

An Overview of “Doing Gender” in Women’s Organizations

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Abstract

Using a focus of practice-based studies and the phenomenon of gender as a practice, this paper explores how to examine the practice of gender within women’s organizations. The author looks at the impacts of gendered individuals within organizations, questions the contemporary literature on organizing as an inherently masculine space, and explores how gendered organizing impacts predominately female-based organizations in their interactions with male dominated organizations. It concludes that utilizing a practice-based approach to organizing which includes a gendered analysis of practice offers a compelling way to understand gender within NGOs and other organizations focused on women’s issues.

Keywords: Gender. Organizations. Practice. Women’s rights. Africa.

Uma Visão Geral do “Fazer Gênero” em Organizações de Mulheres

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Resumo

Apoiando-se nos estudos baseados em prática e no fenômeno de gênero como prática, este artigo explora como examinar a prática de gênero dentro de organizações de mulheres. A autora olha para os impactos de gêneros individuais nas organizações, questões contemporâneas na literatura sobre processos organizativos como inerentemente espaços masculinos e explora como a organização de gênero impacta predominantemente organizações femininas em suas interações com organizações masculinamente dominadas. O artigo conclui que a utilização de uma abordagem de organização baseada na prática que inclua uma análise da prática de gênero oferece uma forma atraente para entender gênero dentro de organizações não governamentais (ONGs) e outras focadas em questões relacionadas as mulheres.

Palavras-chave: Gênero. Organizações. Prática. Direitos das mulheres. África.

1 Introduction

Women's organizations have been an increasing phenomenon of interest across the globe. An amplified focus on gender and organizations results from this growing interest particularly in social science fields and Gender and Women's studies within academia. The need to look more closely at women's experiences and gendered practices within organizations is highlighted by the large number of women's groups which are present, as well as the lack of information and research which strongly focuses on issues of gender within organizations. Practice-based studies with a focus on organizational theorizing is an approach which can allow for a unique and holistic social, material, and theoretical approach to explore gender within organizations in countries across the world.

Research dealing with women's organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) is popular in U.S. academic literature, with the majority of gender-based work coming out of Gender and Women's studies programs, anthropology, and sociology (Naples, 1998; Wright, 2004). Increasingly, since the late 1980s, U.S. feminists have begun to pay closer attention to the situations of women across the globe and have become more engaged in international discourses of women's rights (Fernandes, 2013; Narayan, 1997). For example, women's associations in African countries are now often recognized as the largest organized sector in public societies (Tripp, 2003). The majority of this focus, however, is on the experiences of individuals and not on the organizations themselves. International and global influences, in the forms of NGOs and other donors, have an incredible amount of interaction with and influence on the situation of larger social structures, including gender. This means that the existing scholarly work focusing on organizations and gender in the U.S. and Europe will certainly be important, particularly when addressing these external influences on autonomous organizations as well as organizational practices within specific contexts.

Organizing, as an actively happening process, or assemblage of practices, is vital for the understanding of the study of organizations in general. Czarniawska (2013) argues that the current positionality of the study of organizations should alter the focus on organizations as bounded entities to a focus on the actual process of organizing. Schatzki (2006) supports this recommendation by proposing that the study of organizations should address organizations as they are happening. He argues that the organizational happening includes

the performance of actions and practices, as well as how material arrangements support the activity of organizing.

Additionally, and particularly important to address the field of organizations involved in women's issues, the phenomenon of gender within organizing becomes of vital importance to understand the organizing that occurs which revolves around issues of women and gender. The importance of addressing gender within organizations is highlighted by a variety of situations, three of which will be addressed in this paper. First, the situation of gendered individuals involved in organizing and organizations, and how these gendered experiences impact the organizational practices, will be considered. Secondly, this paper will look at how the overwhelming presence of predominantly women within organizations focused on women's issues challenges the contemporary literature on organizing as inherently dominated by masculinity. Finally, this paper will present an examination of how gendered organizing impacts relationships between predominately female-based, autonomous organizations and predominately male-based, development and other corporate-type organizations.

The aim of this paper is to use a focus on practice-based studies and the phenomenon of practices within organizing to theoretically address the specific situations discussed above. In the next section, important terminology will be discussed, followed by theoretical approaches in part three. Part four will conclude the paper with how research specifically on women's organizations can be influenced and approached through this "gender as a practice" theoretical framework, and this will be followed by concluding remarks.

2 Terminology: Organizations, Practice, and Gender

For the purposes of this paper, which will focus on the practice of gender within organizational contexts, the specific terminology and definitional usages of "organization," "practice," and "gender" must be addressed. Czarniawska (2013) recognized that the word "organization" can be imbued with a variety of definitional understanding. She quotes March and Simon (1993) as saying "organizations are systems of coordinated action among individuals and groups whose preferences, information, interests, or knowledge differ" (p. 8). Czarniawska (2013) also has recognized that the terminology easily gets confused between use as a noun, verb, or adjective. She describes an "organization" as a fixed, knowable place, "organizing" as an active process or practice, and "organized" as a subjective

description related to order. Additionally, Schatzki's (2006) interpretation of the definition of an organization is "a bundle of practices and material arrangements" (p. 1863), otherwise expanded to say that a bundle of actions make up a practice, and a bundle of practices form an organization.

We understand practices through the ability to identify specific elements that produce an action or experience. Rooted in Marxism and phenomenology, Nicolini, Gherardi & Yanow (2003) defines practices as something which people do, or in other words, actions that people perform. I will be using the term of organization in a way which represents an entity closer to the former definition by March and Simon, while including the perspective of Schatzki and others who understand organizations to be inherently tied into the performativity of practices.

When referring to women's organizations in particular, I ultimately mean to acknowledge that these are groups made up of individuals who have chosen to coordinate their efforts in the name of a common cause. With this definition, it is also important to understand that organizations in this context may vary in size and power, yet regardless are recognized as forming a group with some amount of common interests. In addition, I will utilize Czarniawska's understanding of organizing in verb form as inherently important to the conception of organizations and, particularly in the context of women's organizations, the actual act of being involved in a process or practice of organizing is important.

Additionally, the use of the term "practice" is best understood through Schatzki's (2006) explanation as an arrangement of sayings and doing, implying that a practice is a specific action or event which one can understand as a practice because of its recognizable elements. The concept of practices is important to organizational studies because of the before mentioned argument that organizations are in fact made up of bundles of practices. When I utilize the terminology of practice in this paper I am calling upon this foundational concept in organizational studies and imagining the practices which I will speak of as involved in women's organizations to be the everyday actions and standard "doings" that actors take part in through their experiences in the organizations.

The terminology of "gender" has been discussed and deconstructed quite thoroughly across fields such as feminist theorizing and women's studies. Rubin (1975) introduced the sex/gender system concept which we now generally see used across disciplines as a simplified understanding of a biological sex identity, which influences a socially constructed notion of gender and is performed through human activity. This core concept of gender as a

social construction is solidified in the generalized understanding of a strict dichotomy of male and female. While our societal knowledge tends to perpetuate this binary structure of gender, we do know that gender is not such a simple concept. Therefore, my use of the term gender, while binary in purpose for this paper, should be understood as encompassing all variations across the spectrum of genders. For the sake of simplicity and focus I have chosen to use the terms "woman"/"women" to express my specific interest and focus on the experiences of organizations involved in women's issues.

3 Theoretical Approaches

Practiced-based theory offers a particularly interesting lens with which to view the gendered culture of organizations. By examining and understanding the practices connected with an organization, scholars argue that we are able to ultimately see the memories of the organization. Schatzki (2006) explains that practices are always reoccurring and reproducing that which is known, saying "to understand an organization as it happens demands not just a grasp of both the unfolding of the organization in objective time and the joining of past, present, and future in activity time, but in addition, an appreciation of the nexus of material arrangements in which its practices proceed and an understanding of its memory and the interactional complex that effects this memory" (p. 1872). To approach the study of organizations with a practice-based lens allows for the exploration of how organizations are involved with knowing, knowledge, and learning. While scholars agree that there are a multitude of approaches to practice-based theory, all practice-based approaches focus specifically on what people do (Nicolini, et al., 2003).

The epistemology, or world view, of practice-based study allows for a lens with which to see how organizations function. Because people are practicing in specific ways, at specific times and places, the shared group experience of involvement within an organization, as discussed before, can ultimately provide a unique opportunity to look at how actors within organizations influence and impact organizational culture and practice.

Harding, Ford, and Fotaki (2012) argue that the field of organization theory could greatly benefit from an increased inclusion of feminist theorists. The addition of these concepts could potentially help to understand the practice of organizing by examining the social implications and influences of gender roles, norms, and ideologies as they are individually and collectively practiced. They encourage drawing on Judith Butler (1990),

with her influence of the performativity of gender, as well as specific feminist theories, such as intersectionality, which argues that intersecting social categories must be included when discussing social systems of oppression and domination (Crenshaw, 1989).

Overwhelmingly, the current body of literature focusing on gender within organizational practice deals with urban and corporate business-type organizations. Scholars have found that "in contrast with business enterprises or public sector organizations, NGOs have barely been analyzed from the perspective of organizational theory" (Dema, 2008, p. 441). Ultimately, the question I would like to focus on is how gender plays a part within these notions of practice-based theorizing as it occurs within activist-type organizations focused specifically on women's issues.

Reckwitz (2002) explains that in a practice-based approach, the smallest unit of analysis is an actual practice. By analyzing these practical units of practice, we are able to approach the study of organizational knowledge by recognizing that knowledge is not inside minds, but rather knowledge is via the understanding and interaction with the social and material (Reckwitz, 2002). Studying these practices, however, can be difficult because they are occurring in real time and ultimately often being performed without obvious intention due to the deeply socialized nature of masculinities and femininities (Yancey Martin, 2003). However difficult, capturing the actual performativity and practice of gender within these less studied NGOs and activist-type organizations through this lens can potentially help to explore the experiences of individuals and organized groups of people involved in women's issues across the world.

The "gender as a practice" concept comes directly from feminist theory, and some organizational and management scholars are recognizing the validity of this feminist viewpoint of analyzing gender as something that is actually practiced socially. West and Zimmerman argue that "doing gender is unavoidable" (1987, p. 129) and the ultimate accomplishment of performing one's gender, whether right or wrong, results in a shifting focus from the individual to an institutional and interaction-based level. This social practice ultimately defines gendered roles within organizations, but also the practice of gender within organizations ends up contributing back to the reproduction of gender ideologies in the larger public, social arena (Gherardi & Poggio, 2001).

Scholars argue that "studying gender cultures therefore means focusing attention on how members of an organization acquire and then produce and reproduce symbols, beliefs, and patterns of behavior to do with gender membership" (ibid). Therefore this viewing of

gender as a production, performance, or "doing gender," allows for an examination in organizational contexts that explores gender as "a social practice, or better as a set of practices, that together help to define the relations between men and women, and between male and female" (ibid).

The organizational scholars that have focused on this experience of gender within organizations argue that by looking at how differently gendered organizational actors produce meaning and interpretations through their gendered experiences and relationships we can better understand the broader organizational experience through the lens of addressing how gender impacts organizing and organizational practices. Yancey Martin argues that "to view gender as a practice means, among other things, to view it as a 'system of action' that is institutionalized and widely recognized" (2003, p. 351).

Using the theoretical approaches of practice-based theory and of gender as a practice will ultimately help show and explain the culture and experience of organizations. The understanding of practices of gender within organizing will help to understand and analyze the actual experienced situations of women's issues and inequality, and how organizations are involved in the correction and/or reproduction of those issues.

4 Contributions of the Practice of Gender to Women's Rights Organizing Research

Returning to this paper's three main goals, the importance of studying the practice of gender within organizations has hopefully at this point been made clear. Looking at gender as a practice requires, as shown by Gherardi & Poggio (2001) above, an understanding of specific trends of gendered experiences at the level of organizational practice. They have found that differently gendered individuals will participate in organizing in different ways. These varied experiences can impact the organization itself, as well as the organization's practice of organizing, and ultimately can also impact the larger social context of gender.

Gherardi (1994) addresses gender within organizations by looking at how gender is "done" through what she refers to as ceremonial and remedial work. The ceremonial work of gender done within organizations is the maintenance and reproduction of culturally accepted and expected gender norms. For example, this can be viewed through common ritual practices involved in greeting and complimenting where men and women are expected to say and react in certain socially prescribed gendered ways. On the other hand, the

remedial work involves the complete invisibility of gendered difference, which ultimately equates to the acceptance of all organizational actors involved as people, yet still devalues the experiences of women through the silencing of their unique positionalities.

Gherardi finds that both of these situations revolving around gendered actors are often present in organizational contexts and can help us to explore specifically how gender impacts and influences organizational culture and organizing practices. Her research has proven that these situations are often present in organizational culture and ultimately the idea can be extrapolated that organizations tend to be sexist places (particularly corporate-type organizations) which may impact the practice of organizing within them. Additionally, Yancy Martin (2003) discusses how gendered power dynamics create many of the same issues within business organizations.

With research looking at how women's organizations in particular are impacted by experiences of gendered-practice, the way in which men and women interact and create a gendered culture within the organizations will become important in order to proceed further with an in-depth look at gender as a practice in organizing. While this has been addressed within corporate, business-type organizing, I argue that using this same lens to explore gendered culture within NGOs and other activist-type groups would be a compelling way to attempt to uncover information in regards to performance and productivity.

The second main point to address involves the predominance of women involved in women's rights organizing who are impacted by gendered ideologies and the practice of gender within organizations. The importance of understanding how gender is practiced specifically within women's organizations is due to the overwhelming domination of women in staff positions within these women's groups. A report in 2008 found that 75% of workers in the nonprofit sector were women (Mitra, 2011), and scholars have argued that "the significant presence of women in NGOs leads to the invisibility of gender inequalities" (Dema, 2008, p. 442).

In other words, the fact that these women's organizations tend to be dominantly staffed by women can actually lead to the misinterpretation that there are no longer gender inequality issues present. Also, research has found that more times than not predominately women staffed organizations are dependent upon other existing organizations for funding, most of which may be male-dominated themselves (Hearn & Parkin, 1983). Focusing on how gender as a practice influences women's organizations can help to highlight the unique experience created not only by the organizational sphere of women's rights, but additionally

by the fact stated previously that the majority of these women's organizations are in fact run predominately by women.

Scholars doing work on gender related topics, and specifically the few scholars addressing gender within organizational studies, recognize that organizations inherently deal with several issues which can be directly addressed theoretically by examining the gendered relationships and practices within them. Hearn & Parkin (1983) identify these main issues as work and the division of labor, and authority and power. In women's organizations there is a unique experience with gendered division of labor because of the overwhelmingly female concentration of workers, volunteers, and other affiliated actors. But broadening the picture to also look at the experiences of these mainly female controlled women's organizations as they interact with larger, often urban, international organizations increases the importance to address how authority and power work in a gendered way to impact organizational experiences. This focus can perhaps help to address the question asked by Mills (1988), "given that powerful organizational actors are overwhelmingly males, to what extent do values of masculinity permeate understandings of organizational reality, its purposes and structure?" (p. 356).

Additionally, women have generally been placed in the ideological sphere of private space, or positioned as homemakers. The social status specifically of rural women overwhelmingly restricts and denies women's access to education and jobs, specifically speaking of sub-Saharan Africa. However, women often have been able to maintain access to the ability to organize and share their voices, even while mired in this social category of second-place to men. Many women's organizations are in fact working to remedy the inequality present in gendered distinctions of social expectations, labor, education, health, and a multitude of other interests. While women in many places may not have equal access to the labor force, they do increasingly have the access and ability to form and join women's organizations working for women's rights.

Looking at these organizations through a practice theory and gender as practice approach highlights that while the women involved are seemingly stepping outside of their lower status by the nature of being women through their participation in various organizations, ultimately the fact that these organizations are generally made up of only women immediately relegates the organization's own status to a lower position than organizations composed either entirely of men or of a mixed-gender group of actors. This effectively reduces the ability of the organizations to be viewed as "able", and ultimately

could impact these women's organizations' ability to maintain and stand by their autonomous positions in the face of pressure to concede to larger, all-knowing, generally male occupied international organizations and donors.

Mills (1988) quotes other organizational scholars as saying "male domination of the organizational world, in the form of ownership and control, is reinforced and maintained by a cultural system which associates women with 'domestic' life – characterizing them as 'emotional, passionate, and intuitive, yet illogical and fickle', and which associates men with 'public' life – characterizing them as 'rational: analytical and productive but also insensitive and impersonal'" (p. 361). This view of distinct gender roles within organizational structures could very well be a huge influence on the current situation of women's organizations in Tanzania, for example. Mercer's (1999) work in Tanzania informs that, "NGOs at the local scale, therefore, [are] not carved out by actors seeking to represent themselves, or to manage their own income-generating projects, but [are] in response to external agendas" (p. 254). This inextricable connection to outside influences creates the potential for even more conflict of gender role expectations specifically for women-run organizations.

For the final main goal of this paper, the acknowledgement of gender as a practice, and the ultimate impact of gendered practices on organizing as a whole, can be useful to understand the relationship between smaller, autonomous organizations (specifically women's rights organizations) and larger, corporate, international, or donor-based organizations. This is particularly relevant to the contemporary situation of women's organizations within sub-Saharan Africa. Contemporary women's activism across Africa can be characterized as deeply imbedded in associational autonomy. This relationship with autonomy affords women's movements greater freedom within making decisions, like identifying their own interests and sourcing their own funding (Tripp, Casimiro, Kwesiga, & Mungwa, 2009).

While associational autonomy has been a long expressed trait of African women's organizations, these seemingly autonomous groups are often still finding themselves battling against the government to remain autonomous. For example, a study of Tanzanian women market sellers highlights the disconnect often found between governments focusing on development and these more informal women's organizations. The networks of women involved in market selling often do not fit the expectations of development agencies which claim that "they are too informal and too fluid and are based on social relations that cannot easily be translated into the more tightly-structured group organization necessary to procure

credit" (Tierney, 1999, p. 349; Creighton & Omari, 2000). Furthermore, in order for Tanzanian women to benefit from government and development interventions, these politicized arenas must adapt their expectations to match those of the particular women's lived experiences and practicing within organizations.

Focusing on the women's organizations themselves, by analyzing the practices they are involved in, we should be able to more completely address these issues of the maintenance of autonomy and the interactions with external and international influences and donors. For example, Mercer (1999) has argued that the NGO sector in Tanzania is actually reinforcing the reproduction of inequality through the limitation of access to specific women (generally lower class) as well as the inability of the NGOs to effectively practice and produce their own knowledge due to the strong influences of these external actors.

By utilizing an approach through examination of practice theory, which would mean exploring the everyday actions and experiences of the women involved in said organizations, we can discover how the organizations are practicing either a resistance or acceptance of this pressure to move away from autonomy and an embracement of outside influences. The specific ways in which this is navigated can strengthen the overall understanding of how women's organizations navigate their existence in a state-based, as well as national and international, framework in an increasingly globalizing world.

5 Concluding Remarks

As a final point, the existing work which explores organizational culture through a lens of gender as a practice offers a compelling way to potentially examine similar issues within organizations of a less corporate, business-type nature. Recognizing that this paper is ultimately a theoretical exercise, I hope to have stimulated further thought in regards to the study of women's organizations, particularly in locations experiencing increased attention to women's rights organizations, NGOs, and grassroots, women-run organizations, such as sub-Saharan Africa.

Through utilizing a gender-based practice approach, scholars can gain a better picture of how organizing is impacted by the individual practice of gender within organizations, how predominately women-run organizations challenge the traditional conception of organizing as a masculine space, and how organizations' experiences with autonomy and relationships with other organizations are impacted by the practice of gender.

Practice-based theory will enable the study of the lived experiences and actions of those involved which will lead to a stronger ability to understand how these actions impact the larger social environment they are within. Addressing the situation specifically of women's organizations by understanding gender to be a practice allows for a compelling way to explore the unique experiences gender-based organizations must deal with.

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