



Gender, Work and Organization

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### **Class matters: Methodologies to extend gender scholarship**

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*“Why is it still more comfortable to keep the ‘problem’ of gender located in women and to hold women responsible for fixing their own exclusion?” (Sinclair, 2014, p. 2)*

Occupational class is arguably the visible expression of women’s exclusion or difference, as men continue to hold privileged leadership positions in organisations and society. Yet, research about how class interrelates with gender and race/ethnicity and other demographic characteristics such as age and disability, remains an enduring challenge. This stream provides a platform from which to address an important question: how can new ways of knowing, or emerging methodological approaches, make visible the gendered and racialized class processes that stratify society and contemporary organisations?

In Acker’s (2006) incisive analysis of the ways that class is reproduced, she expressed the profound regret that “no-one talk[s] about class any more”, observing

that class, “although essential for making sense of the contemporary world, is a highly contested concept and curiously vulnerable idea, subject to reassessment as political climates and work structuring change” (p. 2). Acker (2006) identified four significant changes occurring in gendered and racialized class:

1. *Changes in the composition of paid work.*
2. *Restructuring of work processes and employment contracts.*
3. *Changes in class effects – growing inequality in distribution.*
4. *Changes in relations of distribution and gender divisions of unpaid labour.*

Today, the ramifications of class stratification are clearly visible in the turmoil of nation states in the Global North.<sup>1</sup> Britain’s controversial exit from the European Union, Trump’s hitherto unimaginable promotion to the White House and the abandonment of mainstream political parties by French voters, are manifestations of a sense of disenfranchisement and desperation. Those on the lowest rungs of employment – for example, younger and older workers, refugees and migrants (many of whom are women) – are struggling to achieve a sustainable life-style. Precarious work arrangements (Williams, 2013), the globalisation of labour markets and the decline of domestic manufacturing jobs (McDowell, 2014) illustrate a complex web of significant issues that underlie widening income disparity and inequality (Rashbrooke, 2013). Similarly in the Global South, there is an ever-widening gap between those who control capital and power and the remaining population. Systemic exploitation and disadvantage, low literacy and human capital levels, the feminization of poverty and poor health outcomes are particularly rife among indigenous populations (Arabena, 2007; Pringle & Ryan, 2015; Siddiqui, 2012). Common to both the Global North and South is a compelling neoliberal narrative of non-negotiable values: “freedom, individual initiative, personal responsibility, the level playing field, private property, democracy, efficiency and the good life” (Wade, 2013, p. 45). Given such exhortations, it is not surprising to see explanations of personal deficiency used to defend the inequality of outcomes that underpin marginalised groups (Hyman, 2017; Wade, 2013).

Thus, class continues to be a minefield of disputed ideologies and identities. Certain classes in society appear to be more vulnerable to changes in economic, societal and organisational practices; for example, youth is fundamentally disadvantaged, as education no longer appears to offer a route to a financially secure

and independent future (Standing, 2016). Economic migrants escaping famine in Somalia and refugees displaced by violent conflict in Syria are also anxious searchers for some sort of future in work. Yet, how to capture those diverse workplace experiences is the conundrum – can the term ‘working class’ now adequately describe the great numbers of those engaged in uncertain or precarious labour, when the absence of regular ‘work’ denies them the core identity of ‘worker’?

The intersections of gender with race/ethnicity complicate the scene for organisational researchers investigating class. Holvino (2010) highlights the main issue: the intersecting effects of class, gender and colour are inseparable, so it is difficult to see which one supersedes the other(s). However, because feminist scholars have never properly defined race or class (Acker, 2006), class intersections remain problematic and elusive. Acker later observed that, while intersectionality addressed the issue of class, it complicated approaches to gender, because “gender tends not to be studied insularly, but in combination with race and class processes, in addition to other forms of societal and organisational inequity” (2012, p. 214). Broadbridge and Simpson (2011) concur, but insist that gender must remain central – it should be studied *with* class, as opposed to gender *and* class, for example. Yet, polarised and conflicting perspectives are still visible in the divergence between critical race scholars (for example, Bilge, 2013) and European feminists, such as Lutz, Vivar and Supik (2011) about the ‘right’ way to research intersections of gender, race and class. Anthias’s (2013) approach transcends the debate, proposing that classifications of class, gender and race are ontologically ‘valueless’ and social class identities are formed from the experiences of ‘transnational migrant “others” in particular localities’ (p. 124).

We welcome others to join our methodological discussions on how to navigate this slippery yet fascinating terrain. You are warmly invited to submit papers that suggest new and invigorating ways to explore ‘gendered class’ issues in organisations, and/or/with other intersections of difference. We encourage conceptual, theoretical and empirical papers from all researchers (doctoral, early career, mid-career and senior academics) who engage in methodologies that craft research in different or new ways, to investigate how gender(ed), class(ed) race(ed) and other demographic characteristics (Acker, 2006) reproduce power, privilege and penalty in organisations. As feminist researchers committed to redressing inequality issues (Calás, Smircich, & Holvino, 2014), this stream calls for papers that help to provide answers to these

enduring 'class questions'. We also welcome submissions that focus on indigenous research approaches for creating and sharing knowledge.

Note:

1. 'Global North' generally denotes the regions of Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand and 'Global South' defers to the areas of Asia, Africa and Latin America. Dados and Connell (2012) observe that both terms have accumulated post-colonial feminist meanings to describe geographical patterns of affluence, privilege/penalty and development and "the term Global South functions as more than a metaphor for underdevelopment" (p. 13).

For submission details go to: [www.mq.edu.au/events/gwosydney](http://www.mq.edu.au/events/gwosydney)

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Papers from the stream will be selected for a special issue proposal of the Gender, Work and Organization journal.

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