WHAT IS GENDER IN ORGANISATIONS?

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In recent decades different constructionist approaches, frequently gathered under the label of ‘doing gender’, have become influential in Scandinavian gender research (Widerberg 2007). In this text we focus on just what ‘doing gender’ in organisations is seen to be. What is gender and how can it be looked at with doing gender as the point of departure? Our initial inquiry involves taking a look at what the suggested definition of doing gender is in research on gender in organisations. We look at the criticism directed towards doing gender and how this has been treated. After going through the research on doing gender, we then outline our view of gender in organisations. We argue in favour of keeping a “divided eye” on how actors do gender via an analytical look at ‘where they have been’ and ‘where they are heading’, in relation to context and practices, and in this way being able to focus on the process of how gender is done. Following this we present some methodological implications arising from our view on gender with regard to two ongoing research projects on gender and leadership in two different organisational contexts. Finally, we give a summary of our ways of reasoning along with one or two observations on our view of gender and approaches to studying organisations.
Doing gender – history, criticism and progression

As far back as the seventies feminist researchers formulated the theoretical starting point of gender as created through relations and processes (Rubin 1975, Kessler & McKenna 1978). This view subscribes to the overall perspective of social constructionism and has its roots in several classics of sociology (e.g. Berger & Luckmann 1966). From a social constructionist perspective gender becomes both something that is done, i.e. a social practice, and something that we produce knowledge of, and which we can thus study as produced knowledge. Gender therefore is not something ready and complete to be discovered by research, but rather research focus should be on understanding and interpreting how gender is done (see e.g. Höök 2001 and Widerberg 2007 for overviews). This applies equally to looking at organisations. People create what organisations ‘are’. Organizations can be thought of as gendered (Acker 1990, 1992). Halford et al. (1997) considered that gender could be understood as embedded in organisational forms and relations. Thus the creation of gender and organisation might be seen as integrated (Acker 1990, 1992, Halford et al 1997).

In the past decade processual views on gender have increasingly been collated under the overall term of doing gender (Korvajärvi 1998, 2003, Kvande 1998, 2003, Andersson 2003, Vänje 2005, Fogelberg Eriksson 2005). This perspective has had a considerable impact in Scandinavia where it also has its roots. Joan Acker’s core article with a processual outlook Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered organizations from 1990 came into being during en period when she was a visiting professor at the Swedish Centre for Working Life (Acker 1990, 2007).

The origins of the term doing gender can be traced to sociologists Candace West and Don Zimmerman. Their article of the 1980s Doing Gender (1987) was published in a period when a paradigm shift in feminist social science was occurring. The term ‘sex roles’ had previously received criticism from feminist researchers from a variety of angles, not least due to its invisibilisation of power and inequality (Lopata and Thorne 1978). And those second-wave feminist perspectives that did highlight power and inequality, such as Radical feminism, and Marxist and Socialist feminism, were criticised for ignoring displays of agency. At this time, individual social action was viewed by each theory as simply the result of one’s ‘sex role’ or the ‘systems’ of patriarchy and capitalism. It was considered that theories on gender suffered an impasse at both the ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ levels. It was against this background that the article of West & Zimmerman was developed. Their objective was “to advance a new understanding of gender as a routine accomplishment embedded in everyday interaction” (West & Zimmerman 1987, p.125.). The writers developed an
ethnomethodological perspective of gender and showed how gender is done in specific contexts. Their interest was in interaction and micro-political activities. They displayed gender to be flexible and something that is constructed in situations.

Over the years the ideas of West & Zimmerman (1987) and West & Fenstermaker (1993a, 1993b and 1995) have received criticism from several quarters. This has above all involved their focus on interaction, which has been considered as paying insufficient attention to significances of structures, specific context, and power relations in constructions of gender (Fenstermaker & West 2002). With the ambition of problematising how systems of dominance create inequality West & Fenstermaker (1995) launched the term ‘difference’ to describe what was produced and established in power relations as lesser valued. They felt the need existed for a word that could link together distinctions between categories such as race, class and gender. But they received particular criticism for their use of the word ‘difference’ since it was considered to contribute to hiding rather than illuminating specific contexts, meanings and power mechanisms coupled to each respective analytical category such as gender, class, race and sexuality (e.g. Hill Collins 1995, Maldonado 1995, Thorne 1995, Weber 1995). But West & Fenstermaker clarified and developed their ideas in numerous texts in dialogue with their critics over a 20-year period. A compendium of their ideas and those of many critics was collected chronologically in the book Doing Gender, Doing Difference (Fenstermaker & West 2002), making it possible to follow developments in lines of thought. In the book’s foreword Dorothy E. Smith highlights the writers as an illustration of how sociological theory-making develops, not only in continuous dialogue with criticism but also with theoretical traditions and a social world. However, Smith is not in agreement with West & Fenstermaker’s reasoning about power in their theory on ‘doing gender’. Smith felt that over the years the authors had not been able to elucidate whatever it is they are talking about when they talk about power (Smith 2002).

In current use of ‘doing gender’ as an approach or perspective, the term appears to function as an all-round expression for a processual view on gender. According to Korvajärvi (1998) approaches to gender in organisations vary among advocates of a doing-gender outlook, and she grouped these as follows: ethnomethodological view (West & Zimmerman 1987, West & Fenstermaker 1993a and 1993b), cultural views (Davies 1995, Gherardi 1994), processual views (Reskin & Padavic 1994, Acker 1992, Korvajärvi 1998) and performative view (Butler 1990). It has been pointed out that the groups of Korvajärvi overlap each other (Fogelberg Eriksson 2005). For example, elements of the cultural approach exist
within the processual approach with Acker as leading representative, as well as focus on interactions.

In 2003 Elin Kvande used doing gender in organizations as a theoretical perspective with several approaches. She did not consider these to be mutually independent. On the contrary, they could be combined beneficially, making it possible to study various aspects of doing gender. She saw the various approaches in the doing-gender perspective as the interactional approach (West & Zimmerman, Kessler & McKenna), the practices approach (Acker, Smith, Morgan), the negotiation approach (Strauss, Haavind), and the symbolist approach (Gherardi).

Karin Widerberg (2007) considered that the various approaches in doing gender, such as interactionism, practices, negotiations and symbols, are used to illustrate how gender is created. The showings of gender - in the form of structures, relations, symbols, identity etc - are the result, not the starting point. And the research should focus on to show the process of how gender is done (Widerberg 2007).

Kvande (2003) first summarised the possibilities that use of a doing-gender perspective open up and then stated two possible limitations. Firstly, the perspective places people in organisations and the activities of these in the centre. Gender does not exist prior to social activity, i.e. gender is not something an individual is, but rather comes into existence when people act in a certain context. Secondly, focus is on everyday practices, something that is linked to broader value systems. A doing-gender perspective is thirdly considered to be dynamic since it treats both stability and change on the basis of a view that gender is created in specific historical circumstances where it may be both recreated and contested. Fourthly the perspective is characterised by a view of gender as open and fluid at the same time as it may be perceived as firm and fixed against a background of its degree of regularity. It is possible for gender to merge with other practices ensuing from e.g. class and ethnicity. Finally, a doing-gender perspective offers pluralism in that variations in time and space often bear with them different constructions of gender. The contents of terms such as man/woman, male/female are seen as uncertain, ambiguous and changing (Kvande 2003).

Two possible limitations resulting from a doing-gender perspective as discussed by Kvande firstly relate to whether it entails relativism since it excludes structures, and secondly there is the question of how power might be addressed. If a doing-gender perspective is limited to looking at interaction situations alone, with no focus on practices, then structural significances may be missed, according to Kvande. On the other hand, with focus on practices and in accordance with the ideas of e.g. Giddens (1984), Smith (1987,
1990), Connell (1987) and Acker (1997) structures and symbols gain a forceful impact on understandings of gender as practices.

Similar reasoning on practices was pursued by Susanne Andersson (2003). Andersson was attracted by the views held by West & Zimmerman (1987), however she was critical of the fact that the implicit in the situation and that which exists in the form of structures is dealt with very briefly. She developed the concept ‘predone’ meanings of gender on the basis of Gherardi’s (1994) ideas on ‘the gender we do’, the level of interaction that West & Zimmerman (1987) focused on, and the link to ‘the gender we think’, which are symbolic universes made up of cultural metaphors and representations with historical roots. Predone meanings of gender are made up of symbolic aspects that are historical remains of meanings of gender and that have to be managed in human interaction. Andersson developed the concept ‘ordering practices’, i.e. enabling and restricting inter-human activities that are both material and discursive (Andersson 2003).

The other possible limitation taken up by Kvande (2003) involved the risk that a doing-gender perspective focused on interactions and negotiations would neglect power. For Kvande it goes without saying that power is included in interactions and negotiations in organisations and is expressed in what women and men are permitted to do and act, and how women and men are ranked and evaluated. According to Kvande power also exists at the symbolic level, in value systems. How power can be addressed from a processual outlook has been discussed by Benschop and Dooreward (1998). Their idea was that a power analysis comprises both manifest and latent power as hegemonic power processes (Benschop och Dooreward 1998). A suggestion of Halford and Leonard (2001) was that power should be seen as a ‘multiple concept’ if we are to grasp the complexity between organisation and gender in a Western 21st century context. They asserted that power relations have a degree of fixedness while at the same time they can be understood as unstable. Also, they said that the question of agency is central and implies an understanding that actors both exercise and resist power formations, and that power is not only exercised in ways that can be observed, in the form of direct actions, but also at invisible levels in the form of ideas and notions that circulate (Halford & Leonard 2001).

In summary, we feel that a run-through of doing gender in organisations has made visible an aspiration to understand the relationship between gender relations at individual, organisational and societal levels, how they are linked and how they influence one another. Doing gender in organizations denotes varied views on gender (Korvajärvi 1998) or alternatively is a perspective which comprises various approaches that can be combined in a
fruitful way for the study of gender (Kvande 2003, Fogelberg-Eriksson 2005, Widerberg 2007). Ongoing discussions on doing gender in organizations revolves around relations between structures, practices, context, interactions and power and its significances for constructions of gender. In the next section we will provide an outline of our understanding of gender in organisations.

**Our view on gender in organisations**

Widerberg (2007) considered that although ‘doing gender’ as a research approach is prevalent in Scandinavia ambitions are not always followed up in research practice. We interpret Widerberg’s critique as concerning gender in certain cases being seen as a starting point in research rather than research showing how gender is done in social practices. The risk being that with the research agenda governing results dichotomous notions of gender may be recreated.

However, seeing gender as the result of social practices, with focus on how gender is done in this process, is not the same as being unaware of organisational setting as a crucial starting point for seeing how gender comes into existence in practices. Rather, if only situations in interactions are at the centre, then the risk is that context as the prerequisite for interactions will disappear from focus. Organisational setting can be seen as an earlier result of people’s everyday practices. As a historical result of social practices, organisational context becomes at the same time a setting for how gender comes into existence in social practices. Organisational setting, as a historical result and precondition, offers a specific historical access in time and space that enables and restricts the way in which gender comes into existence. In the organisational context gender is constituted of both symbolic and material aspects. The latter include the gender structure, i.e. observable (and attributed significances of) segregation between the sexes in organisations such as numerical distribution between women and men, degree of segregation in tasks, professions and positions, and hierarchical distribution between the sexes (Wahl 1992). Other material aspects consist of the many ways in which gender is institutionalised such as in organisation of buildings, hierarchies, spaces, toilets etc. Symbolic aspects include notions of gender that, for example, Gherardi in 1994 called ‘the gender we think’, symbolic universes and what Andersson (2003) called predone meanings of gender, gendering of tasks and positions, and discourses on women and men. We see the various significances the material and symbolic aspects have for how gender comes into existence in the interaction as an empirical matter. When gender is done in a specific
organisational context, the historical material and symbolic aspects of gender will be dealt with in interaction via re-creation, renegotiation or disengagement.

We share the criticism of Kvande (2003) that if a doing-gender perspective focuses solely on interactions, then the risk exists that power will be neglected. We consider further that there is unclarity as to how power might be addressed within the various approaches of a doing-gender perspective. Our view is that power enters into the theory through its being embedded in both the material and symbolic aspects of the organisation context, and in actors. Power relations can be found in material resources such as formal positions of authority, and in property, and in symbolic value systems made up of ways of believing and understanding the world that enable and delimit social interaction by exercising control over people and the material world. We concur with the view of Halford & Leonard (2001) that actors both exercise power and resist power formations, and also that power relations are clearly fixed to some degree, but are simultaneously unstable, and that power is also exercised latently such as in the form of ideas and notions that circulate. Thus our reasoning can be linked to writers named above, e.g. Giddens (1984), Smith (1987, 1990) Connell (1987) and Acker (1997). Their points of departure for reasoning may differ, but they share a similar view of the relation between practice and structure. Historical practices gain material and institutionalised expression, enabling and delimiting various current practices. These expressions create specific cultural values, symbols and notions through which certain practices are possible and rules for actions are established. Thus in summary we consider: 1) that gender can be seen as the result of social practices - in the form of structures, relations, symbols, identity etc - with gender likewise gaining existence via these practices, 2) that organisational context represents the historical result of practices, as well as a prerequisite for how gender comes into existence via practices, 3) that when gender is done in a specific organisational context the historical material and symbolic aspects of gender will be dealt with in interactions through re-creation, renegotiation or disengagement, 4) that power is embedded both in the material and symbolic aspects of the organisational setting and in actors’ interactions. We consider it fruitful to see that we are not dealing with an either/or between context and process, but to perceive both – both organisational setting as a historical result of practices and as a prerequisite for interaction where gender comes into existence. We recommend keeping a “divided eye” on how actors do gender via an analytical look at ‘where they have been’ and ‘where they are heading’, in relation to context and practices, and in this way being able to focus on the process of how gender is done.
Two ongoing organisation studies on gender and leadership

In this section two ongoing research projects on gender and leadership in two different organisational contexts are concisely presented. The aim is to open discussion on some implications that our view on gender has had in our in studies to bring gender into view. Our research strategies are based on a qualitative approach with regard to both gathering of data and method of analysis. One study, by Sophie Linghag (coming 2009), deals with how gender is done in the transition from member of staff to management in a major Swedish bank. This study analyses how gender is done in management development of new first-time managers, and in career themes of potential and new managers. In the second study Klara Regnô (coming 2010/11) looks at how leadership and gender is done in women-dominated organisations. The focus here is on women as managers in organisations with a majority of women both as total of employed people and in management positions.

Significance of context

On the basis of our view on the significance of organisational setting, as historical material and symbolic aspects of gender, context in both studies were seen as important starting points to identify. The organisational context was considered in the studies as the historical result of gender and as the prerequisite for how gender comes into existence via practices. Also, in both studies the context represented a strategic choice in relation to our research enquiries. Since earlier research has shown the significance of gender distribution and the numbers of women and men in management posts in an organisation for an understanding of how women and men are treated and how they act in their organisation (Kanter 1977) it was important to consider aspects such as the gender structure (Wahl 1992) in the organizations.

With Linghag’s interest in how gender is done in the transition from staff employee to management, a case study of a bank was a strategic choice in relation to delimitability and dependence on context. The bank studied had an equal gender distribution but at the same time both horizontal and vertical gender segregation, while there were ongoing changes and restructuring. It appeared plausible that both women and men were able to make discerning choices in relation to becoming managers. People’s career experiences say something about the interaction between an individual and a specific situation. A career theme expresses experiences of where one has been and where one is heading in organizations. Thus, a career theme displays an interaction between the practices of an individual and a specific context. With a dialectical view of experiences this entails the career theme showing how an
‘I’ (as gender being) is created and comes into existence through the experiences that a career theme faces. Thus, with a case study it was considered that a good chance existed to see how gender, career and management could be done and come into existence in the interaction between people.

On the basis of Regnö’s interest in how women as managers do gender and leadership, a woman-dominated context was a starting point for research questions. The majority of research on women as managers has been done in organisations dominated by men. With the help of statistical mapping Regnö was able to identify areas in the Swedish labour market where women are in the majority among management and staff. As a result of these statistics she was able to select women managers working in local authority care for the elderly. In this specific women-dominated context, resulting from work distribution and notions about women and women’s characteristics, and as a basis for how gender and leadership are done, Regnö’s interest lay in the meaning given by women managers to the various categories such as manager, woman and woman manager, and when they themselves experienced belonging to each respective category. Respondents were asked to describe the organisational setting they felt to be part of the category in question. They were further asked to account for who was present and why they believe they felt as they did. The objective was to capture relations between context and practices that they themselves experienced as having meaning.

**Multimethodological application for keeping a ‘divided eye’**

On the basis of our view on gender in the study of organizations our suggestion has been to consider it beneficial to look at organisational context both as a historical result of interaction between people and as a prerequisite for processes of interaction where gender comes into existence, i.e. keeping a divided eye. This has influenced decisions taken by us to use many different methods – multimethodological application – in order to achieve a rich, extensive complex and varying material to be able to capture context, material and symbolic aspects of gender, as well as ongoing everyday practices. Multimethodological application was used in both Linghag’s and Regnö’s studies with the aim of maintaining a divided eye on both context and practice with these seen as related, as both the historical result of and prerequisite to how gender comes into existence in organisational settings. In Linghag’s study observations, interviews and review of documents were used with the aim of capturing both context and practices. The study by Regnö is based on interviews, observations and a workbook – a form
of qualitative questionnaire. Follow-up interviews were used in both studies. In Linghags study, three follow-up interviews were used with potential managers during a two-year period with regard to access to career experiences in an ongoing process of change. Otherwise, longitudinal studies are usually of the retrospective type instead of consecutive accounts of occurrences and practices in organisations (Johansson Lindfors 1993).

In Regnö’s study, twelve women managers were interviewed twice with a two-week interval. The interviews revolved around daily management work and relations with colleagues. The aim was to gain an understanding of how managers position themselves and are positioned in the day-to-day practices of work. It is in daily interaction that individuals reflect themselves in others and both ascribe to themselves and be ascribed various characteristics. Between interviews managers were requested to fill in the workbook where they were asked to describe situations where they felt themselves to be managers, women and women managers. Answers were then discussed at the next interview. In several cases the managers were unable to provide answers; something that was discussed in the follow-up interview. Involved here were analyses on the significance of room for manoeuvre and the implications of being aware of category.

In both studies the interviews captured various aspects of gender in organisations. They in part recorded how gender is done without being interpreted in these terms by interviewees, but rather as explanations of behaviour and segregation found in the individual. It is only when several similar experiences were placed side by side that a pattern showed. In part interviewees were asked explicit questions on gender. Here symbolic aspects of gender and leadership were picked up; i.e. notions that exist on gender and on leadership. The way the symbolic aspects were a prerequisite for interaction – i.e. relating to leadership practice and gender constructions in the organisation – may be seen as an empirical question: to what degree they structure day-to-day practice and their level of disengagement from this.

**Summary and concluding reflections**

In this paper we have pursued the way in which gender may be understood in organisation studies. One starting point was taken in an investigation of what doing gender signifies. We have found that the term doing gender was coined by West & Zimmerman (1987) but that doing gender nowadays represents various outlooks on gender (Korvajärvi 1998), or a

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1 The questionnaire was inspired by self-reflection exercises carried out by Ann-Charlotte Ek when teaching at Malmö University, which we discussed within the framework of a pedagogical collaboration project.
A perspective that embraces various approaches that can be combined fruitfully for the study of gender (Kvande 2003, Fogelberg-Eriksson 2005, Widerberg 2007). Ongoing discussion within doing gender concerns relations between structures, practices, context, interactions and power, and the significances of these for constructions of gender at individual, organisational and societal levels. Our view on gender in organizations was summarised: 1) that gender can be seen as the result of social practices - in the form of structures, relations, symbols, identity etc - with gender likewise gaining existence via these practices, 2) that organisational context represents the historical result of practices, as well as a prerequisite for how gender comes into existence via practices, 3) that when gender is done in a specific organisational context the historical material and symbolic aspects of gender will be dealt with in interactions through re-creation, renegotiation or disengagement, 4) that power is embedded both in the material and symbolic aspects of the organisational setting and in actors’ interactions. We consider it fruitful to see that we are not dealing with an either/or between context and process, but to perceive both – both organisational setting as a historical result of practices and as a prerequisite for interaction where gender comes into existence. We recommend keeping a “divided eye” on how actors do gender via an analytical look at ‘where they have been’ and ‘where they are heading’, in relation to context and interaction, and in this way being able to focus on the process of how gender is done. We then presented methodological implications that our view on gender has had on two ongoing research projects on gender and leadership. In our studies we both saw the significance of the organisational context, historical material and symbolic aspects of gender, as important starting points to identify. Our procedure in our studies can be seen as the application of multimethodology to achieve a rich, extensive, complex and varying material to be able to capture context, material and symbolic aspects of gender, as well as ongoing everyday practices. Both the studies used various methods, with the aim of keeping a divided eye and capturing both context and practice seen as relations. Keeping a divided eye and seeing both historical results, prerequisites and processes around the way in which gender is done in organisations, opportunities might opens the way for the emancipatory venture of research. By gaining new frameworks of interpretation for one’s own experiences, i.e. knowledge of how something is done, the opportunity arises for doing things differently.
References


