininity, which, in turn, suggest and legitimate further experimentation and change (Weick, 1995). In this way, shifts in the material conditions of work are accompanied by shifts in the conversations around which organization members interact and behave. These shifts create new realities and new possibilities for effective action in the organization (Ford & Ford, 1995; Gergen, 1991).

This approach to change is consistent with theories of power and resistance. As Foucault (1977) and others (e.g. Wilmott & Knights, 1994) have suggested, power relations change at the margins through dispersed forms of resistance as alternative possibilities for action, meaning, and identity become possible. Although Foucault would argue that such resistance is always countered – and sometimes annexed – by those in power, we are more sanguine. Following others (Hartsock, 1987; hooks, 1984), we see the transformational potential of this kind of change process. We have learned, however, from both our own and others' efforts to change organizations, that to achieve that transformational potential and to resist the cooptation of change efforts, narratives are crucial. Without a sustained narrative that links the experiment to gender-related objectives, the potential for resistance and change will likely be subordinated, even lost, to the instrumental objectives of the experiment. (See Ely and Meyerson, forthcoming, for an extended discussion of the challenge of 'holding onto gender' in this work.)

## CONCLUSION

In contrast to other perspectives on gender, our understanding of gender in organizations begins with the notion that organizations are inherently gendered as a result of having been created by and for men. Their gendered nature has been sustained through social practices that organize and explain the structuring of daily life inside, as well as outside, the organization. These social practices reflect gendered themes, in the form of masculine-feminine dichotomies, which have become deeply embedded in organizations, so deeply embedded as to appear to be gender-neutral, simply the norm. Yet, because they are rooted in men's lives and experiences, these social practices tend, in often subtle and insidious ways, to privilege men and disadvantage women, frequently compromising their ability to be maximally effective at work. We propose an emergent, localized approach to systemic, organizational change whereby organization members continuously identify and disrupt oppressively gendered social practices and revise them accordingly.

As we have suggested throughout, how gendering occurs and which particular men and women are most likely to be affected varies systematically as a function of other aspects of identity, such as race, ethnicity, social class, and sexual identity. Thus, for each theme, we have considered how social practices shape experiences differently for different groups of men and women, depending on other identity group memberships. Nevertheless, a critique that has gender as its orientation will likely surface a different set of themes than one that is focused on, for example, race or class. No single critique, no matter how complex or how attentive to multiple bases of privilege and oppression, is likely to reveal all forms or sources of inequities that people experience at work. Different starting points will likely lead the team to focus on different processes and outcomes in their change efforts. Holvino (1999) suggests that to be comprehensive in this regard requires multiple critical lenses applied simultaneously. Acker (1999) argues similarly that this would create a more inclusive portrait of the 'regimes of inequality' in organizations.

Our own experience suggests that the most appropriate orientation of a critique will depend on the particular groups in question, the kind of work they do, their organizational context, and the presenting problems or issues with which they are most explicitly grappling (Ely, Meyerson & Thomas, 1999). For example, to understand the experience of oppression among working class white women, it may be necessary to lead with class relations as the focal point, and then examine how gender operates within and between the different social classes in question. This approach allows the organization's concerns and the particular way those concerns have manifested in the organization, rather than

the researcher's interests, to define at least the initial, orienting framework for the analysis. Once begun, the framework would then presumably become increasingly complex as the project team strives to consider the various intergroup relations at play. This requires that researchers engaged in this kind of work have the capacity to move with relative ease in their analyses across the various group memberships that are represented in the organization, a capacity that we believe is enhanced to the extent that the cultural composition of the project team mirrors the cultural composition of the organization (Alderfer et al., 1983). An exploration of how substantively an analysis that begins with a set of relations other than gender would take shape is beyond the scope of this chapter. We nevertheless believe that the general framework we propose here provides a useful template for any such analysis.

## NOTES

1. We are grateful to Lotte Bailyn and our colleagues affiliated with the Center for Gender in Organizations, Simmons Graduate School of Management – Gill Coleman, Joyce Fletcher, Deborah Kolb, Deborah Merrill-Sands, Rhona Rapoport, and Bridgette Sheridan – for their contributions to these ideas and for their foundational research, on which this paper builds. We also appreciate the feedback we received on an earlier draft from members of the FSC Research Group, Elaine Backman, Herminia Ibarra, Maureen Scully, and Kathleen Valley. We thank Joanne Martin and Barbara Reskin for their comments, which helped in our conceptual framing of the paper. Finally, we thank Bob Sutton and Barry Staw for their helpful suggestions. This research was funded in part by the Ford Foundation.

2. The research on which we draw was primarily action research to develop theory and methods for advancing gender equity while at the same time improving organizational effectiveness. Our own efforts in this regard (Coleman & Rippon, Ely & Meyerson, and Meyerson & Kolb, all forthcoming) build on and are among a series of related projects, which others have conducted over the past ten years (Rapoport et al., 1996; Kolb & Merrill-Sands, 1999; Merrill-Sands, Fletcher & Acosta, 1999).

3. See Diamond & Quinby (1988), Nicholson (1990), and Holvino (1994) for the kinds of feminist post-structuralist perspectives on which we draw here; see Calas & Smircich (1996) for a typology of feminist positions.

4. Members of the project team were Gill Coleman, Robin Ely, Deborah Kolb, Debra Meyerson, Ann Rippin, and Rhona Rapoport.

5. The internal members of the project team should include both those people who have sufficient authority and reach within the organization to be able to influence the change process, as well as those who represent a hierarchical, functional, and demographic cross-section of the organizational groups of interest. In addition, research suggests that the data collected will be more valid to the extent that external researchers also reflect the demographic composition of employee groups of interest (Alderfer, Tucker, Morgan & Drasgow, 1983).

6. See Meyerson & Fletcher (2000) for a description of experiments as 'small wins'. Through a number of examples, this articles demonstrates how small wins act as local interventions into systemic phenomena.

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