

## Revisiting Joan Acker's work with the support of Joan Acker

### Introduction

This article is a personal tribute to working with Joan Acker. I worked with Joan in 2012, helping to edit her own thoughts and reflection on how other academics evaluate and used her own theorising, specifically her seminal work on the gender sub-structure and inequality regimes. However, while this article is a tribute to Joan, her work and her thinking; it is also a personal thank you to someone I will miss for her generosity and also her activism in challenging inequalities in organisations and beyond. She continues to inspire me and hopefully others to challenge for social justice. In her 80s, Joan remained committed to addressing inequalities in social relations and how these were experienced within a dynamic social and work environment. During our collaboration, she called upon academics to put theory into practice to help address visible and invisible inequalities in organisational processes. This article is inspired by that experience and it will reveal Joan's views about her own, and other academics, theorising of her two key concepts; the gender sub-structure of organisations and inequality regimes in organisations and the overlap with intersectionality. This article will offer a unique opportunity to gain insight into Joan's thinking as an academic sociologist as well as a feminist activist thereby uniting Joan as a person with her concepts.

Joan was a committed Democrat activist campaigning for change. As a feminist she was also involved in initiatives and programmes particularly in the area of gender pay equity in the US. She believed in the feminist tenet of implementing change and improving women's agency through action particularly in the state of Oregon (in the US) where she worked and lived. As a sociologist and academic, Joan had a wider focus; she believed in uniting theorising with empiricism and communicating these messages to all academics. Joan was very generous in creating dialogues with new generations of authors and helping them to develop their work, always prepared to have her work challenged and revalued and in her responses to those challenges, support the dialogue moving forward.

This was the Joan I saw when editing the 2012 special edition issue for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. She was willing to help out a new journal and agreed to review and also comment on her theorising as presented by other academics.

Joan was rightly proud of how theorising gender and organisations had progressed from the 1960s. Her research and that of others had led to the acceptance of concepts of 'gendered and gendering' and there was a greater understanding of how inequalities were produced and reproduced (Acker, 1989). She was also proud of how her concept of a gendered subculture of organisations (Acker, 1990) helped to uncover and explain the persistence of gender inequality in pay equity and job segregation. She was also alert to how this battle continues and is being carried forward by new generations of feminists as the political and social work environment itself constantly changes. In her work, she always placed emphasis on action, not just in 'doing gender, being racialized and living class experiences' but being involved in interventions. In her theorising and activism Joan challenged the idea of organisational claims of gender neutrality that influence the construction of work rules that guide behaviour. For her, organisational and political arguments about gender-neutrality

were a smokescreen. As a sociologist she considered all workers come from, and interact with, a private as well as public domain and that organisations do not operate in isolation. Here she referred to men's and women's differing roles within the private domain, differing caring responsibilities and women's domination of daily unpaid work. This situation led Joan to challenge the concept of a gender-neutral worker. The idea of such a worker, who is unencumbered disembodied isolated around which policies and regulations are formed perplexed her. For Joan this abstraction did not acknowledge people's unexamined gender beliefs and assumptions which have helped to construct ideas of a gender neutral worker in alignment more with men's lived reality than women's (Acker, 2006). Joan was keen to argue that this separation of production and reproduction helps to explain the endurance of inequalities and difference through the operation of values and beliefs that are deeply embedded around images of femininity and masculinity.

Joan was opposed to how domestic concerns around reproduction become divided structurally from the fundamental organization of capitalist societies because of its impact on equity in society and in organisations. Joan herself had exposed and fought against the effects of the separation of public and private concerns, looking at how this had impacted on job classification in the state of Oregon to produce a gendered wage gap (Acker, 1989). How this separation had led to job segregation by sex, and fundamentally how women's work tasks had become to be valued less than men's. Here her research demonstrated how men's jobs were more specifically described, had more classifications and a greater range of wages and unlike women's work, their job bandings were not associated with lower wages. It was her observation of comparable worth inequities between male and female workers in the 1980s in the US (but a pattern she saw repeated internationally), that led to her agitation for change in this area.

### **Joan Acker's Gender sub-structure**

One of Joan's seminal works and lasting contribution to the field was her gender substructure framework. This depicted an analytical explanation of a social order that explains how inequalities are established in the formation of gendered organisational structures and processes (Acker 1989). The gender sub-structure originally had six key components: organising processes, organisational culture, job interactions, gender subtext, gendered identities and organisational logic.

Joan, considered that organising processes including job design, influenced how much workers would be paid, how decision-making and supervision would be distributed and how the rules around behaviour at work would operate. In turn these factors were predisposed to creating and sustaining a gendered wage gap, which still exists for all Joan's (and others) feminist activism.

Organisational culture was theorised next, focusing on the role of organisational beliefs in shaping behaviour leading to organisations not questioning gendered differences and gender pay inequity. Her key argument here is that, hiding behind a smokescreen of gender discourse, a so-called gender neutrality, organisational decision-makers are able to validate their adoption of workplace behaviour. Joan argued this was, often linked to less visible beliefs rooted in how masculinity and femininity are viewed within an organisation, which can undermine organisational change.

Visibility and the legitimisation of visible inequalities was a recurring motif for Joan and her academic theorising and she linked *Job interactions* to how differing power dynamics, whether these are formal or informal, person to person or group activities that exist between

both work colleagues and those who work at different levels of seniority, reproduce the gender substructure. Key was how the practise of these more subtle interactions make the consequences of gender inequalities less visible and more persistent.

Moving to how organisational texts are used to shape the gendered processes and structure such as the job evaluation system and documentation, Joan referred to the *Gender subtext*. Joan outlined an example to me that she observed; it involved job rigidity where people performing different jobs with an overlap of tasks such as doing managerial tasks would not be rated as acting managerially if a secretary was doing it (when secretarial roles were mainly occupied by women) (Acker 1989). While this job example could be seen as less relevant to contemporary organisations, the point that Joan made still resonates: It is in the way schemes and policies, which are often developed by consultants with the input of corporate managers, are formulated and interpreted that perpetuates gender assumptions.

*Gendered identities* are constructed but also brought into workplaces. For instance, when management styles value masculine practices of competition and aggression, then senior managers or professionals may need to develop identities as tough and assertive in order to be credible. However, this is not expected of women, whose gendered identity risks being judged harshly if they adopt more masculine attributes to perform their role. In her later work, Joan was concerned with expanding this to recognise the interaction with other identities, such as race and class, as highlighted in her discussion of inequality regimes (Acker, 2006). The final dimension of Joan's gendered substructure was *organisational logic*. This dimension is intriguing to discuss because it is a category that existed in her earlier work on the gendered substructure (Acker 1989 218-223, Acker 1990) but disappeared from her later work (Acker 1992). Joan (Acker, 2012) usefully explains the reasoning behind this; she had originally claimed that organisational logic was the logic of hierarchy and bureaucracy, the theoretical or ideological ideas that underpinned organisational processes and practices.

### **Discussing Acker with Acker and reflecting on her response to the gender sub-structure**

Moving forward to my interactions with Joan, I am now going to discuss her review of the gender sub-structure articles in the 2012 special issue for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. Joan particularly valued Benschop's and Doorewaard's intention to progress thinking around her gender sub-set, questioning organisational assumptions of the gender-neutral workers which for Benschop and Doorewaard was usually legitimised by a meritocratic individualistic discourse. Joan was a fan of their earlier development of the gender sub-set (see Benschop and Doorewaard 1998a, Benschop and Doorewaard 1998b) and considered that their US as well as their European research should be more widely recognised. In Benschop's and Doorewaard's (2012) article the gender sub-set was revisited in light of the move towards intersectionality. Here they discussed how to make the invisible visible through using Joan's concept and developing it further by linking it to the debate around hegemonic power to indicate how gender inequalities gain control and compliance through organisational processes and affect women's agency within organisations. For Joan, this was in line with her concern raised in her inequality regime article about how inequality within organisational processes can become to be legitimised and 'taken for granted,' (Acker 2006:454).

What Benschop and Doorewaard argue is that the 'ideal' organisational worker may differ in different organisations and occupations; but he was always masculine. Joan appreciated Benschop's and Doorewaard's work in returning her theorising to a more abstract level of relationship processes of identity formation and cultural development. However, Joan

wanted to push this notion further to argue that there was clearly a class, race and ethnicity dimension to this notion that needed further elaboration.

Benschop's and Doorewaard's (2012) abstraction of the gender plus subset uncovers the concealed power processes that produce and reproduce gender distinctions within the workplace and differing interpretations of feminine and masculine at work. How the gender subset through which women could experience gender inequalities become embedded in work practices. How organisations demonstrating gender equity through having some token executive women, or men and women being segregated into different career pathways such as mothers with young children moving out of mainstream career pathways. They also consider the importance of social relationships in organisations, how the importance of being asked to participate in career development by senior others was itself a gendered process. Through their research they reveal how organisation's gender processes are rooted in day to day practices thereby challenging organisational claims of gender neutral processes that posit that differences are inevitable and linked to skills or type of work suited to part-time or family responsibilities.

Picking up on the loss of organisational logic, Acker subsumed within other categories of the gendered substructure in her later work, Dye and Mills (2012) queried this loss. In her review of their research, Joan explained that in 1992 she had conceptualised practices within the organisational gendered substructure as interlinked and rooted in ongoing processes to dynamically form in practice the 'reality of the organisation' (Acker 1990:146). This thinking meant that organisational logic was a concept that was now redundant as it was repeating what was already included in the framework as outlined earlier.

Dye's and Mills' (2012) piece got Joan to rethink this decision. Their argument was that, organisational logic helped to integrate the other processes and this function was missing in Acker's (1992) reiteration of her conceptualisation of the gender processes. This argument was accepted by Joan and she indicated that she intended to rethink this area because she could have used her own framework for analysing organisations more empirically than she had done.

However, others like (see for example, Benschop and Doorewaard, 1998a, 1998b, 2012) have expanded on Joan's original framework to include more abstract organisational thinking around identity, culture and practice; as seen particularly in Dye's and Mill's discussion of institutional logic. Dye' and Mills's (2012) article was about exposing the gendering of an organisation over time using Pan American Airline (Panam) archives showing how the organisational logic component can be used to develop multiple levels of organisational analysis. They drew on the processes identified by Joan's gendered organisational substructure and used Joan's conceptualisation of organisational logic as a temporal and contextual process based on poststructuralist feminist theory to argue that these processes are more interlinked and need to be examined over time.

Something useful to readers of Joan's work here is understanding why, subsequent to 1992, Joan moved away from more abstract theorising and chose to focus on more tangible forms of gender inequalities such as pay, recruitment and selection to help expose the structural nature of daily practices in forming and reforming organisational processes. This point was raised by Benschop and Doorewaard (2012) as they lamented the loss of Joan's systematic analysis of interrelated sets of process that Joan originally outlined in the gender sub-set (Acker, 1989). Benschop and Doorewaard (2012) argued that what is needed is once again a more discreet focus on organisation's structure as well as identity processes to push Joan's analysis further. Joan's response to this critique was that her ambition was to see future feminist researchers develop the explanatory notions of the gender sub-set but ally

them more fully to an intersectional focus, in order to include other forms of inequalities that make up social reality. She considered this ambition partly fulfilled through her later work on 'inequality regimes' (Acker, 2006), which went beyond the gender boundaries to include the effects of class, race and ethnicity in organising processes that complicate the patterns of inequalities within differing organisational and industry contexts.

As part of her involvement in the 2012 Special Issue of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, Joan reviewed my work on being a female pension trustee. Joan asked a pertinent question about how the diversity of pension boards affect board activities and outcomes. I agreed with Joan that there was a need for a gendered organisational framework to analyse what was happening at this level. This was of particular importance when looking at pension and corporate boards which are closely scrutinised and monitored for diversity, as well as its impact on decision-making. I agree with Joan that other methodologies such as Pugliese et al.'s (2015) observation methods can give greater insight into the social relations at this privileged level. They could also say something important about race and class as well as gender, although gender is presently the focus of much European and global regulatory scrutiny. Joan was in favour of exploring the role of transformative action research methodologies emerging from Scandinavian research within gendered organisations (see De Vries and Van Den Brink, 2016), which she saw could be a useful approach to implement change. However, there is a caveat, Joan retained reservations about the long-term effect of gender initiatives and interventions and the impact of change on underlying processes of inequality (Acker, 2006). She was always aware of the capitalist imperative of organisations to make profits and how this could disrupt momentum to change and override equality gains, as her work on welfare and comparable worth had demonstrated (see Acker 1989, 2010).

Through discussing Joan's review of my work (see Sayce, 2012), I tended to agree with Dye and Mills (2012) about the importance of organisational logic. The contextual and temporal position of boards demands a more innovative approach to get empirical data, thus if I were to use Joan's framework again to analyse what is happening at board level, I would consider using a 1990 framework that included organisational logic rather than the later 1992 version. This would allow for the analysis to pick up on the point that most board members make about the need to understand how personal social relations interact with external and internal pressures and how these dynamics affect board decision-making (Sayce and Ozbilgin, 2014). In other words, understanding social relations is fundamental for those trying to obtain, or continue working, at an executive level, which suggests that how this works in practice needs further empirical investigation.

As a sociologist, Joan understood how underlying tensions both internal and external affected organisational policy-making and decision-making and wanted her research developed further. This came across in her review of the Parsons et al (2012) article, which also wanted to reinstate Joan's organisational logic dimension in their theorising about feminist organising. Similar to Dye and Mills (2012), they used Joan's 1990 gender substructure framework including organisational logic but took it in another direction. They wanted to explore how the implicit rules and assumptions about what an organisation should be impact on the gender substructure and vitally the organisational logic (Acker 1989, 1990) of an organisation that consciously aimed to fight sexual and racial discrimination within its industry. To that effect, they used critical hermeneutics to re-evaluate the archive of the association for Stewardesses for Women's Rights (SFWR), an association that was established in 1972 and lasted four years. They looked to uncover how gender becomes embedded in texts, which ultimately would allow the relations of power and domination that go into the text itself to be revealed and see how this was experienced in a purportedly female dominated organisation. Their focus on feminist organising was also contextually

important as this was an era when second-wave feminist thinking and practice was at its height so understanding how gender itself becomes subordinated in this context was a welcome addition to scholarship.

In her review of these works, Joan reminded the authors that the external relations of other organisational structures would also influence how feminists would view more formal hierarchies and work against their preference for more unstructured consensual hierarchies. As a feminist who lived through the conflict of the 1970s and an activist, Joan knew the importance of having legislative support and links to a wider social movement (Acker 2006). As she pointed out the strength of the intent to work with other organisations and structures (particularly other private or public funding bodies, who also have their own organisational logic and expectation about how funding should be managed), can push the desire to follow a feminist inspired organising path aside. This is an issue that Joan had seen in the way public sector organisations often mimicked neo-liberal organisations when it came to cost-effectiveness.

In part, Joan was reiterating a point that she had previously made (see Acker, 1995) that, trying to create an organisation without a gender sub-structure was unlikely to work because of the day to day pressures of organising and the need to do so efficiently and make decisions quickly, resembling masculine-influenced organisations. She also commented on how people in organisations saw gender as an individual issue rather than a socially-constructed issue. Joan was concerned that these tensions pushed aside more ideological beliefs of hierarchical organising, particularly when there are other social relations such as class influencing how women interpret feminism. Nevertheless, she did recognise that the strength of Parsons et al.'s work (2012) was in its questions: How can egalitarian organisations be created? What effects do these attempts have on unequal social relations such as gender, race and class? These questions remain as pertinent to feminists today as they did to second-wave feminists.

Together in conversation we discussed the implications this could have for current theorising of management, in particular the demand for more transformative styles of management, which are supposed to emphasise more collaborative empathetic style of management. (Acker 1990, Mumby and Putnum 1992). We both agreed that there is a danger if feminine values and attitudes of consultation and cooperation are associated more with this type of approach, the effects may be limited because of pressures from other organisational logics that not embrace this approach. This may limit a major stakeholder's verbal commitment, which may be difficult to accommodate due to differing organisational logics in their gendered substructure. This is an area where new empirical research could be valuable about how women and men in management can create new gender cultural images and processes while navigating masculine based organisational logics.

What Joan offered with her theorising was a very necessary organisational focus, which emerged from her belief in workers' rights to have secure employment and income. Furthermore, in revealing the intersection of class, gender and race deeply embedded, unacknowledged discrimination can become visible. Joan took issue with the casual re-assertion of privileged interests that forces women and economically-deprived workers into the risky world of welfare. She was someone who had battled first-hand with policy makers in Oregon for pay equity, leading her to find that the interests of capitalism and its privileged elite meant that the outcomes gained were hard fought for and limited.

As Joan and I collaborated in 2012, she was not necessarily optimistic of change in America and other successful capitalist countries to reduce the 'schism' between paid and unpaid labour, which she argued was supported by the reiteration of notions of masculine and

feminine (Acker 2012:222). She considered that more social democratic countries such as Sweden, where she had previously worked, as well as Norway, offered hope for the formulation of policies around low cost child-care, and paid parental leave to help transverse the gulf. While there has been some shift in discussions in Europe of changes in men's attitudes to childcare and domestic chores- with the introduction of parental leave and shared maternity leave- in the main these responsibilities still remain predominantly with women. In particular, Joan was sceptical of change occurring in corporate America in respect to supporting flexible work arrangements to help people negotiate these issues. Perhaps her pessimism was justified in light of recent political events in the US, which would have had Joan jumping up and down in rage. Her reaction would be all the more vehement because as a longstanding feminist, she knew exactly how difficult it is in practice to advance equality policy in a capitalised society.

### **Intersectionality and inequality regimes**

While Joan's earlier work focused on the gendering of organisations, her later work around 'inequality regimes' (Acker 2006) extended her theorising to consider the effects of other processes in inequalities including race and class and how all these processes, practices, meanings and actions are entwined in inequalities (Acker 2009:201). This connects to a point she had made in earlier work: "The daunting reality facing radical and socialist feminist visions was, and is, not only that we have no gender and race egalitarian alternative to capitalism, but that the interweaving of gender and race with the economic, political, and social relations of capitalism is much more complicated and pervasive than we had imagined. To fundamentally change the situation of women, almost everything else must change." (Acker 2001:46-49).

Here Joan admits that victories in respect of tackling inequalities may be small and incremental, but that this is a success. While, the above thinking underpinned the pessimism that pervades her 2012 article, Joan did not consider the struggle to be in vain. As the above quote also highlights, Joan continued to believe that the economic element of class was still a vital component that supported the presence and persistence of gendering and racializing in social relations in society. She was continually arguing that there could be more refinement and development around class, acknowledging that this is a fluid notion in constant reconstruction so its processes and practices have to be historicalised and contextualised.

Joan's inequalities regimes concept has been successfully used to analyse intersecting inequalities such as gender and race across multiple intersecting dimensions and resonates with intersectionality thinking. Berry and Bell's (2012) study of US home health aide workers, who were drawn from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and were often from Black or Hispanic groupings evidences this point. Their work uncovers the multiple intersecting inequality processes in these workers' organisations where some workers were subject to discrimination and stereotyping while others were quickly allocated to better job positions in an industry with a reputation of offering poorly-paid but highly demanding work. In this article, which Joan really enjoyed reviewing and which she admired for its scholarship, Berry and Bell indicate how class as well as gender and race discrimination were operationalised within home aide organisations. They showed how this was supported by excluding this lower valued occupational work, done predominantly by women, from the protection of US labour legislation.

Berry and Bell (2012) wonder why few academics actually explore the mutually reinforcement of class with gender and race in intersectionality research. This question resonated with Joan, who lamented the waning of class as an area of research within academia. Joan recognised that for intersectionality researchers it may be easier to focus on one inequality process. However, she wanted to see more researchers unpicking the strands of several dynamic intersectionality processes simultaneously, difficult as this is. She wanted academics to reveal the variability of exploring intersecting processes even though these processes are often invisible to those involved in organisations or to those privileged who are observing, including academics who themselves may be relatively advantaged.

As someone whose sociological thinking had been influenced by EP Thompson's seminal work 'The Making of the English Working Class' (1963), Joan's belief in the importance of class social relations underpinning differing processes of inequality never wavered; her insistence on continuing to acknowledge class social relationships and the agency within them appeared to be spot on. It resonated with me, as someone who comes from the English working class and has experience of how social relations can constrain aspiration and ambition to stifle social mobility in an era where economic inequalities seems to be widening.

The last article in the special issue reviewed by Joan was Tatli and Ozbilgin's (2012) piece, which explored intersectionalities of inequality and privilege in the UK arts and cultural sector. They used Joan's inequality regimes to explore intersectionality in a sector focusing on job placements. Their approach of uniting intersectionality theorising with Joan's later framework led them to argue that intersecting inequalities have more explanatory power than focusing on straightforward explanations that theorise aspects of gender, race and class together as equivalent. They argue this is problematic as disadvantage around race, gender and class are not experienced equally. Using Collins' (1990) work, they argue that there is a matrix of domination so that inequality is not only relational but also contextual and historical. Joan supported this point within in her theorising of inequality regimes (2006) when she discusses how gender, race, class and other inequalities are experienced is influenced by how specific organisations develop their hierarchy and segregation. Key to Joan was how these aspects can be used as processes of compliance and ultimately control because visible inequalities become legitimised and this legitimisation interacts with wider political and economic contexts.

Tatli and Ozbilgin (2012) used the parameters that Joan set out in her inequality regimes but through their sectoral focus of work placements in the creative arts they found not only that visible inequalities were legitimised, but that these inequalities sometimes took surprising forms. Exclusion practices and processes seemed to operate under assumptions of categorisation around social class background, race and ethnicity as well as disability. However, in terms of gender and sexual orientation with the sector on the surface being considered more open, this was still an identity that was complicated by social class and race, needing to have the 'right' skin colour or middle-class background. Thus, using a sectoral lens gay men could become privileged and complicit with existing inequalities if meeting assumptions about social class. They posit that it may be more useful for intersectionality researchers to consider categorizing industries more as tribes, where tribal experts maintain the rituals and rites, jargon, dress that workers in this field need to accrue in order to enter and progress.

For Joan, challenging both the invisibility as well as visibility and legitimacy of discrimination was a perennial problem whether it be race, class or a combination of others. She argued that inequalities had to be made visible at the organisational levels to invite change.

Nonetheless, Joan argued that this was only part of the problem and that change also had to take place at a societal level if more egalitarian regimes were to be developed because of the reluctance for those privileged people to give up power.

## Conclusion

As a sociological feminist academic and activist I shared many of Joan's concerns and her limited optimism for lasting inequality change in organisations. However, Joan believed that while it was difficult, this did not mean that the challenge of striving for more equality was a battle not worth fighting for. To give her optimism, she often looked towards Scandinavian contexts for concepts and interventions that could inform the on-going equality struggle. She never lost sight of the importance of understanding gendering organisations and intersectionality to expose and explain how inequalities are perpetuated. However, Joan considered that more dialogue between academics and practitioners is needed to help each other through difficult times. At heart, Joan was a sociologist, activist and academic researcher, and in these changing economic times where economic inequalities appear to be growing in her homeland and elsewhere, she would have supported feminists to continue to promote equality in all its forms. The recent call 'Diversity and inclusion at work: Time to talk (again)' by Lotte Holck, Patrizia Zanoni and Laurence Romani in *Gender, Work and Organisation* (2017) for more class-focused papers would have delighted and inspired her and seem a fitting tribute to this academic class warrior.

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