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Different Perspectives on Gender

In the previous chapter we argued for taking a gender perspective in understanding organizations and also touched on some of the main problems with such an approach. This chapter presents some different perspectives that can be taken in understanding gender and organizations, and considers their respective contributions as well as problems and difficulties.

Gender studies are dominated by feminism – or maybe more accurately, feminism*s* as it is anything but a unitary concept. There are various opinions about how this broad orientation should be defined. Most authors emphasize that feminist theory critically addresses the subordination of women with the aim of seeking an end to it. As Weedon (1987: 1) comments: 'Feminism is a politics', and should be seen as synonymous with critique and change. Feminist theorizing is directed at the creation of knowledge 'not only to study the world but to change it' (Stanley 1990: XX). Similarly, Chafetz defines a theory as feminist 'if it can be used (regardless by whom) to challenge, counteract, or change a status quo which disadvantages or devalues women' (1989: 5). Historically, feminism is connected to the struggle for women's economic, social and political independence. It goes beyond theory and research as it also refers to political and social practice. Here we are mainly interested in theory and research, so feminism should be read as feminist studies in this book, unless otherwise specified. Contemporary feminists also emphasize (not without tensions, as we shall see later) the importance of considering other forms of oppression, in particular, through class, race and ethnicity, and sexuality. A key concept here is intersectionality, referring to 'the simultaneity and linkages of oppressions in the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, etc., aiming to understand these as processes and outcomes in the context of social structuring' (Calás & Smircich, 2006: 305).

We prefer to use the concept gender studies rather than feminist studies for several reasons. One is about research politics. Although along with critical theorists, including feminists, in general, we advocate the view that research should be socially committed to fight injustice and irrationality, we also believe that research is more than a tool for political activism. Political awareness is a key quality of reflexive research. However, to a priori take the side of what is constructed as one category (which is seen as sharing a particular interest) seems premature. The primary purpose of research – to find out what is going on – becomes subordinated to what is perceived as benefiting a specific group (in this case women). Research and theory should be

politically relevant and practically useful, but to see research as directly oriented to advantaging or up-valuing women (as the citation of Chafetz above seems to imply) is narrow and may potentially lead to biased and by political assessments controlled knowledge production. Knowledge then easily becomes constructed in ways to benefit the cause. Key virtues such as honesty, curiosity, carefulness and caution may suffer. In addition, there is the problem of who is to determine how the social world should be changed and which part of status quo disadvantages or devalues women. Researchers should carefully reflect upon this, be aware of arrogance and elitism and show considerable openness about whether their views are the 'correct ones' and not only the politically correct ones.

Perhaps even more important is that gender relations widens the debate to consider not only female issues, i.e. the objective of gender studies is not necessarily solely to support the presumed interests of all or some women and to deal with what is seen as disadvantaging (many or some) women. More diversified aspects of gender are also called for, including the study of men and masculinities. We are critical, therefore, of the tendency to equate gender with women and women's concerns alone. In doing so, maleness is ignored and remains invisible (or treated at a distance, as the Other, that can be written off quite easily) and gender relations are unquestioned and overlooked. In addition, a focus on feminist studies rather than gender studies is also problematic, as we will elaborate below, as it tends to treat 'women' as a robust and unitary category. Diversity within the category means that it is not always obvious how certain conditions relate to the interests of different groups of women. Having said this, many versions of what is often labelled as feminism share our concerns and the somewhat one-sided focus on women can be motivated by the years of exclusion and marginalization of females:

> As long as the interests and practices of the 'other' gender are ignored or distorted, there will be a need for feminism to focus, disproportionally, on women and the constraints of assumptions about femininities. (Martin, 2003: 85)

Although we prefer the term gender studies, overlapping and being favourable to most views presented as feminism, nevertheless, in this and other chapters we often talk about feminism as it is a dominant concept and orientation within gender studies and other authors frequently use this label. In many cases, it gives a more precise description of the orientation of an author and/or a school. The overlap between feminism and gender studies is sufficiently strong to enable us to use the words as synonyms in many contexts, even though the latter term covers a broader area and indicates a more open (and less politically oriented and/or instrumental) attitude.

Gender studies seem to centre on three major points: (l) the notion of gender is central and relevant to understanding all social relations, institutions and processes; (2) gender relations constitute a problem as they are characterized by patterns of domination/subordination, inequalities, oppression and oppositions; (3) gender relations are seen as social constructions. They are not naturally given – an offspring of biology and impossible to change – but an outcome of socio-cultural and historical conditions, i.e. of processes in which people interpret and (re)create the social world. Gender is the

effect of social definitions and internalizations and reproductions of the meaning of being a man or a woman. Gender can therefore be radically changed through human action in which gender is redefined. Social definitions and processes, not nature, form gender, according to most feminists – although some also see biology as significant. It is the 'doing of gender' (West and Zimmerman, 1987), which is interesting rather than gender per se. This means that it is the construction of differences between women and men (girls and boys), which are paid attention to, differences that are not natural, essential or biological – but after they have been constructed as such they will easily be looked upon as 'essential'. The process of doing gender we also refer to as gendering, and this process might take place at different levels, the macro level (societal level), meso (e.g. in organizations) and micro level (in daily interactions). We deal more with these three levels in Chapter 3.

The label sex has been used to distinguish biological sexed bodies whereas gender refers to the culturally constituted forms of masculinity and femininity that produce the specific ways in which men and women are developed in a particular society; the splitting of the terms being an act of defiance by 1960s feminists to challenge biological determinism, at least in Anglophone countries (Moi 1999). However, the distinction is somewhat unclear. Ideas about biology, too, are social phenomena and understanding biology is not just a matter of letting nature speak for itself (Kaplan and Rogers, 1990) a point emphasized by a further challenge to the culturally accepted meaning of 'sex' by the move away from viewing sexed bodies as an essence and more as something that is in itself culturally and historically made up (Butler, 1990).[1] Nevertheless, most people interested in gender take biological identity as a given point of departure and talk about 'men' and 'women' as unproblematic, easily identifiable categories. Sex thus in a sense dominates, even if researchers claim that their interest is gender. Therefore we do not rigidly stress the sex-gender distinction, but follow the general practice of using the former term when social constructions are not very central and the bodies of women and men are seen as the criteria for identification, while the term gender is used when emphasizing the more social and cultural aspects. We see the terms as overlapping, rather than clearly distinguishable.

Political positions in feminism

The various positions within feminism can be identified and classified in different ways. A common way is to classify positions according to their *political positions*; that is, distinguishing them according to the way they view society and what they consider to be desirable changes. Probably the most commonly used classification is to divide feminism into a number of approaches: liberal, structuralist[2] forms, including radical, socialist and Marxist, and poststructuralist/postmodern feminism. However, as with all forms of classification there are inherent limitations in their use, in that they tend to suggest a temporal and special fixedness and therefore underemphasize the dynamic and evolving nature of the different approaches to feminism and their classification.[3] Therefore, it is important to remember that feminism (and other forms of gender studies) is also a process, with each category identified being revised and reshaped.

Liberal feminism traces its roots back to the early eighteenth- and nineteenth-century political liberal pioneers who emphasized equal rights for all. However, it is normally associated with the second wave of feminist activism in the 1960s and 1970s anti-discrimination campaigns for sex equality. Liberal feminism aims at gender equality but does not seriously address or question any other aspects of society than those that work directly to negatively influence women and their opportunities. Ironically, the image that might be gained from the liberal approach is that it is concerned with only making upper-class women equal with upper-class men, working-class women equal with working-class men and minority men and women equal within the minority without considering other possible forms of oppression and injustices in society and their intersections with gender. Critical scrutiny of society is limited to those aspects that are seen to work against women's access to the same options as men and in the more obvious ways where men are oppressing women (e.g. sexual violence). It is as if organizations and societies are only 'accidentally gendered' (Halford et al., 1997: 7), that gender neutrality will be regained by the removal of discriminatory individuals, policies and practices, and that women's emancipation will be achieved by a greater inclusion of women into 'male-stream' organizations and organizational theories. For liberal feminists, gender primarily means strict comparisons of men and women and a commitment to reducing differences unfair to women.

Radical feminism rejects the male-dominated (patriarchal) society as a whole and claims that women – when freed from the dominance of patriarchal relations – should aim to transform the existing social order radically or even develop their own social institutions. This radicalism is based on the assumption that women have different experiences and interests than men and/or that women have radically different orientations than those characterizing traditional and contemporary patriarchal society. This idea of the 'united sisterhood' and a common experience of pain and oppression, or 'wounded attachment' (Brown, 1995) provide the main source of resistance and political struggle. Radical feminism does not aim at competing with men on equal terms or to share the benefits – top jobs, higher wages, access to formal power – on a 50/50 basis, but wants to change the basic structure of society and its organizations and make competition a less central notion.

Marxist feminism and *socialist feminism* study society in a critical way with the ambition of contributing to a radical change where new gender relations are included as central elements. Class and gender inequality are seen as by-products of capitalism and gender inequalities are examined as parts of a system of stratification in society. The main focus is on women's marginal position and weak bargaining power in labour markets, serving as low priced, flexible and disposable labour. Capitalism and patriarchy[4] are viewed as independent but interacting systems, which work together to oppress women (Hartmann, 1979). This is sometimes named dual systems theory. According to Walby (1990) there might be conflicting interests between capitalism and patriarchy, as women's entrance to the labour market potentially might undermine patriarchy. While liberal and radical feminism mainly focus on improving the living conditions of women – especially when it comes to career possibilities (for liberals) and

sexuality and economic independence (for radicals) – socialist and Marxist feminisms focus on changes in society in a more general way that will also benefit other unfairly treated groups, including those that are not restricted to only one sex (the poor, the working class). The oppressive features of capitalism are highlighted. Issues such as ecology are also taken seriously, seeing the exploitation of nature as an inherent characteristic of capitalism and its dominating, masculinistic logic of exploiting people and nature.

Finally, in recent years, *poststructuralist* and *postmodern feminisms* have emerged as a major influence in understanding gender. They emphasize variation and fragmentation and tend to discourage broad-brushed views such as the one about women's general disadvantaged position in society and the idea of a gender system. Gender is seen as unstable and constituted by discourse meaning that we cannot really say something about gender as such, out there, outside representations. We will come back to this stream in the next section. Sufficient here is to say that postmodernism has no clear or 'strong' political agenda, but is overlapping with and has inspired directions such as third-world, post-colonial, transnational feminism and queer theory[5] and these in turn have had a significant impact on feminist thinking. Sometimes referred to as 'third wave' feminism or postfeminism these approaches are seen as a radical departure from 'second wave' feminism, arising out of the feminist activism of the 1960s and 1970s. The key distinction is its distancing from a general portrayal of women as 'victims of oppression' or 'the second sex', whether that be in relation to a denial of equal rights (as in liberal feminism) or as victims of patriarchal/class/white power (as in the structural approaches). Politics within the 'post-fem' streams become much more local and situation-specific, and less focused on a broad struggle for universal women's interests. Issues around lesbian and gay politics are, for example, seen as different from many concerns of heterosexual women.

Post-colonial feminists aim to emphasize the importance of other forms of oppression – race, class and ethnicity – and their interrelationship with gender oppression in marginalizing women. They present a critique of Western forms of feminism for their privileging certain presentations of the subject, and certain visions of a utopia, that reflects a White supremacist position in the generation of knowledge. In espousing a politics, post-colonial feminism also challenges liberal and radical feminist accounts, seen as promoting Western ideals of emancipation, freedom and equality and imposing Western cultural norms, perpetuating Western hegemony (see Alexander and Mohanty, 1997).

Also having a significant influence on feminism in recent years is *Queer theory*, where, again, the united womanhood is challenged. Probably the most influential contributor to feminism in this regard is Butler (1990, 2004), who views gender identity as a performance, a fluid variable, shifting over space and time. Common to these postfeminist approaches is the eschewal of the meta-narrative of women's fundamental oppression upon which structural theorists base their critique, emphasizing a more ontologically fractured and complex 'woman' and multiple and complex material realities. Transsexuality and the avoidance of clear categories like men and women and the inboxing of people into these would be a key concern.

Gender studies and epistemology

Another common way of classifying gender positions and overlapping with the classi-
fication discussed above, is according to the researcher's view on *knowledge* (episte-
mology). As we have already seen there are different ontological and epistemological
positions, i.e. fundamental assumptions about the basic character of social reality and
in what sense one can develop qualified understandings of it. The understanding of
knowledge cannot be totally detached from one's political standpoint but other ele-
ments are also important, e.g. the understanding of the nature of language, of what
research methods are the most appropriate and what kind of knowledge products are
possible/most valuable: precise empirical description and/or testing of hypotheses,
valid theories, insights, change-stimulating arguments, practical advice and so on. One
important dividing line concerns whether gender is only an object of study or also a
part of research projects' 'input' to the study, explicitly or implicitly imprinted in the-
oretical frameworks and methodological ideals. Research ideals such as objectivity,
neutrality, and the ability to quantitatively measure may, for example, be seen as gen-
der-neutral or strongly masculine. Perhaps, for example, the experimental psychologist
wanting to reveal gender (inequality) unintentionally does so less through the focused
study and more through the set-up and ideals of the study. A lot of research and gen-
eral knowledge production can be paradoxical in this respect, sometimes triggering
questions such as

- Do we study gender (sex) with a 'non-gendered' (e.g. inductive or in other ways
  'gender assumption-free') methodological approach?
- Or do we study gender – as well as a range of other phenomena – with an
  approach that is unavoidably (explicitly or implicitly) 'gendered'?

In taking this approach to classifying feminism, we follow Harding's (1987)
distinctions (but modify the terminology) between three main perspectives. In the
first one, women and men are treated as rather robust categories; in the second
gender is believed to be an organizing principle and finally the third one is post-
structuralist feminism. Of course, to reiterate, all distinctions and ways of divid-
ing up a complex, heterogeneous and rapidly expanding research area are
problematic. They inscribe order and obscure disorder, ambiguity and variety.
Thereby they invite not only simplifications but also distortions. Combinations
and syntheses are common and there are also orientations emphasizing other
aspects than those focused upon here, for example, psychoanalytic feminism. We
do believe, however, that Harding's distinction aids getting an overview of the
field of gender studies.

Gender as variable – women and men as robust categories

The first line of approach views gender (sex) as a variable and maintains the cate-
gory of women (men) as a relevant and unproblematic research category. The focus
is on comparisons between men and women in terms of inequality and

discrimination with the aim of explaining such phenomena. Traditional (male-dominated) research within a number of different disciplines has disregarded women as a category and failed to pay attention to possible differences between the sexes (Acker and Van Houten, 1974). Within this perspective it is investigated if, in what respects, under which circumstances and to what extent, men and women differ in terms of subjective orientations (psychologies, ethics, values, attitudes) and how social structures and processes affect them. Various forms of gender inequity are measured and explained. Understanding gender requires that research pays careful attention to the specific conditions of women and does not take equality between the sexes for granted. Therefore, possible differences between men and women should be taken into consideration when we wish to understand different kinds of economic, social and psychological phenomena, ranging from horizontal and vertical division of labour, class differences, and salaries to work motivation, recruitment and selection, leadership style, and political and moral values. A large part of this research 'adds' women to the analysis of different phenomena.[6]

In the beginning of the 1970s, focusing on women and their conditions and how these differ from the conditions of men was a 'logical' consequence of the fact that women had been absent from or poorly represented in most previous research, both as subjects and as objects. Often, this approach shows a rather simple and unproblematic understanding of gender. It is very easy to classify people according to their (biological) sex, but defining the meaning and significance of this and finding out when, how and why men and women are treated differently can become a difficult task.

To divide women/men into categories has been and still is a dominating trend within organization theory, especially within the field of women in management (WIM). It has been carried out since the l960s, according to some critics without much change:

> The majority of the women-in-management literature is still trying to demonstrate that women are people too. Consistent with the tenets of liberal political theory, it conceives of organizations as made up of rational, autonomous actors, whose ultimate goal is to make organizations efficient, effective, and fair. (Calás and Smircich, 1996: 223)

But other kinds of gender studies also use this approach as their starting point: for example, studies of gender wage discrimination or sexual harassment, and also studies that show how women are kept in an inferior position because of oppressive structures (glass ceiling), and studies which show that differences in attitudes can be explained by differences in work tasks and job situations for men and women rather than by sex *per* se (Kanter, 1977; Powell, 1999). In other words, what appear to be sex differences may be outcomes of other circumstances.

Critique of the idea of women and men as robust categories

This approach dominates in much research, especially within management and psychology. It has, however, been criticized for its assumptions about scientific

knowledge, the question of method and its rather restricted intellectual and political agenda. This of course overlaps with the critique of neo-positivism. Neo-positivism has been and still is an unexpressed 'premise' in a lot of the scientific practices that make women (as well as other groups) the passive object of science, and establish technical procedures as servants of truths and legitimizers of science as authority.

For example, this approach tends to operate with a naive view of language and the assumed ability that language can mirror an objective reality through the strict adherence to scientific techniques (Ashcraft, 2004). Critics claim that the results of trying to *measure* gender relations by means of questionnaires, observations of experiments or even (semi-) structured interviews are unreliable. Formulations in questionnaires and interviews are typically interpreted in different ways by different people. Therefore it is difficult to know the intended meaning of a given answer. Even minor changes in the way the research interview is framed or the questions are formulated can make a big difference to the answers received. Questionnaires assume that language is transparent and that people's experiences, orientations and mastery of language are so straightforward that they can easily be expressed as responses in pre-structured formulations chosen by the researcher. On most issues, language and personal experiences, as well as the very nature of social life, are far too ambiguous to make such assumptions realistic or 'accurate' (Deetz, 1992a; Denzin, 1994; Potter and Wetherell, 1987).

A second problem with most variable studies is thereby touched upon: the artificial nature of the empirical material (see for example, Graves 1999). Sometimes experiments are seen as the most rigorous method. In human studies, however, such research involves considerable problems. Often it may better be described as the study of the behaviour of students in simplified and artificial settings. It is thus a question of what exactly can be learned from laboratory studies. What seems to hold true in the laboratory does not necessarily correspond with what might be going on in the outside world. We are not suggesting that experiments or survey studies are of no value. They may often give us some valuable input to thinking and may be seen as arguments for why a particular view on a social phenomenon makes more sense than another one.

A third major problem is that the researcher is often objectifying and/or 'controlling' the research subject.[7] By constructing a questionnaire or an experimental situation the researcher typically defines the issue at hand and a narrow range of possible responses, and thus 'forces' the research subjects to respond to the questionnaire or to behave in the laboratory within a particular set of constraints. Subjects are deprived of using language in any non-trivial way to describe meanings, feelings and cognitions.

A fourth problem is that the robust category view tends to 'freeze' gender and gives sex priority. Through assuming – even taking for granted – that men and women form easily accessible and unproblematic variables for comparison the entire approach reproduces and reinforces the categories. The distinction becomes normalized and naturalized. Even if specific research may or may not challenge such a norm and naturalization – e.g. if a group of women are seen as victims of pay discrimination – the self-evident and unproblematic character of dividing

human kind into 'men' and 'women' and assuming that these labels say something vital, means the reinforcement of gender divisions.

Having said all this, some of the advantages of dividing up people into men and women and comparing them should be mentioned. Our critique here mainly refers to the use of a variable approach to measuring phenomena that can also, and often better, be understood 'qualitatively'. But far from all phenomena are like that. Of course, there are important questions that can only be handled quantitatively or through strict comparisons of men and women (and other categorizations), e.g. broader societal changes on labour markets and in occupations, studies of gender (sex) and pay, discrimination in promotion. The approach encourages a kind of rigour and clear procedures for study. Compared to other approaches – to be addressed below – it is more disciplined and can counteract some of the tendencies to insert or project one's own preferred results onto the research project. Even though we believe that the robust category approach and the quantitative studies that go with it are too frequently used and are far more problematic than they seem, it would be foolish not to recognize that they have an important place in gender studies.

Feminist standpoint: gender as a fundamental organizing principle

This perspective stresses the importance of a much deeper exploration and theorizing of women's situation and experiences. Gender is seen as a fundamental organizing principle of patriarchal society; social relations (of all kinds) are heavily structured by hierarchical differences in the social position of men and women. This perspective proceeds from an assumption of the existence of specific experiences and/or interests of women that differ radically from those of the majority of men, at least with regard to how these experiences and/or interests are formed and expressed under contemporary (patriarchal) conditions. Many researchers are aware of the possibility, indeed likelihood, of variations in terms of women's espoused interests or manifest orientations across time and culture, but they de-emphasize this point in favour of shared experiences arguments. Below the variation of surface manifestations of groups of women, some common logic or basic themes are seen as uniting them. Widespread oppression and devaluation of women are regarded as central features of society and its institutions.

While the robust category perspective is broadly equating with the liberal feminist category discussed above, the fundamental organizing principle is generally more in line with the structuralist accounts of radical, socialist and Marxist feminism though it could also, to a certain degree be combined with a more liberal political perspective. However, again, it is worth reiterating that some feminists categorized as thus are not always comfortable with being lumped together within these labels of convenience. Within this perspective, theorists argue that women see the world differently to men and have certain values derived from their material, marginalized and alienated positions, that enable them to understand and relate to others in ways that

give them both an epistemological and political edge. Women are viewed as being more intuitive and in touch with the natural world, rather than agents of capitalism. Empirical research focuses on making the lives of women visible, viewing women as more than variables to be considered in comparison with men, presenting women mainly as victims, but also as active participants essential to the creation of their own lives.

It is assumed that there is something that characterizes women as such and that women, irrespective of differences associated with class, age, sexuality, race and ethnicity, have something in common. This unique and unitary femaleness is seen as originating from a variety of sources, for example positions in the relations of production (reproduction), a universal status as the second sex, where men are culturally defined as the first and as superior, a specific female sexuality, experiences associated with childbirth and childcare and/or a language that generates a certain feminine 'logic', common feminine values or a general way of relating to the surroundings (Brown, 1995). Specific qualities tend to be associated with women: sensitivity, nurturance, emotional expressiveness, social orientation and social skills. Most researchers are now sensitive to the notion of essentialism – the idea of defining women in terms of a universal, stable basic quality – and want to avoid biological explanations or lines of inquiry emphasizing the existence and social significance of biological differences *per se*. Nevertheless, biology is viewed as being of some significance, without having definite, determinating impact (Weeks, 1998). Cockburn (1991: 162) is probably representative in saying that we should not ignore biology and in arguing that 'the social practices that structure gender relations neither directly express nor are without reference to natural biological differences'. She emphasizes childcare as of particular significance for the orientation of women. Even though it is often downplayed by gender studies researchers, females sometimes appear to change their orientations and commitments drastically after childbirth, upgrading the role of children and seeing work and career as less significant, at least for a time (Fearful and Haynes, 2006). For the 'gender as a fundamental organizing principle' researcher it is important to explore the meanings, experiences and orientations of women (in particular, it seems).

Many authors are not so interested in subjectivities but focus on an overall system or structure rather than individuals or specific actions and conditions when accounting for gender relations, e.g. gender system (Hirdman, 1988; Rubin, 1975), patriarchy and capitalism. Here the reasoning comes close to the robust view of men and women, but the interest is not in the detailed comparisons of men and women, as it is in the overall system that produces effects on gender.

Those writers who might be categorized as taking a fundamental organizing approach in their research represent a broad range of positions and within the category a complex and detailed set of debates have taken place over experience and the 'knowing subject' (see Hartsock, 1987; Collins, 1997; Harding, 1987; Smith, 1997). This approach considers the nature of knowledge and knowledge creation in far greater depth than the robust category perspective. All significant aspects of society are, in principle, seen as gender-relevant. The institution of science is – like all other sectors – heavily gendered, influenced by masculine assumptions, priorities and central notions, giving the enterprise a narrow and constrained orientation. The

predominant principles and rules of science are seen as essential parts of patriarchal dominance, preventing the exploration of vital social issues, such as an in-depth understanding of gender, including the experiences of women. The ideal of positivism – the dispassionate, neutral, objective, analytic, number crunching researcher – is viewed as expressing a masculine bias (Jaggar, 1989). Often, feminist researchers outside the robust category camp are not very eager to stress science as a central base and criterion for their writings.[8] Instead of arriving at the ultimate 'truth' or insight, input into rethinking and political consciousness-raising may be crucial guiding values. The question of whether women have different understandings of reality, whether they are attracted by, or would benefit from, alternative ways of creating knowledge, have therefore been raised by researchers, leading to an interest in feminist methodology (Hughes, 2003; Olesen, 2000).

This approach maintains that almost all research is regarded as biased (or sexist) if it does not take the interests, experiences and insights of women seriously. In terms of methodology, those giving more room for personal experiences and critical insights are usually preferred. The idea is that research founded on women's experiences and interests will have something special to offer. Harding, for example, states that the personal experiences of women are a 'significant indicator of the "reality" against which hypotheses are tested' (1987: 7). It is believed that the marginal status of women enables them to develop certain kinds of insights, that they can provide science with more adequate and critical descriptions and interpretations than is possible when only the point of view of a more privileged group, i.e. men, is available. The female experience 'is a more complete and less distorting kind of social experience' (p. 184), because women have a double consciousness: they have knowledge of the dominant (male) culture as well as their own. This perspective claims to provide alternative insights compared to those established, well known and, therefore, taken for granted.

This perspective is usually related to – and justified by – claims about women's concrete and unambiguous experiences of discrimination and oppression. In Ferguson's (1984) work the *Feminist Case Against Bureaucracy* this feminist vision and transformatory project is set out. Ferguson draws on the Foucauldian interpretation of discourse to present a (radical feminist) critique of how women's voices represent a submerged discourse within the bureaucratic organization. Through deconstructing the bureaucratic discourses, and pointing to a different set of values based on what is said to be women's morality and individual identity and emphasizing caring and connectedness, an alternative mode of social interaction may be promoted, 'out of which a fresh form of understanding and action might emerge' (op. cit.: 155). Crucially, Ferguson is not arguing for feminine discourses to be incorporated within the dominant bureaucratic discourse (i.e. to become like men), rather it is to use the subjugated feminist discourse to render bureaucratic capitalism obsolete by challenging the truth claims upon which it is built. She dismisses the liberal approach – that an increase in the numbers of women in senior positions will change the nature of bureaucratic control, arguing that to succeed within the existing frameworks demands that women internalize the bureaucratic discourses. Women and men struggle within bureaucracy, Ferguson argues, but women more so because of their 'double disadvantage' of their subservient position within the

patriarchal institutions of home and family. Ferguson promotes a critical under-
standing of the repressive character of modern organizations based on 'the concrete
and common interests of women' (1984: 27). Similarly, Cockburn advocates a
women's movement in organizations in order to strengthen women's position and
self-confidence 'so that we can re-introduce our bodies, our sexuality, and our emo-
tions on our own terms' (1991: 159).

    Within organization studies, this perspective is primarily expressed in the form of
critical investigations of organizational practices (e.g. Cockburn, 1991; Ferguson,
1984) or in studies of feminist organizations – organizations oriented to the needs
and goals of women using principles and means viewed as feminist (e.g. Brown,
1992; Morgen, 1994). The latter include combining the private and the public, con-
sidering life as a whole also in the context of work, building upon feelings of com-
munity and using democratic means of coordination. Feminist alternative visions of
organizing are proposed that emphasize a non-hierarchical, non-goal orientated
organizational form, for example, cooperatives, or non-hierarchical sub-cultures
within bureaucratic organizations, such as women's studies courses within the
bureaucratic university. In a similar vein, Acker (1990) also calls for an end to the
masculinist organization, promoting instead one where:

> The rhythm and timing of work would be adapted to the rhythms of life out-
> side work. Caring work would be just as important and well rewarded as any
> other; having a baby or taking care of a sick mother would be as valued as
> making an automobile or designing computer software. Hierarchy would be
> abolished, and workers would run things themselves. Of course, women and
> men would share equally in different kinds of work. (Acker, 1990: 155)

Critique of the idea that gender is a fundamental organizing principle

The main problem of this perspective concerns the ontological basis for claiming that
gender is a fundamental organizing principle and the effect of this. In what sense is it
organizing, and how is it fundamental? Is it in the sense that there is a rigid distinc-
tion between men and women as social categories and a privileging of the former
and/or a tendency to divide the social world into masculine and feminine meanings
and viewing the former as superior? And is gender crucial for one's experiences?

    To what extent can, for example, women's experiences be said to be uniform?
Based on ethnicity, nation, class, age, profession, sexual orientation, religion, and so
on, women, and men for that matter, are very different. Different historical periods
and different cultures change the notion of man and woman and the connected
experiences. Even when it comes to individual backgrounds, lifestyles, lifecourses
and political and ethical values, variations are considerable (Chafetz, 1989; Sum,
2000). Within a specific category of women, for example US white middle-class
women in their thirties, some are heavily consumption-oriented, others less so. Some
appear to think that children are the most important thing in life, while others see
work as equally significant or as the prime source of satisfaction. Some women are
pro-, others are anti-abortion. Even though the voting behaviour of women differs

from men in many (Western, modern) countries, females tend to be somewhat more leftist – possibly contingent upon women more often being employed in the public sector and benefiting from the welfare state – but they, like men, vary, from radicals to conservatives.[9] The claim of speaking on behalf of all or even a larger group of women is therefore questionable, sometimes even criticized for being an ethnocentric expression of white middle-class women (e.g. Mohanty, 1991).[10] Critics thus claim that feminist researchers have repeated the criticized universalism and narrow perspective prevalent in what they see as masculine research, only exchanging traditional notions with female experiences that are often understood to be generalizable and superior.

As a consequence, there have been detailed critiques from Black feminists (e.g. hooks, 1984; Brah, 1996) and sexual difference theorists (Grosz, 1994; Braidotti, 1997; Felski, 1997) giving rise to greater focus on issues of 'intersectionality' between different social groups to which we may simultaneously belong or be assigned, which presents complex and fluid experiences of advantage and disadvantage amongst women at different times and therefore greater focus on women's 'relational positionality' (Friedman, 1995). Inter-sectionality is then not just a question of how class intersects with gender (like the dual systems theory) but more complex as many more aspects of difference interlink. This means looking at different social dynamics and trying to understand how they work together and perhaps create multiple disadvantages (Bradley, 2007). An example is that upper and middle class women and men might employ cleaners and maids (often immigrants or guest workers) to help with housework and child-care and they might be managers over lower class employees and thus their class power enables them to 'buy themselves out of many of the problems other women might face' (p. 191). They might however be faced with gender trouble in the street, be harassed by other men and perhaps be subject to domestic violence. Another divider is age; many people have experienced age discrimination, whether they are men or women. Feminists are of course aware of the fact that the category of woman is heterogeneous and that gender never appears in the abstract, but in the context of a variety of social and material situations. Considering all variations is impossible. It is often hard to avoid, in research and discussions on gender, as on race, ecology and class, 'a flattening of the world and a silencing of other voices … all human characteristics, relationships, investments and viewpoints unrelated to the binary are suppressed' (Gergen, 1994: 61).

One way of handling the diversity problem would be a differentiated approach departing from specific groups of women, for example, elderly skilled British female factory workers or young black female professionals in the up-market US consulting industry. The experiences and perspectives of these specific groups can then possibly be defined and studied, if one is open to their unique as well as possibly diverse experiences and accounts. Also within a social category, diversity may be prevalent. For example, in a study of Swedish female civil engineers and MBAs of the same age, 55 per cent answered that they had felt themselves discriminated against (treated negatively) at work on at least one occasion because of their sex, while 58 per cent answered yes to the question 'Are there situations in which you think you have been treated differentially because of your sex in a positive direction?' (Wahl, 1992: 298–9).

(Of course the questions are independent. One may sometimes be positively, sometimes negatively treated contingent upon any characteristics.) These figures indicate considerable variation in terms of the experiences associated with gender at work. This is illustrated in research carried out among Swedish female physicians, in which one head physician said,

> I have little in commn with 25 year old junior physicians with small children. (Sahlin-Andersson, 1997)

Of course, if a few other dimensions (age, industry, ethnicity, immigration status, family status, sexual orientation) are considered, some of the heterogeneity may be accounted for, with the risk of the attention to gender issues being weakened and the general relevance getting lost in favour of the details of the highly special situations. But if the interest is in a group of women (scientists in biotech companies, parents with mentally disturbed children, UK senior citizen voters, for example) there is an a priori tendency to read into and emphasize something universally female in the group being studied (e.g. being oppressed, communitarian, nurturing). In other words, even if a distinctive standpoint for women does not necessarily imply 'a general attribute of women as a class of persons', it is still assumed that there is 'a mode of experience that is distinctive to women' (Smith, 1989: 34) and that this indicates something close to universal. Even a more local version of studying female perspectives and experiences therefore has difficulty in avoiding some of the problems mentioned.

A problem with the idea of genuine experiences and in particular the idea that feminist research is an exploration of women's experience, concerns the vague, ambiguous, often contradictory and always constructed nature of experiences. Experiences are not just out there in the subjectivities of women, waiting for the feminist researcher, in a dialogue, to elicit and subsequently 'mirror' them in research publications. Experiences may be made sense of, constructed and told in many different ways. Depending on the assumptions and interest of the researcher and the dynamics between her/him and the interviewee, very different accounts (or stories) may be produced. As social identity theory shows, when an individual is defined/defining herself as part of a specific social category (e.g. women) the response is different from if the person is called upon in another identity (professional, manager, member of an organizational unit) (Haslam, 2004). Experiences cannot only be expressed in different ways but are also affected by the vocabularies and interpretative frames that guide how sense is made of the world and one's experiences. Experiences and accounts of discrimination are not independent of talk about gender inequality in society at large. The interaction and language used by the researcher in the interview does not so much tap the subject about her genuine experiences but is also productive in constructing these. The assumptions, style and vocabulary of the researcher greatly influence what comes out of the interview.

There is a tendency for some feminist research to give a strong privilege uncritically to women's experiences, seen as carriers of superior insights. Elshtain's critique of 'systematic know-it-allism' is relevant here. It is characterized by an 'unquestioned inner authenticity based upon claims to the ontological superiority of female

being-in-itself' (1981: 129). A similarly focused critique concerns the tendency to put a female way of knowing against a male, dominant version.

> There is no male science, or female science. True, the experience of women differs from that of men. I would rather state this differently: some women's experiences (in plural) differ from some of men's. Does this mean that their scientific methods have to differ? (Coser, 1989: 201)

A strong tendency to look for one perspective capable of explaining all oppression is related to the whole idea of assuming something universal about the situation of women and men as the point of departure for a general critique of dominating social relations. This is usually thought to be work/economy (capitalism), patriarchy, sexuality, childcare or language. The cause of the oppression is described as a phenomenon that has always existed and is relatively independent of limited historical contexts (e.g. patriarchy). The concept of patriarchy, embraced by many, appears to be particularly problematic in this respect, tending to function as a totalizing concept reducing historical and cultural variation to the status of different versions of the essence of patriarchy.[11] Even though since the beginning of the 1990s it has been more common to talk about patriarchies, i.e. in the plural (e.g. Hearn, 1993), it is clear that the essence of male domination over, and the victimization of' women is given a universal status and that this aspect is privileged over other ways of understanding society. Assumptions that 'men have political interests with other men' (Hearn, 1993: 150), and that the contemporary society is a patriarchy, 'a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women' (Walby, 1990: 20), first, underestimate the role of subjectivities – interests and orientations anchored in their ways of being rather than in abstract, elitist sociological categorizations; second, neglect enormous social variations within the categories of men and women; third, underestimate what the large majority of men and women have in common (e.g. interest in clean air, peace, good housing, safe transport, healthy food, low criminality, good schools, low unemployment, low inflation, preferences for autonomy and variation at work, close relationship with children, etc.); and finally, simplify the notion of 'interests'. This is, of course, not to deny that some men share some political interests or that (some) women are dominated by men.

It is easy to agree that being a male is a significant symbolic resource in many areas of life in general, and especially in work organizations, and that women and women's work are often devalued, but there are also situations and areas where men do not enjoy the privileged position that they do where formal power, status and income are concerned. Studying oppression, hierarchy and discrimination are certainly core themes for gender studies, but not the only relevant themes to study. We don't do gender only in hierarchical and discriminatory ways. Defining women primarily as victims of patriarchy freezes the intellectual project too categorically.

The most significant problem is that the broad-brushed view on patriarchy, men and women, means that variation, complexity and contradiction are lost from view. Aspects of organizations falling outside what is addressed by the dominance–resistance–victim vocabulary tend not to be seriously considered. The question of variation is exactly what the third perspective of feminism revolves around.

Gender as floating signifiers: poststructuralist feminism

A third position views gender as much more fluid, processual, uncertain and shifting. This view is closely associated with poststructuralism (and postmodernism, but we favour the former concept). Poststructuralist feminism, sometimes shortened to post-feminism, questions the gender categories that were taken for granted by the two perspectives previously described.[12] As discussed above, notions like men and women, the male and the female, are no longer viewed as fundamental, valid points of departure but considered to be unstable, ambiguous and attributing a false unity (Flax, 1987; Nicholson, 1990; Weedon, 1987, 1999). One might rightly ask what is the common significance of 'woman' when applied to a 70-year-old, retired Brazilian schoolteacher as well as a 14-year-old girl from the New Delhi slum, a Norwegian female minister, a black single mother of several children in South Africa, a young Scottish female accountant and a lesbian upper-class middle-aged artist in Victorian England? There are hardly any interesting common social and cultural characteristics or meanings for these 'women', a poststructuralist would argue.

Even the biological sex of these women has different and maybe even contradictory meanings in different situations: in the gynecological clinic, in different employment situations, in political elections, in consumption settings, etc. Because of these considerations it is argued that unitary notions such as 'woman', 'feminine gender identity' and 'mothering' (like male and men) are problematic as they imply a false unity and suppress divergence and variety (Fraser and Nicholson, 1988). The general understanding that language is not simply a mirror of reality but has validity only within, and in relation to, a specific local situation–context, supports this standpoint. The meaning of 'woman' is not universal, but varies with the language contexts – discourses – in which it is used. Also other favoured concepts such as masculinity, dominance, hierarchy or discrimination may indicate a misleading unity – if the use is not governed by an appreciation of the local context giving these words some meaning in particular instances. Deetz (1992a), for example, stresses that the words 'man' and 'woman' do not simply represent a given reality 'out there', but communicate a certain way of making people aware of what is the case 'out there'. No use of these notions is ever neutral. The distinction reveals that the identity of the subject is constructed as woman or man, and that people are defined as objects with certain rights and characteristics. When the chain of definitions (signifiers) has become a net the woman can be viewed as mother in a family relation, as wife in a marriage relation, as a Scottish married accountant, etc. In every case, the way possibilities and limits have been defined by institutional dispositions provide the individuals with advantages as well as disadvantages. The distinction, however, remains arbitrary. It can be neglected or become irrelevant or questionable from one moment to the other, and the relational system of concepts can therefore be generated differently. The mother in a wife context gets a different meaning from the Scottish accountant one. And when eating haggis or flirting with a colleague at work, the wife, mother, Scottish or accountant aspects of the person – and how these are gendered – may be lost out of sight.

This understanding of language not only has consequences for addressing what is naively seen as specific and robust categories, but also has drastic consequences for our attempts to develop knowledge in the traditional sense of the term. Methodologically, all observations and interview accounts are contingent upon the vocabulary and distinctions applied and there are always alternative ways of representing phenomena. This means that social reality, as well as 'inner life', for example, attitudes and feelings, becomes problematic and difficult to account for in any self-evident or objective way. All descriptions tend to be seen as arbitrary and stand in an ambiguous relation to any phenomenon 'out there'. Therefore, the ability to say something definite, for example about feelings or values is now not accepted, at least not without reservation.

Female experiences – like all experiences – are therefore not seen as robust, language-independent concepts and points of departure. Apart from some aspects of anatomy the notions of men and women (masculinefeminine behaviour, work, etc.) are generated and defined in various ways in different situations. It is argued that 'the most important single progress within feminist theory is the fact that gender relations have been questioned. Gender can no longer be viewed as a simple and natural matter of fact' (Flax, 1987: 627).

Poststructuralism is an intellectual movement – or rather, several rather heterogeneous streams – that has been extremely influential within social studies since the late 1980s. The understanding of language, individuals, how science works (or doesn't work) expressed in poststructuralism and related writings (particularly by Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard) has had a significant influence on parts of gender research. Many maintain that there is a considerable overlap between a poststructuralist perspective and a feminist position (Flax, 1987; Nicholson, 1990). Like the poststructuralists and many others prior to them, feminists have also revealed the political power of science and argued against the illusion of objectivity and neutrality.

The perspective introduces a general scepticism as to universal understandings whereas differences and variations become central notions. Any attempt at a true or ultimate understanding is rejected, as are most uses of statistics, based on the idea that representing reality in numbers indicating 'the truth' means that diversity is suppressed. In opposition to the other perspectives, poststructuralism questions the idea of finding a universal ground for reason, science, progress or even the subject. The feminist search for 'truth' is seen as just one more attempt to conquer reality, preventing researchers from addressing ambiguities, diversity and fragmentation and understanding how reality is rhetorically constructed rather than discovered by social researchers. Rather than developing valid knowledge based on a firm methodological standpoint or a strong political commitment, sensitive listening and providing space for alternative voices is celebrated in poststructuralism.

As opposed to other gender researchers poststructural feminists stress the arbitrariness and vulnerability of social constructions. Gender as a label and a guideline for identity and experiences is viewed as imposing a view on the world. Gender identity and gender-related ideas about social and individual phenomena must therefore be understood as dynamic, indeterminate phenomena. Static and specific definitions and correlations are of no use and must be replaced by such questions as: what is, in the local situation, defined as masculine and feminine? what does

such labelling obscure? What is the significance of these definitions when it comes to creating and recreating subjectivity, that is, the feelings, cognitions and self-image of a person? In other words, what are the effects of language use? All answers must be understood as uncertain and tentative, not only historically limited, but also locally oriented. Gender and gender relations differ at different times and places. To repeat, 'men' and 'women' – like other signifiers – have only a precarious, temporal meaning tied to the context in which these words (signifiers) are used, according to poststructuralists.

The question: 'How do we put together the myriad standpoints of women?' (Acker, 1989: 78) is important. Of course this could be read as calling for suggestions how this should be accomplished, the worthwhile task then being to put it all together. From a poststructuralist perspective this question should be given a critical meaning, not intended to search for a positive answer, but to encourage critical reflection on how this is actually done, that is, how order is created and fragmentation suppressed. The poststructuralist avoids or minimizes putting standpoints together, actually being highly sceptical about the very idea of there being specific (stable) standpoints. Instead of hiding the diversity; the myriad should be taken seriously and demonstrated in research texts.

For poststructuralists the gender perspective cannot be specifically related to men and women in organizations. Instead, discourses about men and women – as expressed and constituted in the use of language – become central. A discourse may be defined as a set of statements, beliefs and vocabularies that is historically and socially specific and that tends to produce truth effects – certain beliefs are acted upon as true and therefore become partially true in terms of consequences. Different discourses produce different effects. There are no independent objective truths existing 'before', or independent of' a discourse.

Viewed as an important phenomenon in society that saturates all cultural relations, fragmented gender relations and discourses may be traced in the basic structures of social institutions and our general concepts of goals, rationality, values, and so on. Gender can therefore be useful as a perspective on, or a metaphor for, understanding organizations, for example. The gender dimension could be stressed on a more abstract level than the actually existing relations between men and women; for example, one is not counting bodies or taking accounts of experiences as 'truths' or even valid viewpoints. Calás and Smircich (1992a: 227) suggest a radical reinterpretation of organizational thinking in terms of gender: 'We will examine how the idea of "gender" can become a strategy to question what is commonly presented as organization theory. We would also like to start discussing how this leads us to a different way of writing "organization".'

This kind of feminism disregards the level of the individual subjects and replaces the interest in forming essential ideas about gender by, showing how discourse constitutes masculinity, or rather masculinities in organizations. Talking about 'corporate strategies' could for example be seen as a way of expressing/enforcing a masculine identity by using terminology from the military (Knights and Morgan, 1991). This kind of research strategy avoids the problem of defining men and women based on biological criteria, and also bypasses the assumption that there are experiences tightly bound up with this biological equipment. To the extent that

men and women are of interest to study, it is the discourses in which they are con-
stituted that are relevant to explore.[13]

The purpose of research is thus not to develop 'truths', but to show the contradic-
tions and problematic claims of efforts to establish truths, to open up and destabilize
cultural meanings and beliefs that appear too rigorous and unproblematic. Discourses
defining 'women' and thus tying and subordinating these subjects to this signifier –
locking subjects into the fixed identity of being a 'woman' – are critically examined.

Within the general commitments of poststructuralism – giving privilege to language,
diversity, fragmentation and the local – one may distinguish between a *strong* and a
weak version. The former pays exclusive attention to a discursive level, where the social
reality is cut off and sceptical analysis of rhetorical claims is made in texts. All accounts –
interview statements, conversations in everyday life, academic texts – may be seen as
texts to be analysed in terms of structure, how claims are supported by rhetorical moves
and undermined by contradictions, repressed meanings and alternative representations.
Gender is a text. This branch, here broadly defined, is called deconstruction and aims
at showing the false robustness of claims (e.g. Calás and Smircich, 1991; Martin, 1990,
2000). It might be viewed as a rather purist approach, antithetical to empirical work
and empirical claims, at least as this is normally understood.

The weaker (or moderate) version sees language as precarious and loosely cou-
pled to social reality but maintains an idea of some relation, although an uncertain
one, between words and a social reality beyond language. Texts may throw a cer-
tain light on social conditions. Something 'out there', apart from language use,
'exists'. Representation in texts is possible. Ideals such as fragmentation, diversity
and an emphasis on the local means that one holds back strict theorizing and the
prospect of generally valid points, including universal concepts (class, race, men,
manager, women). Empirically oriented work takes the accounts of interviewees
seriously, but these are seen as multifaceted and context-dependent, not arising from
a uniform subject, mirroring genuine experiences and viewpoints. Accounts have a
narrative quality, following their own logic of story telling. Discourses form the sub-
jects' experiences and accounts, which are open for a variety of representations
(descriptions) and interpretations. For the purpose of the present book, it is the
weaker or milder version of poststructuralist feminism that is of relevance
(cf. Fraser and Nicholson, 1988). Such 'mild' poststructuralism then becomes close
to a process-and multiple meaning oriented version of interpretation (Alvesson,
2002b).

Critique of poststructuralist feminism

The poststructural critique has turned upside down a number of dominating ideas
within gender research, destabilizing meanings fundamental to feminism's political
and theoretical project. It has highlighted the role of language in shaping our under-
standings of reality and illustrated therefore the instability of meanings and the power
relations involved in their construction. It is especially popular among those who take
an interest in theoretical and philosophical questions rather than in empirical or
political issues. There has been considerable resistance towards poststructuralism

within some feminist circles, where the central tenets of poststructuralism are viewed as a fundamental challenge to identity politics (politics based on identification with a specific, disadvantaged social category) and praxis that lie at the core of feminism. This critique draws attention to a number of tensions when feminism meets poststructuralism, in relation to the subject 'women', privileging concerns over language and text over material situation and experience and feminist praxis and change.

In consideration over the loss of the subject, one line of critique maintains that the ideal of diversity and variation is strongly exaggerated. Most researchers now probably accept that it is not reasonable to consider our universalized and abstract notions of gender, reproduction, sexuality, marriage, man, woman, etc., to be adequate when applied to a wide range of different cultures, groups in society, historical periods, etc. But this does not exclude some generalizations, which could be relevant or even necessary in order to say anything of any interest.

> In our determination to honor diversity among women, we told one another to restrict our ambitions, limit our sights, beat a retreat from certain topics, refrain from using a rather long list of categories or concepts, and eschew generalization. I can think of no better prescription for the stunting of a field of intellectual inquiry. (Martin, 1994: 631)

Bordo (1990) also finds the emphasis on diversity problematic as it easily leads to a mechanical and coercive requirement that all enlightened feminist projects should take race, class and gender seriously. One cannot include many axes and still preserve analytical focus and argument, she argues. In addition, the ideal of diversity would mean that research does not stop with adding class and race to gender. The list of what diversity may draw attention to is endless: sexual orientation, ethnicity, age, family conditions, and occupation ... these categories may also, and quite contrary to poststructuralist ideals, be seen as unitary, macro, a priori. Discourses involving these categories may, from a poststructuralist point of view, call for deconstruction – showing the fragile and contradictory nature of the way they are used – rather than be understood as positive and authoritative guidelines for what should be explored.

Another criticism is that the importance of language is overestimated at the expense of empirical studies (as conventionally defined). Gender is being reduced and considered as 'nothing but' a discourse on men and women; all that can be done, therefore, is to destabilize ideas and terms. It is difficult to maintain that anything 'is' in any 'positive' sense, that something is actually the case. No statements claimed to convey truth are accepted as such, but are treated as claims always less robust than they appear to be. This way everything that is being said is viewed as contingent upon a very specific point of view and use of a specific language. At least the stronger forms of poststructuralism could be seen as expressing a kind of language reductionism, overprivileging the linguistic aspect.

Researchers more inclined towards empirical research have found poststructuralism unhelpful, not to say destructive (Stanley and Wise, 2000). Much energy has been devoted to both exploring and defending the nuances of different critical positions and increasingly such theorizing has become enshrined in 'texts', endlessly 'poured over like chicken entrails' (Stanley and Wise, 1993: 24). Concern

with the discursive construction of reality and identity has seemingly turned the attention away from central concerns about material oppression and has led to an apparent practical, political and ethical paralysis (McNay, 1992). A key focus on these concerns is the move from feminist activism to academic debates. Stanley and Wise (2000) lament the increased self-interested 'language games', where the 'data' is increasingly the writing of other feminist theorists rather than social phenomena. The line between productive text critique and navel-gazing can, however, be thin. Too thin, according to critics.

The demand for change in material and social relations upon which feminism has been grounded clashes with poststructuralist feminism's emphasis on the disassociation of struggle from a prescribed end goal. The debate here centres on whether a transformatory politics can still sustain a unified utopian vision, given the recognition of multiple voices within feminism. Much of the critique of poststructuralism concerns its (lack of clear or focused) political implications. Identifying suffering and problems 'out there', for example, in organizational life, and suggesting lines of thinking improving the life conditions of people is discouraged by poststructuralist thinking. This may be subversive in problematizing and deconstructing dominant discourses, thus opening the way for alternative ways of relating to the world. But poststructuralism may equally well be used against observations and accounts of discrimination, suffering and injustice. Any form of critique with a claim to express the truth or a better judgment may be disarmed.

In practice, most feminist poststructuralism in social science avoids the extreme poststructuralist position that totally ignores humans as beings of flesh and blood, rejects any claims about the objective existence of a system or a pattern and regards all accounts of oppression and injustices as mere linguistic expressions (truth claims to be targeted for deconstruction). Instead, most researchers have some interest in political issues and in promoting change. Fraser and Nicholson (1988) are inspired by poststructuralism and criticize mainstream feminist research, but find that studies making empirical claims are legitimate and reasonable if they are aware of and acknowledge their historical and contextual limits; that is, if they avoid the problem of overgeneralizations and fixed categories. They thus adhere to a 'soft' or 'weak' version of poststructuralism. Its relevance for social research is thus maintained but the approach easily becomes a bit muddled. Sometimes authors move between a strong and a weak version in an inconsistent way and may be accused of ontological gerrymandering. This mixture of the philosophical position and a more robust feminist perspective addressing reality 'out there' – although a reality that is constructed by the researcher and open to a variety of representations and viewpoints – is a common attitude among feminists who take an interest in poststructuralism (e.g. Weedon, 1987). The risk of becoming deeply mired in philosophical contradictions, inconsistencies and conundrums, however, is ever present within this position.

A critical–interpretive perspective

The three perspectives, discussed in this chapter and outlined in Table 2.1, highlight different and important dimensions of gender research. The most central differences

Table 2.1   Comparing the perspectives

Politics	Conception of knowledge ideal		
	Robust truth, validation of theories/ hypotheses	Positioned truth, valid points, insightful arguments	Avoiding `truths', resistance through opening up/deconstructing
Political engagement		Gender as a fundamental organizing principle	
Doubting, sceptically committed		The position of this book	Feminist poststructuralism
Cool, constrained Commitment	Women/men as robust categories		

concern their focus on the importance of political involvement and their expecta-
tions as to the possibility of obtaining, by means of good research, dependable and
valuable knowledge of reality 'out there'. The broad approach taken by the authors
of this book is to subscribe to a middle position (with a slight 'down-right' tendency)
in this table; a position that could be described as critical–interpretive. This critical–
interpretive perspective should be seen as a loose, basic orientation rather than a dis-
tinct, clearly elaborated theoretical position. Used as a general framework this
orientation is helpful in trying, as in the case of this book, to describe and comment
on the field of gender research rather than promoting distinct viewpoints. The critical–
interpretive perspective could also be the starting point of empirical research, but in
this case it would have to be combined with more specific theories, e.g. on identity,
culture, leadership, sexuality, etc.

The characteristics of the critical–interpretive perspective are influenced by insights
produced by poststructuralist feminism as well as other modern philosophies of sci-
ence, such as hermeneutics and variations of critical social studies (Alvesson and
Sköldberg, 2000; Deetz, 1992a; Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). A certain, not to say con-
siderable, amount of scepticism is part of this influence. As opposed to poststruc-
turalism, we tend to find that some degree of scientific rationality is possible.
Empirical studies may be taken seriously, which does not exclude a concern for dif-
ferences, variations and considering 'undecidabilities'. Moreover, we feel that it is
important to say something of relevance to the world outside a specific, narrowly
defined local context or being heavily focused on discourse (texts). Language is a sig-
nificant and problematic theme for reflection in research, but it also offers the possi-
bility of illuminating important phenomena and seeing them in constructive
perspectives. Carefully used, language opens up more than it closes in terms of con-
structive understanding, although the element of closure (the use of a specific vocab-
ulary discourages alternative understandings) cannot be neglected. Theory – in the

sense of a framework and vocabulary offering a line of interpretation and under-standing sufficiently abstract to work across empirical situations – is desirable and necessary. Even though we as researchers (and practitioners trying to understand what is happening and doing something about it) are constructing the constructions of people, we can do this in a careful and insightful way, saying something valid about the social world. The risk of absolutism, however, should be handled first, by incor-porating elements that allow for reflections on language, perspective dependency and one's own rhetoric, and second, by alternating between alternative perspectives and interpretations, letting these confront each other (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000). These two methodological principles overlap and facilitate each other. Rorty's (1989) ideas on irony are relevant in this regard. The writer should be aware of the fact that alternative interpretations are always possible and should therefore maintain a cer-tain distance from his/her own writings – so that neither the writer nor the reader are led into believing that they are witnessing the final and ultimate 'truth' or the supe-rior interpretation.

The characteristics of our favoured approach are set out as follows. An essential element of this approach is a disciplined social and political involvement, which implies emancipatory interests – although we are modest about its potential and well aware of the dangers of elitism and negativism of critical research (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996: Chapter 7; Nord, 2002). The critical–interpretive perspective, how-ever, tries to avoid the desire to stimulate social change being one-sidedly privileged, and does not take for granted that research can do much more than suggest ques-tions to be reflected on and discussed (without any clear-cut political objectives), offering arguments, illustrations and raising question marks (not evidence) for cer-tain understandings. As opposed to many traditional feminist ideas of describing the 'true' nature of the patriarchal society in broader ways, this position is more doubt-ing as to what an adequate description of the multifaceted and varied character of actual society would be. It is also more humble as to its own contributions. There are very few safe truths on the subject matter and these tend to concern relatively simple issues.

A critical–interpretive approach tries to stimulate critical reflection but is wary of invoking too dogmatic images in its use of what might be regarded as feminist polit-ical propaganda. Descriptions of women as victims and (many) men as brutal oppressors can, at times, be fair and important, but can also express and reinforce crude stereotypes – as witnessed in some feminist literature and studies of masculin-ities. Other, less negative, aspects of gender relations might also be considered wor-thy of comment.

The critical–interpretive approach identifies with unfairly treated groups and aims to bring forward their voices and interests. Possible alternative meanings are brought into relief, by studying different ideologies, ideas and discourses, and help-ing to clarify social phenomena and ideas in new ways, in order to provide a broader foundation for understanding and dealing with gender relations. Simplified and one-sided descriptions of asymmetrical structures of power and interests such as a universal notion of patriarchy are considered problematic. For example, expressions such as 'women's interests are subordinated to the interests of men' (Weedon, 1987: 2) are too general and thereby potentially misleading. Detailed

studies of, for instance, workplaces show large variations as to how gender rela-
tions are organized. This of course does not negate that Weedon's proposition
could, in many specific cases, be relevant and that gender studies should be criti-
cal to forms of male domination.

It is thus important to maintain that gender relations vary considerably not only
between different societies, cultures and other macro-categories (class, ethnic
groups, age, profession, country), but also within and across these categories. Even
within a group of white Scandinavian female managers in the same businesses there
are considerable variations in terms of experiences, identities and motives (Billing,
2006). Research should be sensitive to these variations, and within organization
research it could be relevant to consider how different branches, workplaces and
occupations, or even different situations and processes within the same workplace,
constitute and express gender relations. An interpretive sensitivity does not, how-
ever, imply stressing differences and variations as far as possible, as in the case of
poststructuralism. Instead of avoiding universal categories altogether, they are used
in a locally defined situation but with the ambition of finding patterns as well as
variation in the local case. One should be very careful when generalizing or using
universal concepts such as men, women, patriarchy, and use them carefully when
motivated. Not only local grounding but also middle-range conceptualizations –
universalizing across micro-situations but not across history, class and society –
should be seen as a valuable ideal.

The interpretive perspective aims to achieve a 'deeper' understanding of limited
empirical phenomena. Empirical studies are considered important even though it is
admitted that they cannot provide us with any ultimate truths; results are always con-
testable and open for reinterpretation. Researchers – like other people – have a ten-
dency to find what they expect. At the most, empirical studies can provide us with a
basic understanding and input for further, more differentiated considerations and the-
ories. Empirical material can also be used as a more or less strong argument for a case
of how one should represent and understand a specific piece of social reality.

Another central aspect of the research approach is the element of criticism of
ideas and meanings expressed within social groups and situations being studied.
Instead of embracing a non-evaluative attitude towards the meanings produced by
subjects, as most interpretive research tends to do, this approach allows for critical
viewpoints that can stimulate reflections on ideas, values, experiences and prac-
tices. Critical investigations are thus not only directed towards abstract categories
such as patriarchy, capitalism or class society, but also embrace the subjectivities
and the 'politically incorrect' feelings and orientations of people. Challenging
and stimulating rethinking of established ideas, theories and social practices is
important.

A final point concerns language. Not only the choice of vocabularies, but also how
one views language, is crucial in all research. As emphasized by poststructuralists,
language is not a simple medium for transporting meanings; it is a system of differ-
ences where some meanings and relations between meanings are hidden. A word like
masculinity (or leadership or work) has for example, no simple and absolute mean-
ing. There is no one-way relation between the notion and some cultural or social real-
ity 'out there'. This does not mean that the term is unable to describe a social

phenomenon or stimulate thoughts about social reality, extrinsic to language, but it is important to recall the hidden and suppressed meanings that give the notion an arbitrary and relative meaning. Masculinity presupposes femininity, which again pre-supposes masculinity. The meaning is unstable and dependent on context and per-spective. Poststructuralists sometimes use the inability of language to mirror reality as an excuse for focusing on language alone, on deconstructing texts and in this way avoiding the question of extra-textual (social and material) reality as such. Conventional researchers tend to avoid the complications of philosophical questions on language by ignoring them and treating language as a tool for communicating 'facts', genuine experiences and abstract, general theories.

A critical–interpretive approach struggles to find its way between these two posi-tions. Language is ambiguous, all descriptions and ways of talking about subjects and things are in a certain way arbitrary and liable to redefinitions. Language does not mirror anything outside, instead it re-presents. But language has the ability to accom-plish shared understanding – if only in a precarious form. Researchers should there-fore consider their use of language very carefully. Alternating between different vocabularies – using theoretical as well as empirical/low-abstract terms – could be a useful way of not subordinating the researcher and the reader to a particular vocab-ulary (and way of thinking). The ideal is to present theories and reflections in a way that generates open-mindedness. This is difficult to do and it must be seen as an effort and ideal rather than something that is (fully) accomplished. Dealing specifically and exclusively with language is, on the other hand, not essential to a critical–interpretive point of view. Language is important as a theme for reflection and as the object of study but less significant than the ambition of making empirical studies and generat-ing interesting interpretations and theories. Language will of course be part of this, but it is not necessarily treated as the most important. It is definitely not seen as the sole and exclusive concern.

An important theme running through all kinds of research is that of defining its lim-its and the legitimate field of research. What kind of questions can it even attempt to answer? In this regard we think that the field of gender research should be carefully expanded beyond the limits of the variable approach. This expansion should be com-bined with critical considerations as to how and when notions of gender are broad-ened too far, so that they are made to be all or nothing. Assuming that gender is everywhere, and/or that it is useful to question everything in terms of gender, involves a risk of absolutism. Gender is often an interesting and productive approach to vari-ous phenomena, but sometimes other approaches may provide a better understanding. Intellectual imperialism and its partner reductionism represent a serious threat in all research, and gender studies are no exception. Some research and thinking simply neglect how gender always exists in a matrix of other ways of dividing people and soci-ety and that some conditions affect men and women more or less equally. Gender research should be, as with all research accompanied by self-criticism, for example, admitting that the gender vocabulary is no more absolute or self-evidently reliable or valuable than other vocabularies, which sometimes have more to offer. The researcher may, therefore, broaden and enrich the interpretive capacities through developing an interest in other fields of research, as well as becoming acquainted with their approaches (Chapter 10).

Other ways of slicing the pie?

From a theoretical point of view the four approaches or perspectives (robust category organizing principle, floating signifier and critical-interpretive) outlined above seem easy enough to distinguish, but researchers often make use of a mixture of two or maybe even all of them, or work with other ideas and points of departure. Especially within qualitative empirical research, approaches often appear in hybrid forms.

At a superficial level, elements from all the perspectives could be considered within empirical studies of specific research areas. For instance, when analysing labour market and organizational conditions the following questions could be raised. How are the sexes divided according to work tasks and social positions, that is, what does the horizontal and the vertical work division look like? How are privileges distributed? How do recruitment, selection and promotion take place seen from a gender perspective? Asking these questions mean making anatomy (bodily differences) the decisive distinction and accepting that women and men are robust categories. This, however, does not exclude a subsequent broader approach, and the results could therefore be followed up by another set of questions. Are some experiences gender-specific? What are the predominant relations of power and dominance for men and women? Do actual power relations, priorities and ideologies favour one gender rather than the other (normally men or a certain group of men)? Or is power unstable and multidimensional, including also female forms of power and male subordinacy, or are forms of power to a large extent non-gendered? How is gender being constructed by organizational structures and processes, that is, how are men and women created within the organization (how is their gender identity being influenced) by means of language, patterns of interaction and social practices? How can the organization – objectives, practices and values be described from a gender perspective? Can ideas, values, actions and practices be interpreted in terms of masculinities/femininities, for instance, carrying male and female values and meanings respectively? If so, what kinds of masculinities and femininities dominate and, if there is not hegemony, how do they interact? Why do we (as researchers and other kinds of developers of knowledge) define something as masculine or feminine, and what do we gain or lose from using these concepts? Is the language used expressive of gender bias? How do discourses on gender interact with different forms of subjectivity, and what is made possible or impossible by the dominant discourses and attempts to develop resistance against them? To what extent does it make sense to talk about dominant patterns? Perhaps fragmentation, inconsistencies and ambiguity should be emphasized instead?

This whole cluster of questions goes far beyond what could be asked within a specific study, but some of them could be combined, thus reflecting aspects of all perspectives. If approaches are to be reasonably consistent, however, they cannot be combined in an arbitrary way. There are profound differences between perspectives, which mean that the specific approach of an individual researcher is committed to one or a combination of two of these and not to the other(s). It is, of course, not possible to combine totally different worldviews or political commitments. In general, eclecticism, the free borrowing from different sources, easily leads to shallow and confusing projects. One cannot count and compare bodies of men and women

(in relation to other variables), nor focus on the experiences of women as carriers of particular insights and simultaneously view 'women' as a signifier without trying to give a stable and unitary meaning to 'women'. Normally, one main position forms the starting point and minor inspirations from other perspectives can then be included subsequently. If all the suggested questions are included in the same study, the variable idea of counting and comparing bodies of men and women can provide a general foundation, while the following more complicated questions aim at more central research perspectives. Comparisons of men and women (defined in terms of bodies) could give some ideas for the examination of female experiences and disadvantages as well as for the study of discourses on 'men' and 'women'. It is very rarely possible to include all questions in just one study, even an ambitious and longer one, giving priority to some at the expense of others is inevitable.

Summary and implications

We have in this book reviewed four overall positions within the field of gender studies. The first three, often used in reviews of the area, we label gender as robust category, as organizing principle, as floating signifiers. These correspond to what often is labelled gender as variable (where men and women are compared), as feminist standpoint (where experiences and crucial divisions in society closely following gender lines are highlighted) and poststructuralism (where clear gender categories are deconstructed). Our fourth perspective, which we label critical–interpretive, is partly a kind of synthesis of the other three.

We will in this book mainly proceed from the critical–interpretive position, emphasizing the level of meanings, beliefs and constructions rather than behaviours, structures, facts and 'truths'. We take the often precarious and shifting character of these meanings and constructions seriously. This means an interest in the more nuanced aspects of cultures, identities and interactions at work and in organizations. We will, however, not stick strictly to this overall perspective – which in itself is quite broad and open for various uses. We will also review and discuss research results and ideas from the other three perspectives and sometimes critically scrutinize and sometimes more positively build upon them.

The various chapters that follow are somewhat different in relationship to these perspectives, depending on the theme and the character of available studies in the sub-areas. The next chapter we devote to division of labour and here some ideas from gender as robust category and organizing principle are more salient. Also the two chapters on women and leadership (Chapters 7 and 8) – an evergreen in gender and organization studies – take the mass of studies discussing this from primarily a robust category viewpoint seriously. But here also critical-interpretive reasoning surfaces, and somewhat critically discusses the issues at hand. This line of reasoning dominates most chapters, although in the final chapter we draw a bit more heavily and provokingly on poststructuralist ideas when discussing how we can avoid reproducing established and conservative tendencies to take the categories of men and women for granted when addressing gender. There is thus some degree of eclecticism in this book, but this is hopefully seen by the reader less as a source of confusion or

worry than as a well motivated choice in order to be able – in a productive way – to address a diverse body of knowledge on gender and organization and the wealth of topics within the field.

Notes

1 Like West and Zimmerman, Butler sees gender not as an expression of what one is, rather as something that one does.
2 Structuralist approaches cover a range of different, often conflicting positions. For a detailed outline of their positions and how they relate to the study of organizations, see Calás and Smircich, 1996 and Gherardi, 2003.
3 Another approach is to combine political, theoretical and epistemological dimensions as grounds for dividing up the field. Calás and Smircich (1996) do so and include seven versions of feminism in their review article: liberal feminist theory, radical-cultural feminism, psychoanalytic feminism, Marxist feminism, socialist feminism, poststructuralist feminism and third world/post-colonial feminism.
4 There are major controversies with regard to the precise meaning of patriarchy. Weber used it to describe a special kind of organization of the household in which the father dominated (and controlled) the other members in an extended family network. Millet (1970) was one of the first to use the concept, patriarchy, as a universal concept, independent of the form of production. All societies should then be seen as social systems of male dominance. Despite the controversies whether it is a relevant concept (in the Western world) today, most would agree that it refers to a society where there are hierarchical relations between men and a solidarity between men which maintains male domination. Some call such a system for a sex/gender system (Hirdmann, 1988; Rubin, 1975).
5 Queer theory is partially inspired by Foucault. It is critical towards binaries, like homo-and heterosexual, and prefers instead to see our (sexual) identity as more unstable (changing).
6 Apart from making women visible as a specific category within different empirical studies, it is also a question of pointing out important but disregarded contributions by women to, for example, politics, art, science and administration (see Keller, 1974; Lerner, 1986; Stivers, l993). Or it can be a question of drawing attention to activities and themes that are seen as mostly related to or problematic for women, for example, household work, pay gaps, childrearing and sexual harassment. Arguably, certain research areas have been disregarded contingent upon the traditionally low representation of women in research.
7 Deetz (1996) talks about this as an elitist/a priori approach, which means that the researcher decides in advance and without listening to the voice of the field, about central categories, theoretical concepts and/or hypotheses.
8 This position they share with a number of different critical schools that view the dominating notions of science and method as conservative, technocratic and limited and try to justify their research approaches in alternative ways (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000).
9 In Turkey (2007) more women than men voted for the fundamentalist right wing party.

10   One may even go further and say that the level of representativity is often restricted to the quite limited group of white middle-class, leftist, feminist public sector professionals.

11   There is no absolute relationship between this position and the use of the concept of patriarchy. Many feminists do not talk about patriarchy and the concept may be used also by researchers not adhering to this perspective. There is, however, a strong connection between an inclination to capture contemporary society as a patriarchy and the adoption of the idea that gender is a fundamental organizing principle.

12   Poststructuralism (sometimes labelled postmodernism – we treat the concepts as overlapping) is a theoretically and philosophically sophisticated stream. Our intention is not to review the core ideas in a way that does the complexities full justice, but only to summarize some vital aspects of relevance to social science/gender studies that maintain an empirical interest in social phenomena and do not move into literature criticism, philosophy or – something poststructuralism sometimes seems to border on – the esoteric. For reviews of poststructuralism (postmodernism), see e.g. Dews, 1986; Poster, 1989; Rosenau, 1992; Sarup, 1988; Smart, 2000.

13   From a strict poststructuralist position there are reasons to open up and deconstructing the idea of the 'masculine' nature of 'corporate strategy'. This would mean showing the fragility of notion of 'masculinity or 'strategy'.