# Moving out of the 'Armchair': Developing a Framework to Bridge the Gap between Feminist Theory and Practice

symposium

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Abstract. This article describes how a research team used feminist organization theory in its work with organizational change agents to further gender equity in their organizations. We describe the theoretical framing that initially informed this action-research project, what we learned in the early encounters inside the organization and the framework we ultimately developed to help bridge the gap between feminist theory and practice. The framework outlines four approaches to the 'gender' problem in organizations and their respective implications for organizational change. We also describe our early attempts to translate this framework into knowledge that change agents could use. *Key words.* feminist practice; feminist theory; gender; gender equity; organizational change
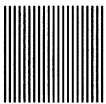
Over the past decade, feminist theorists have made significant contributions to the study of organizations by offering critiques of accepted management principles and articulating the ways in which organization theory and practice are systematically biased against women (e.g. Acker, 1990; Martin, 1990; Ely, 1999; Calás and Smircich, 1991, 1992; Kolb and Putnam, 1997; Fletcher, 1999; Meyerson, 1998). There is little research or theory, however, on how to use this work to change organizations in ways that will make them more gender equitable. In an effort to move out of 'armchair' theorizing, our research team[1] set about the task of developing an approach to organizational change, based in critical feminist perspectives on organizations, that we could then use collaboratively with partners inside organizations to advance gender equity.
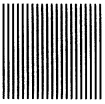
As one of our first tasks, we contracted with the Chief Executive of a global manufacturing and retail company, who shared our interest in achieving greater gender equity and who offered her company as a site for engaging with us in a collaborative, interactive process of critique, experimentation, and change. In this paper, we describe what we have learned about translating feminist organization theory into interventions that organization change agents might carry out in practice. Specifically, we discuss: (1) what we initially thought most relevant from feminist theories of gender and organizations, and how we attempted to introduce these ideas to the company; (2) what we learned from these initial encounters with our change agent partners inside the company, and (3) the framework we eventually developed to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Still in the Armchair: Our Initial Approach

Our theory of gender was based in the notion that gender inequities in organizations are rooted in taken-for-granted assumptions, values, and practices that systematically accord power and privilege to certain groups of men at the expense of women and other men. We wanted to transform work and its relation to other aspects of people's lives in ways that would fundamentally alter power relations in organizations and make them more equitable. The grant proposal we submitted in 1995 to the Ford Foundation,[2] in which we requested funds to support portions of this project, describes how we anticipated using this understanding of gender to inform our initial objectives and analytic approach. These ideas are captured in the following four sets of questions we proposed to explore as a way of probing deeply into the underlying assumptions, values, and practices in organizations that hold gender inequities in place. These four sets of questions comprised what we called the *gender lens* through which we would observe and analyze the organization.

1 What are the deeply entrenched assumptions and values that undergird dominant organizational structures and practices, such as hierarchy, competition, and control, and how do these reflect and sustain gender inequities in organizations? How might these assumptions and values close out the possibilities of alternative arrangements and relationships, enabling organizations to resist fundamental change in their cultures and practices? How can these alternatives be discovered and implemented in practice? For example, what assumptions and beliefs sustain the mandate of heroic corporate growth? How does this mandate legitimate certain forms of organizational practice while delegitimating others? What does a heroic growth mandate imply for the relationship between work and family? How does the relationship between work and family shift when we relax this mandate?

2 What forms of activity count as work? What work styles and activities are systemically valued and devalued, and how do these patterns relate
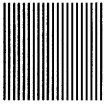
to gender? How does the valuing and devaluing of different styles and forms of work shape the distribution of opportunities and rewards? How can existing reward systems, both formal and informal, be revised to credit traditionally devalued, but nevertheless essential, forms of work? For example, how does work, such as informal, behind-the-scenes mediation, become 'invisible'? How can we reformulate accounting systems to attend to and reward these kinds of activities?

3 What is the relation between the public sphere of work and the private sphere of home and family? How do gender roles and deeply held assumptions about gender privilege one sphere of activity over the other? How do these assumptions shape popular solutions to 'work–family conflicts'? In what ways might these solutions co-opt a potentially more radical change agenda and maintain the traditional dominance of work over family? How can the boundary of work and family be blurred at the individual and organizational levels to produce gender equity both at work and at home? How can we transform work so that it more easily accommodates and supports home and family life? What roles can organizations and education play to make this happen?

4 How is the ideology of individualism and competition sustained within the organization, despite recent efforts to increase teamwork and collaboration? How do gender relations reinforce, and how are they reinforced by, this ideology? How does this ideology systematically undermine certain forms of collaboration and the 'feminine' values of caring and compassion? How do individualist practices undermine efforts to integrate work and family concerns? How can work be transformed to enable the organization to resist the ideology of individualism and competition?

Our goal from the outset was to identify a small group of collaborators inside the organization who would share our commitment to making changes in the organization that would both benefit the firm and promote gender equity. Our intent was to develop an intervention process that would be simultaneously critical and generative. The approach would be critical, because an analysis using a gender lens would question underlying assumptions, values, and practices in the organization. And it would be generative because this analysis would reveal possibilities for transformation.

Our work on previous projects (e.g. Bailyn et al., 1996, 1997) suggested the value of holding what we call a 'dual agenda' in our approach. That is, we framed our approach as capable of advancing gender equity and, *at the same time*, increasing organizational effectiveness. This is because our gender lens makes visible how the same assumptions, values, and practices that compromise gender equity often undermine effectiveness as well, despite the organizational purposes they are intended to serve. By surfacing these connections, we are able strategically to choose
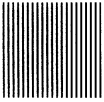
intervention points that will enhance both equity and business goals. This increases the political viability of our work, decreases resistance to change, and, perhaps most importantly, helps to ensure that change efforts are aligned with the mission of the organization.

Our First Visits to the Site and the Challenges of Translation

We had several objectives we wanted to achieve in our first visit to the organization. One was to gain the approval of key gatekeepers, including members of the company's Executive Committee. A second was to identify people who could help us develop a strategy for building a cadre of change agents inside the company. Most people with whom we met had read the proposal we had submitted to the Ford Foundation and greeted the project with great enthusiasm.

To get the project off the ground, we needed to explain how a gender lens could be applied to this organization and to suggest the benefits it could yield. We always emphasized our dual-agenda approach in these discussions, attempting to show how using a gender lens to identify points for intervention could both benefit the business and promote gender equity. We told success stories from other projects, including how interventions strategically designed to enhance gender equity had also led to reductions in absenteeism and shortened product-development cycles. In our first meeting with executives from the company, we emphasized that our approach could help them bring their work practices in line with their espoused values, many of which were explicitly feminist, which in turn would enable them to work more productively and cohesively.

From these stories, people tended to hear what we later concluded they were likely most interested in hearing: that we could help them solve their business problems. At our first meeting with executives, there were many who volunteered to collaborate with us on projects that they believed would address pressing business problems in their own departments. It was unclear, however, the extent to which members of this group understood or were interested in the gender equity portion of our agenda. Undoubtedly, we contributed to this confusion by emphasizing our success in solving business problems in the stories we told about other projects. In addition, although we described our use of gender as a lens through which we would critically examine their work practices, we made no specific claims about how our approach would enhance gender equity in their company. In hindsight, we can see that this led to the subordination, and at times even disappearance, of gender as a primary focus and concern in our work. Nevertheless, in spite of a range of different levels in the extent to which our partners were committed to both aspects of the dual agenda, the company's executives gave us permission to proceed.

In addition to our presentation and follow-up meetings with executives, we met with an initial group of people whom the Chief Executive
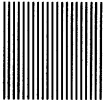
had assigned to be our internal collaborators on the project. These were people (all women) in various staff functions whose work clearly was in line with what we envisioned. They included the director of Learning and Development, the department responsible for employee training and development; the person charged with maintaining the company's 'corporate culture'; and the new director of Organization Development. The CEO affirmed her commitment to the project, and she assigned one of her direct reports to be our liaison.

Working with this group of collaborators, we had our first brush with the problem of translating armchair theory into practice. This problem took several forms. First, people had a hard time understanding us. They understood the term, 'gender', to mean 'women'. Our meaning was broader and more complicated than that, but we did not have a straight-forward way to help them shift their understanding to something more like our own.

Second, what we were proposing was an ambiguous, ill-defined process of critique and intervention. Our plan was that we would provide the theory and analytic approach; they would provide the local knowledge, experience, and context; and, together, we would conduct the analysis and design, and implement the interventions. This method, we suggested, would yield concrete business benefits and improvements in gender equity, though we could not yet specify what these would be. We quickly learned that this description was too amorphous for them to embrace in any practical way. They kept asking for outcomes, deliverables, metrics, timetables—all reasonable requests to make of people who were asking them to collaborate on a significant and time-consuming research project from which they were supposedly to benefit. But we could not yet furnish them with anything so concrete.

Third, all we could provide in the way of concrete examples were from projects undertaken in other companies. Many of these examples were not directly relevant to them. When the examples did seem relevant, our collaborators did not understand why we could not simply adopt the solutions we had developed in those other sites and sidestep the ambiguous and time-consuming process we were proposing. Based on our own and other colleagues' experiences, however, we believed firmly that to achieve the dual agenda we were collectively pursuing would require engaging together in a collaborative process of critique and intervention (Bailyn et al., 1996).

Finally, our collaborators did not want to be associated with our project if there appeared to be a reasonable probability that it would fail. This probability was difficult for them to assess, however, because we were unable to describe the project in concrete terms, claiming that the specific goals, processes, and outcomes would emerge from a collaborative process, the parameters of which we could only outline at that point. In practice, this meant that our process might be attached to *any* business concern. On the one hand, this made it tempting for them to see

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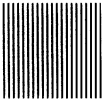
us as the 'latest and greatest' solution, the next 'great white knight' to solve their business problems. On the other hand, their experience suggested caution, given the organization's tendency to pin its hopes on consultants who promised quick solutions, only to discard them when they failed to deliver.

For all of these reasons, the people who had been assigned to be our internal partners were not ready to collaborate with us. They were reluctant to enter into the open-ended process we were proposing, and they did not understand our approach well enough to feel they could responsibly sign on. Nevertheless, they felt compelled to go forward with us because of the commitment we had secured from the senior team, particularly the Chief Executive. We jointly struggled with next moves.

Identifying a Specific Project

Our project team decided that two things needed to happen next in order to bring our reluctant collaborators along. First, we needed specific examples from their company to help us make our theory more concrete and to demonstrate the potential value to them of our approach to change. To generate these examples, we jointly identified a local project. Our partners reached quick consensus that one of their manufacturing plants was the perfect place to begin our work. The plant was old-fashioned in its operations and was sex-segregated by job and level. Women tended to occupy the lowest level positions of factory line worker and line leader, whereas men held virtually all supervisory positions and most other positions that led to careers in management. Based on a recent survey of employees, morale in this division was extremely low among both men and women, and people had little hope for their prospects within the company. In addition, the plant manager was open to experimenting with new ideas and approaches as a way to address these problems. As part of his own development, he had recently entered into an ongoing training program with the director of Learning and Development, who was one of our collaborators, and he was actively looking for methods to humanize and revitalize his plant. Perhaps most important to the decision to locate our first efforts in this plant, however, was that it was physically and culturally marginal in relation to the rest of the company. Managers from headquarters rarely set foot in this plant and often talked about it as a separate part of the company. Locating our project at the margin of the organization would take us out of the spotlight and therefore minimize employees' perception of us as the next corporate savior. In retrospect, we can see that we were likely directed to the plant also because we could do little harm there.

Second, to move forward we needed to develop a pedagogy—a method of teaching—to help our collaborators understand gender in a more complex and critical way. This was consistent with one of our central goals, which was to develop a forum in which to work with organization members to translate theory into practice as they engaged in ongoing
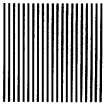
change efforts. A project at the plant would be crucial in helping us to do this. Thus, our project there began almost immediately. It lasted over 18 months and is described in more detail in the paper by Coleman and Rippin (this volume).

At the point at which this decision was made, however, we had no pedagogy and no well-articulated framework to help us make the translation from theory to practice for our collaborators. Our feminist theories were too abstract to seem relevant to a group of potential change agents. Within our team, we had different ideas about which aspects of our theories of gender were most relevant to our project, and about how we could most effectively communicate them to people who were not trained in feminist or organizational theory.

Developing a Framework for Gender Equity and Change

To help us develop a framework and pedagogy we could use with our group of potential change agents, we brought together a group of colleagues—sister (and a few brother) armchair and practitioner feminists. We presented them with our challenge: what would organization members need to know if they were going to work with a gender lens as a basis for critique and lever for change? We needed a way to take people from where they were—from an understanding of gender as synonymous with women—to a more complex understanding that would capture the processes by which organizations are *gendered*. Our colleagues brought their own theories and approaches, some more fully explicated than others. For example, Marta Calás and Linda Smircich had recently finished a paper that laid out a typology of feminist approaches to organizations (Calás and Smircich, 1996). Their typology and the actions of the hypothetical protagonist they used to illustrate the dilemmas that each approach posed directly influenced our thinking, as did their lively and thoughtful participation in our discussions. Other colleagues influenced our thinking through their writings (e.g. Acker, 1990; Gherardi, 1995) and still others through ongoing conversations and collaborations with them. For example, in her work on 'relational practice' and 'invisible work' in organizations, Joyce Fletcher helped us think about potential targets for change. In particular, she helped us to see how the relational kinds of activities in which many women engage at work, which are crucial to the effective functioning of the organization yet typically ignored or devalued, provide a ready and compelling connection between gender and organizational effectiveness.[3] Deborah Merrill-Sands, who had been working on a series of projects employing the dual-agenda approach in international scientific institutions, provided many additional illustrations of how gender is systematically linked with strategic organizational issues, as well as much advice about the actual practice of this type of intervention work. Others, such as Lotte Bailyn and Rhona Rapoport, further reinforced the foundation for our collaborative interactive action-research approach through their numerous,

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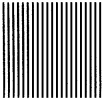
earlier projects on work and family issues in organizations. Though it would be impossible to mention by name all of our colleagues who contributed to the design and execution of our work on this project, we wish to emphasize the truly collaborative nature of our efforts to develop the theoretical framework we presented to our internal partners in the company. It is a framework we continue to develop and refine.

The framework accomplished two purposes. First, it linked different feminist theoretical perspectives with distinct definitions of 'gender' and corresponding formulations of the problem of gender inequity, and it helped us to translate these into recognizable, organizational approaches to intervention. Second, it helped us to define different visions of gender equity, which grow out of these different theoretical perspectives, and thereby suggested the different criteria by which various kinds of interventions could be assessed. Our plan was to present this framework in a workshop with potential collaborators in the organization—people who might work with us as internal change agents. We hoped it would help them see gender as a complex and pervasive social process, as well as how this process occurs in their own organization to produce and sustain gender distinctions and inequities. In addition, we hoped that the framework would help our collaborators differentiate our approach from more traditional approaches with which they were likely to be familiar. In the remainder of this paper, we present the framework we developed for these purposes and tell the story of how we introduced it in that workshop.

A Framework for Understanding Gender in Organizations

Frame 1: 'Equip the Woman' or Liberal Individualism

The first and probably most common approach to understanding gender equity and change rests on a liberal vision of society and organizations. Gender from this perspective is synonymous with biological sex; differences between men and women are the result of sex-role socialization. According to this view, men and women have equal access to opportunities, and they rise and fall on their own merit (Hernstein and Murray, 1994). Women's lack of achievement, relative to men's, is due to socialized sex differences, which result in women's deficits. Women lack the skills or attributes that are valuable and necessary to compete in the world of business or to assume positions of leadership.

The goal of this approach—and thus its vision of gender equity—is to minimize differences between women and men so that women can compete as equals in the workplace and in the labor market. Executive development and various forms of leadership development programs targeted at women are the hallmark of this approach. While women may have technical skills for a job, they need to become more political, assertive, and strategic if they are to succeed in the way men have (e.g. Hennig and Jardim, 1977; Powell, 1987). The problem and solutions
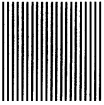
within this frame rest squarely with the individual woman; she must acquire the skills she needs. Our collaborators were familiar with programs of this type. Indeed, several had participated in one Meyerson had run the previous year.

These programs clearly benefit the individuals who participate in them. Many women have learned valuable skills in these programs, and some have succeeded in moving into middle and senior management positions as a result. Moreover, in those jobs, they serve as role models for others. Nevertheless, as important as these programs are, when implemented alone as the primary solution to the problem of gender inequity, they result in few changes in organizations. Individuals assimilate and some succeed, but little is done to change the systemic factors within organizations that create an uneven playing-field for women in the first place.

Frame 2: 'Create Equal Opportunity' or Liberal Structuralism

The second approach to gender equity focuses on structural barriers. Gender, from this perspective, is still defined as differences between women and men, but here the deficiencies of individual women are no longer viewed as the source of the problem. Rather, according to this frame, the problem is rooted in the structures of organizations—what Kanter (1977) calls differential structures of opportunity, which create a sloped playing-field. Gender inequities are the result of biased hiring, evaluation, and promotion processes, which, in turn, result in the gender segregation of occupations and workplaces (Kanter, 1977; Heilman and Martell, 1986; Reskin and Roos, 1990). The goal of this approach is to create equal opportunity by eliminating structural and procedural barriers to women's success and advancement.

Legislation and organizational policies are the dominant forms of intervention in this frame. They include a number of familiar remedies, such as affirmative action policies and revised recruiting procedures designed to bring more women into previously male-dominated jobs; more transparent promotion policies to ensure fairness (Acker and van Houten, 1974); sexual harassment policies; mentoring programs (Kram, 1985); alternative career paths (Schwartz, 1989); and the provision of work and family benefits, such as child care and flexible work arrangements (Bailyn, 1993). These latter policies recognize that a significant structural barrier for women is their care-taking responsibilities outside of work.

There is no question that these interventions have made it possible to recruit, retain, and promote greater numbers of women, and numbers can have a positive impact (Kanter, 1977; Ely, 1995). Nevertheless, they have not substantially changed many of the conditions that create and sustain gender inequities. For example, even though flexible work benefits are available, using them often has negative career consequences and, because they are still used predominantly by women, they tend to
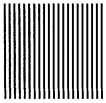
reinforce stereotypical gender roles (Bailyn et al., 1996). In addition, these efforts to recruit and promote women, as well as programs that provide parents with special benefits, can create backlash, which undercuts the very goals these programs have tried to achieve. Again, by themselves, these programs do not sufficiently challenge the systems of power that make them necessary in the first place.

Frame 3: 'Value Difference' or Women's Standpoint/Advantage

The third frame shifts the focus from eliminating difference to valuing difference. This perspective, rooted in the writings of feminist standpoint theorists (e.g. Harsock, 1985; Smith, 1987), conceptualizes gender as socialized differences between men and women, embodied in different masculine and feminine identities. Masculine and feminine identities, from this perspective, are styles or ways of being that have been shaped differently for men and women by their different life experiences and social roles. In this frame, the route to equity is not to eliminate these differences, but rather to recognize and celebrate them.

According to the third frame, women are disadvantaged because the attributes and skills associated with women and femininity (e.g. nurturing, listening, emoting, relating) are devalued relative to the attributes and skills associated with men and masculinity (e.g. directing, talking, thinking, doing). Framing the problem in this way points to corrective measures that focus on acknowledging differences and valuing them equally. Interventions attempt to raise awareness of relevant differences between men and women and demonstrate how traditionally feminine activities or styles, such as listening, collaborating, and behind-the-scenes peacemaking are beneficial to everybody in the organization (e.g. Helgeson, 1990). Efforts to advance gender equity from this frame are often linked to broader diversity initiatives that attempt to acknowledge and value other kinds of identity-based differences among people.

There is no question that interventions designed to value women and 'women's ways' have raised awareness and created workplaces that are more tolerant and flexible. Some of these efforts have also raised people's awareness of the limitations of a male standard. Nevertheless, merely recognizing differences and mandating that they be equally valued does not necessarily ensure that they will be equally valued. The main problem with this approach is that it reifies sex differences and reinforces stereotypes by failing to recognize or question the practices that hold asymmetric power relations in place, which produced those differences in the first place. This approach fails to dismantle that masculine standard, so that masculinity continues to be socially constructed as the ostensibly neutral standard against which femininity is constructed as 'other'. Those who enact a feminine style remain marginalized, and their efforts remain invisible (Fletcher, 1999). The largest barrier to achieving gender equity in this frame, therefore, is that it fails to challenge effectively
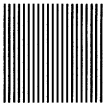
either the hierarchical valuing of gender differences or the organizational mechanisms that reproduce them.

Frame 4: 'Resisting and Re-vising the Dominant Discourse' or 'Post Equity'[4]

The fourth frame builds from a more complex and comprehensive perspective on gender. In this frame, gender is not primarily about women nor is it localized in discrimination practices; it is about the more general process of organizing itself. Gender is an axis of power, an organizing principle that shapes social structure, identities, and knowledge. To say that organizations are 'gendered' means that 'advantages and disadvantages, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identities are patterned through, and in terms of, distinctions between what is constructed as male and female, masculine and feminine' (Acker, 1990: 146).

Work in this frame starts from the premise that organizations as we know them are inherently gendered. Having been created largely by and for men, organizational systems, work practices, norms, and definitions reflect masculine experience, masculine values, and men's life situations. Everything that we take for granted as 'normal' at work is, in fact, based on these male/masculine standards. As a result, that which seems 'normal' and neutral tends to privilege traits that are culturally ascribed to men while devaluing or ignoring those ascribed to women. This includes, for example, norms and assumptions in the work culture that value specific types of work and work processes, define competence and excellence of staff, and shape ideas about the best way to get work done.

This perspective presumes that sex differences are socially constructed and that they take on particular forms depending on race, class, and other aspects of identity. Observed differences between women and men in, for example, their proclivity for certain styles of communicating and ways of working are not inherent, nor are they simply the result of early childhood sex-role socialization; they are also created and sustained through formal and informal social processes institutionalized in organizations. This notion that sex differences are an active, ongoing social construction marks an important departure from the other three perspectives in which sex differences, for better or for worse, are essentially given, whether through acts of nature or nurture.

There are many gendering processes in organizations, both micro and macro, that produce knowledge, relations, and identities. While the specific nature of these processes depends on the particular organizational context, there are generalizable types. Acker (1990) identified five such gendering processes, which we have adapted as part of our framework for change. Acker and others analyze these processes as the source of the problem; we extend their work by viewing them also as potential sites for resistance and change. In this way, we use the critique that

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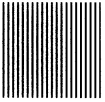
reveals how gender asymmetries are socially constructed in organizations as a central part of our change method. Once we identify the particular ways in which concrete organizational practices produce gender inequities, these practices become potential targets for experimentation and change.

Gendering Processes in Organizations. The first set of gendering processes in organizations are the *formal practices and policies* that appear neutral on their face, but have a differential impact on men and women. Some of the most fundamental building blocks of organizations appear to be neutral, but are, in fact, fashioned around the constraints and opportunities that characterize the lives of men, especially men who are white, heterosexual, middle- and upper-middle class. These include, for example, job descriptions and evaluations, benefit provisions, and work–family policies. The provision for paid sick leave within the plant we studied is one illustration. Paid sick leave was formally available to all employees, but one had to discuss with one's supervisor the nature of one's illness in order to receive it. Young women, whose supervisor in every instance was a man, were often too embarrassed to discuss with him such illnesses as menstrual cramps. As a result, they received fewer authorized leaves. Unauthorized leaves were unpaid, and people who received too many of them risked being labeled 'slackers'. What this meant in practice was not only that women received less financial benefit from the sick-leave policy than men did; but also their relatively higher rates of unexcused absenteeism justified giving them fewer opportunities and responsibilities.

The second set of gendering processes in organizations are the *informal work practices* that appear neutral on their face, but, again, have a differential impact on men and women. These include norms about when meetings are held and informal systems of reward and recognition that determine which forms of work are recognized and valued. For instance, the activities that tended to be noticed and rewarded within the plant were those that were 'task-oriented', which meant those that most visibly contributed to solving immediate problems. The more visibly pressing the problem was, the more valuable the work and the worker. Activities that managers and supervisors failed to notice—that were 'invisible'— were those that were 'relationship-oriented', which meant, for example, keeping lines running smoothly by anticipating or preventing problems, and mediating small conflicts within and between groups on the line. Hence, invisible, relational work was typically associated with the feminine and done primarily by women, whereas visible, problem-solving work was typically associated with the masculine and done primarily by men. As a result, men's efforts were recognized and rewarded more often than women's.

The third set of gendering processes are the organization's *symbols and images*, often imported from the larger culture, that express, legitimate,

and reinforce gendered divisions in the organization (Gherardi, 1995; Mills, 1995). Symbols that sustain cultural images—including images of masculinity and femininity—vary by race, culture, and class, but they reinforce and support gender divisions nonetheless. At the factory, for example, the image of the 'ideal supervisor' was someone who was able to put work above all else in life, work overtime whenever necessary, affirm control, and, in general, assert an imposing demeanor. This image systematically excluded many women as viable candidates for supervisory roles on two counts. First, because the ideal image was connected to dominant images of masculinity in this context, it was inconsistent on a symbolic level with images of women. Second, because women carry a disproportionate share of responsibilities for home and family, it was difficult on a practical level for many women to work the overtime hours necessary to uphold this image.

The fourth set of gendering processes are the *everyday social interactions* that enact patterns of dominance and submission between men and women. Again, these can take different forms depending on other aspects of people's identities, such as their race and class. Research in a variety of fields has documented the ways in which routine social interactions reinforce gendered and other identity-based divisions, sustaining images of men as actors and women as supporters (e.g. Okin, 1989; Tannen, 1990). In the factory, power relations between men and women surfaced in and were reinforced by a variety of interactions. For example, during our meetings with the planning group, men tended to speak for the entire group, whereas women deferred. Men and women appeared to be comfortable with these different roles in their interactions. When we made these roles salient by naming them, however, women resisted them and became more assertive in what appeared to be a relatively easy role shift. Similarly, when women line leaders needed something from the men in the warehouse, although it was legitimate for them to make such requests directly, they would channel their requests through their male supervisors. Male supervisors saw it as within their role to be assertive and demanding of the men in the warehouse, whereas female line leaders did not. These interactions reinforced a dependency relation between women and men in the factory, which reinforced power asymmetries in their relationships.

The fifth set of gendering processes in organizations follows from the others and involves people's *internalizations and expressions of their gender identities*, including what it means to look, act, and talk like a man or woman (e.g. Tavris, 1992). Again, the meanings people attach to gender and other aspects of their identity, such as their race and class, shape the particular form expressions of gender identity take (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Messner, 1997). In the factory, women (almost all of whom were white and working class) reported that the gendered division of labor, in which women worked on the line and men supervised, was in fact appropriate and consistent with their notions of what it
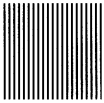
meant to be women and men. For example, both women and men claimed that it was 'unmanly' and emasculating for men to work the line—'that is women's work'. Again, this belief reinforced women's subordinate status relative to men.

In sum, the gendering processes in organizations occur, not only through formal policies, but through routine work practices and inter-actions as well. Together, they produce and legitimate gender and other cultural identity-based inequities. Interventions in the fourth frame, therefore, focus on these processes as potential sites for resistance and levers for change. In this way, our notion of gender as a deeply entrenched organizing principle becomes concrete and context-specific.

Change from the 'Fourth Frame'. The method of change we have formulated involves three conceptually distinct components: (1) critique, (2) experi-mentation, and (3) narrative generation. Critique involves identifying the specific ways in which the kinds of gendering processes described above produce gender inequities in the organization. But our dual agenda takes us further. As our colleagues (see Bailyn, et al., 1996, 1997) have shown, these gendering processes can also have negative consequences for the organization's performance. Our approach is to help organization mem-bers develop as internal change agents who can identify those gendering processes in their organization that also detract from the organization's performance. Linking gender inequities to organizational effectiveness through work practices makes a connection that can be quite exciting. It means searching for new ways of working that reduce inequities and at the same time enhance performance. It is essential that our internal collaborators engage with us in this diagnostic process so that they may come to hold the concerns about both gender and the business over the course of the inquiry. In this way, critique can be a critical form of intervention. (See Coleman and Rippin, this volume, for more detail on the role of collaboration in this process.)

The second component of our change method is to identify, with internal collaborators, possible experiments—concrete changes in work practices that have the potential to interrupt gendering processes and at the same time improve work effectiveness. We call these changes 'experiments' to highlight the fact that they are trial interventions into 'normal' work practices, probes for learning how better to conduct the work of the organization.

The third component of change involves developing narratives.[5] The experiments do not speak for themselves. Organization members must construct stories about why they are undertaking an experiment and what outcomes they expect from it, in terms of both gender equity and business gains. We developed this component of the change process in response to difficulties we experienced in our work at the factory, in particular, the problems we had keeping gender equity as a primary objective in our work there. Coleman and Rippin (this volume) describe
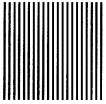
this and other challenges we faced; Ely and Meyerson (this volume) develop the notion of narrative generation as a way to overcome them.

Our reliance on the fourth frame does not mean that we reject the previous three. We believe, however, that the kinds of interventions they suggest would be more effective if undertaken from a fourth frame perspective. For example, the significance and goal of increasing the number of women in positions traditionally reserved for men—an intervention that might grow from frame 2—shift when one probes as well the gendered processes in the organization that have kept women out in the first place. If a response to the need to hire more women is to examine critically the values that underlie the organization's traditional recruitment policies and practices, to reconsider what counts as work, and to use as criteria in these assessments how established ways have been impediments not only to women but to business success as well, then efforts to recruit more women can be an important and deep intervention.

Applying the Framework: Holding onto Gender

In our workshop with change agents, we used this explication of the four frames to help translate our theories of gender into a workable approach to organizational change. The data we had begun to collect in the plant provided the examples we needed to make our theory more concrete. Together with the workshop participants, we examined the plant supervisor's job description as an artifact of the organization and manifestation of a formal organizational process that is gendered. It was easy for our partners to see that the attributes stated in the job description as requirements for that position—discipline, authority, and constant availability— would draw men, who would see themselves as more naturally fit for the role, and discourage women, who would question whether they had the requisite capabilities. As participants considered more carefully what attributes were actually required to enact the role effectively—such as motivating workers on the line, dealing with conflicts and crises, and acting as liaison among the different players on the shop-floor—they saw how the organization's assumptions about what constituted real work, its cultural definitions of the ideal supervisor, and the masculine images these reinforced could help to explain the absence of women in supervisory roles. Further, they could see how the women in the plant could internalize these role definitions and come to believe that they—as well as other women and 'less masculine' men—did not have what it took to be supervisors. In addition, given the kinds of work supervisors needed to do day-to-day, they saw that the organization's criteria for promotion into supervisory positions were not necessarily the most appropriate for the job. Hence, they were able to see how gender and business objectives could work in tandem.

During the workshop, we focused on the sexual division of labor within the plant to explicate the other three approaches as well. It

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was easy for participants to identify interventions from the first three frames to address the problem of women's absence from supervisory positions: training programs to help women develop skills of discipline and assertiveness, from the first frame; revisions of the job description so that it does not automatically screen out women, from the second frame; and recognition of and rewards for the traditionally feminine skills that women on the line demonstrated, from the third frame. It was less immediately clear, however, what the intervention strategies from the fourth frame would be. Our workshop participants could see that we would need to enlist people from the plant to work collaboratively with us to identify the particular ways in which work practices there compromised gender equity as well as organizational effectiveness. We explained that experimentation would involve practical steps to disrupt these practices and challenge norms and cultural images of supervisors and workers. These interventions would themselves be acts of resistance; but, equally important, they would be occasions for creating new visions of work, providing critical wedges that might help to pry open the way for new possibilities.

Some of our partners at this workshop understood well the fourth frame and the approach it advocates, seeing the many ways in which their organization was upholding the gendered order. The conceptual framework we introduced, elaborated with examples from their organization, helped us translate our armchair theories, and, over time, a few of our partners became comfortable analyzing their organizational experience using the fourth frame. The relatively successful translation at the workshop, however, was only a preliminary step to using the fourth frame to guide an ongoing change project. As Coleman and Rippin (this volume) detail, engaging a variety of types of partners inside the organizations as our collaborators in the critique, experimentation, and, ultimately, the narrative generation, proved to be far more difficult than we anticipated.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have introduced our original and ongoing rationale for this action-based research project. We came together—initially, two feminist academics—with the hope of bringing our armchair feminist theories into the 'real world'. We wanted to apply feminist critiques as a way of generating alternative organizing possibilities that could further the goal of gender equity and at the same time help organizations be more effective, and we wanted to do this in collaboration with organization members. Therefore, we courted collaborators, developed a framework to guide our approach, and collected preliminary data. This was the beginning of our move out of the 'armchair' and into real organizations. We were hopeful.

In retrospect, it is easy to see that we should have anticipated the types of resistance we would confront. What we most underestimated, how-

ever, was the range of barriers, from political to epistemological, that would conspire against our ability to sustain the gender focus of our work. Despite the primacy of our gender lens, it was, ironically, keeping the gender aspect of our dual agenda alive in the course of our work that turned out to be our most formidable task. The following two papers in this symposium elaborate on various aspects of this challenge and explore what we have learned from working on this problem.

Notes

Author order reflects only 'turn-taking'! This article was a fully collaborative effort.

1 As described in the Overview of this paper series, our research team included Gill Coleman, Robin Ely, Deborah Kolb, Debra Meyerson, Rhona Rapoport, and Ann Rippin.
2 This research was supported by a grant from the Ford Foundation.
3 Fletcher's work also foreshadowed the central dilemma of this paper series—the problem of 'losing gender.'
4 We settled on the label for this frame tentatively, after much debate and discussion within our team. Unlike the other frames, we can articulate no endpoint or vision with the language and constructs of the dominant discourse, and we cannot speak from outside of this discourse. Thus, this frame asserts an ongoing collaborative process of critique and generation, and goes beyond traditional notions of gender and end-state notions of gender equity.
5 At this point, during our early workshop, we had not yet formulated the importance of co-building alternative narratives. We developed that part of our approach to change after our failure in the factory to keep the gender agenda explicit over the course of the inquiry.

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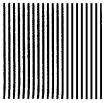
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