

Studying Gendered Practices

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Weight on her chest. Weight so heavy that Little Red Riding Hood cannot really breathe, night and day the same weight, constricting, straining.

The walls around the house where she lives with Wolf and the cubs feel unscalably high, over them you can not see, not climb. You are enclosed, unless you yourself take care of getting out in time.

Wolf thinks it's good to be here inside, the world is excluded, here is everything they might need, warmth, closeness, safety. Little Red Riding Hood and Wolf and no one else except the cubs, who are part of themselves, nothing else exists.

Little Red Riding Hood cannot breathe, the weight on her chest pulls her down.

When the constriction becomes too much she has suddenly climbed over, stands on the other side without knowing how she came to be there and what made her climb.

She is outside, she gets herself a key and a front door where she can come and go, she can do as she pleases, she can smile and talk, meet other people, there is air and possibilities

and only now is the house behind the walls a shelter, not a prison to Little Red Riding Hood.

(Tikkanen, 1986: 279)

The author is a Finnish woman writer, who from the shadow of her famous artist-cum-author husband has won herself a place in the Nordic cultural scene and international acknowledgement. Her text reflects the pressure of expectations she has felt while seeking room for herself and trying to fit family responsibilities with literary work. It sets up the exciting question of the dynamics of gender relations, the question of change and permanence, which is also the central tension of our book. Little Red Riding Hood meets the system of gender relations through Wolf, her husband. In our book we look at that in another perspective through the processes and structures of working life, including the interrelations of work and family.

The context of a Nordic welfare state gives a background to the questions. It is a context that is in many ways favourable to gender equality: in addition to the formal equal rights – which nowhere guarantee equality in practice – Nordic women and men have about the same educational level and rate of participation in working life, and it is considered a social right of the citizens that the society provides full day care for children, school meals and other services that help people combine work and family responsibilities. The Index of United Nations' world-wide gender equality survey (Human Development Report, 1995) rank the Nordic countries Sweden, Finland, Norway and Denmark in the four top places. Close behind came the USA, Australia, France, Japan, Canada and Austria, and last on the list came some African countries (Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali, Sierra Leone) and Afghanistan. The Index counts such indicators as gross income per capita, life expectation, educational level and women's income level compared with men's – and therefore favours industrialised rich countries and penalises poor developing countries. For example, in Afghanistan women could be expected to live on the average to 44 years; in Niger less than 6 per cent of women

were literate. In almost half of the world's countries, women were completely lacking from the parliaments or had a share of less than 5 per cent, whereas in all the Nordic countries more than a third of parliament members were women. In a global perspective, the Nordic countries seem relative oases in a desert of inequality.

However, from the point of view of women living in such oases, equality seems a mirage: when you get there, it has fled. We have not escaped the gender wage gap, the gendered segregation in work and education, the hierarchic difference of the valued masculine and devalued feminine, or sexual violence and indignity. Does this mean that in talking about equality we are chasing a deceitful image? Certainly it points out that equality is no simple problem for either politics or research.

WHAT ABOUT PATRIARCHY?

A feminist author who has consistently tried to understand the dilemma of gendered inequality in working life is Cynthia Cockburn (1983; 1985; 1991). Her book *In the Way of Women* (1991) looks just at how and why attempts to promote gender equality in working life may run aground. The book's subtitle is 'Men's resistance to sex equality in organizations', but Cockburn is not proposing a straightout male-conspiracy theory. The resistance she studies is systemic: "not casual but structured, not local but extensive, not transitory but stable, with a tendency to self-reproduction" (Cockburn, 1991: 6). Therefore Cockburn decides to use the conceptual tool of patriarchy for the systemic subordination of women.

The concept of patriarchy had its heyday in feminist research by the late 1970'ies and early 1980'ies, when the debates about the nature of patriarchy mostly concerned its origin and scope - since behind the common term there were actually very different understandings (see, for example, Sargent, 1981). The whole concept of patriarchy was also strongly criticised, mainly for being universalistic and ahistorical (Barret, 1980). But such a use of the concept is not necessary, according to Cockburn (1991: 7), since patriarchy can change historically. And indeed, feminist research has brought up how, for instance, the old father-right has changed to a modern generalized male sex-right of fraternal patriarchy (Pateman, 1988), or how the Nordic welfare states have substituted private patriarchy with a public patriarchy (Hernes, 1984). Cockburn's book also proves that another common point of the criticism is mistaken: the patriarchy concept is not limited to questions of 'The Origin' of gender inequality, but can also be used in a study of concrete social mechanisms of resistance to equality.

For the purposes of our book, some interesting aspects of the patriarchy concept come up where feminist researchers have studied working life. Heidi Hartman's classical article of job segregation by sex (1979) in a male-dominated branch emphasizes the centrality of hierarchy and solidarity between men as the basis of their control over women. Sylvia Walby started from men's exclusion of women from the labour market and trade unions (1986), and later generalized her concept of patriarchy to a multiple system of social structures that result in women's subordination and exploitation by men (1990).

Patriarchy is useful as a research concept because it is concerned with power relations and can be used in a systemic way. But is it useful enough? Cynthia Cockburn uses it as 'a popular shorthand term' (1991, 8), even if she also hints that a different term might be

needed and briefly mentions Gayle Rubin's concept 'the sex/gender system' (Rubin, 1975). The patriarchy concept is also encumbered with futile disputes. Cockburn refers to the heated debates of the relative importance of gender and class (and race); whether patriarchy or capitalism is the basic system of subordination, or two separate and equally basic systems, or just one systemic unity (Eisenstein, 1979; Acker, 1989). She concludes that the question is unnecessary since from one empirical perspective it will be gender, from another class, or race, that is relevant, and the important thing is to study the articulation of these sets of relations. She also makes a very interesting comment: our view of the dilemma depends more on what interpretation we give to the concept of 'system' than what interpretation we give patriarchy or capitalism (or racism). (Cockburn, 1991: 8)

THE CONCEPT OF A GENDER SYSTEM

In this book we will use the concept of a gender system just because we wish to emphasize the systemic character. But first some points should be clarified, both about gender and about system.

We do not agree with a sex/gender distinction that posits a sexed 'natural' body as the ground and material on which gender is socially constructed (for an early critique, see Gatens, 1983). In our thinking, sex, sexuality and the body are also constructed culturally. We will use just the term gender; it has also the advantage of yielding verb forms (to gender, gendering, gendered) which connects it to what people are doing.

A system should be differentiated from a structure. Both are complex wholes where the whole is more than the sum of its parts. To speak of structure means to picture a set of relations as in a cross section, whereas a system is a set of processes happening. A schematic presentation of your car motor is a structure, but gas flowing in, a spark igniting it and kinetic energy transferring to the wheels form a system. Social systems differ much from mechanical ones: any system is a functioning whole, but social systems are not necessarily consistent and well-ordered like well-functioning machines, instead they may have many inner contradictions, gaps and ruptures. They also have histories, they are in a state of constant potential change and yet tend to reproduce themselves, or at least their inner logic.

A gender system is both a methodological and a theoretical concept. The methodological aspect is concerned with the concept's multilevel nature: that gender is organized simultaneously in social structures, cultural meanings and personal identities, according to Sandra Harding's presentation (Harding, 1986) – and we would add social interaction, bodies and desires to the list. It is simply a reminder that research on gender needs to take into account many interlocking levels of our lived world of action and meaning.

To speak of a system means that its constitutive elements must be connected according to certain rules, that the system has its own overall logic. The theoretical aspect concerns questions about this logic. Only on a very general level of abstraction we can speak about 'the' gender system, otherwise it is better to think about gender systems, plural, limited by social and cultural space-time.

Whatever the disputes, feminist research is quite unanimous about the overall logic of present gender systems: it is male domination. The basic rules of the present male dominated gender system – or to use the shorthand term, patriarchy – seem to be amazingly similar.

The Swedish historian Yvonne Hirdman calls them the two principles of 'difference' and 'hierarchy' (Hirdman 1990). In practice these are intertwined in multiple ways but conceptually it is useful to examine them also separately. Since they are general rules of the gender system their manifestations may change historically, even several times over, although the basic logic itself remains unchanged.

'The difference' means that woman, female or feminine should be clearly distinct from man, male or masculine, in both ideas and practices. There are many alternative ways to achieve this – for instance structurally by creating a public sphere for men and a private sphere for women, or segregating women and men to each their 'own' jobs and tasks in working life. In this process both genders may develop their own special skills which then seem to be part of their 'nature'. The structural gender segregation of social positions is reinforced by the process of constructing individual gender identities on the difference of femininity and masculinity, sometimes quite consciously and intentionally. The differences will be normatively controlled with ideas of deviance and proper conduct. Islamic fundamentalism may require physical separation and visual obstacles, while European cultures mostly tolerate a lot of physical contact and superficial similarity of men and women. Women have usually more freedom to enter male arenas and behave like men, while the maintenance of difference from women is socially and psychologically more important to men. That is connected to the other principle of the gender system.

The principle of 'hierarchy' – or as Hirdman puts it, 'the primacy of the male norm' (1990: 79) means that in every instance man, male or masculine should take precedence or rate higher than woman, female or feminine, especially with reference to power and prestige. The gender figure of Man is the basic norm of abstract humanity, and compared with it woman or feminine are incomplete or deviant. Male and masculinity carry cultural prestige whereas woman and feminine lack significance, cultural 'glamour', regardless of the concrete individual women and men in question. Let's take an actual example: women may for decades busy themselves with their pretty little knittings and it is of no importance, but a man as a designer of knitting patterns is an international cultural figure. Hirdman even talks about 'the iron law of gender', the well-known phenomenon that when women enter a formerly male area of work its wages and status start to sink – whereas when men enter female areas they quickly rise to top positions, 'like cream' (Hirdman 1990: 79).

Hierarchy and difference certainly seem to be central dimensions in numerous studies of the gender system in working life (or patriarchy, see above the references to Hartman and Walby). A criticism of Hirdman's theory would not deny the importance of those two. Instead, it is reasonable to ask whether there might be other very basic rules in addition to the two. We would suggest that one such rule could well be 'compulsory heterosexuality', as Adrienne Rich calls it (Rich, 1980). That would actually reflect back to the concept of gender and its taken-for-granted categories: why do we see just two genders or two sexes, men and women? why not more? This is not the place to go further into the matter, and for the purpose of studying modern working life the two rules of hierarchy and difference will suffice in most cases. But the principle of theoretical openness is important. Here the concept of a gender system has an advantage to the concept of patriarchy. Patriarchy is organized by power relations, dominance and subordination. A gender system may include theoretical aspects that are analytically (not empirically) separate from dominance and subordination: for instance qualitatively different cultural constructions of women's and men's bodies and bodily experiences, including sexuality – but not restricted to that either.

FROM A GENDER SYSTEM TO GENDERED PRACTICES

We start from the point that a relatively persistent system organizes gender relations both in working life and other areas of human life. Our interest is focused on the processes that reproduce and change a gender system. Research on the interrelations of social structures and human action, the recurring central problem of sociology, is therefore a core idea of this book.

Our thinking about the relationship of structures and actions has also been influenced by the work of Anthony Giddens and Dorothy Smith. The central idea Giddens (1984) uses to analyse the structuration of social relations across time and space is 'duality of structure'. He defines structure as the medium and outcome of the conduct it recursively organizes. According to him the structural properties of social systems do not exist outside of action but are chronically implicated in its production and reproduction (1984: 374). This theoretical frame has led him to emphasize the study of day-to-day life in the analysis of the reproduction of institutionalized practices (1984: 282).

Dorothy Smith approaches the relationship of structures and actions through the concept of 'social relations' (1987: 183). She wants to study how actual practices form or articulate social relations. Like Giddens, she takes people's everyday activity as the starting point. Smith searches for social relations through the accounts and activities of concrete people, seeing social reality not as fixed, but rather as an ongoing production, 'always in the making' (1987: 126). This orientation is in line with her view that a social relation is only created while active subjects shape it through their own practices, sequences of action; on the other hand social relations have power over the active subjects, they reach beyond specific individuals and are reproduced independently of individual objectives.

Some feminist sociologists have conceptualized the ongoing production of gender in working life as 'gendering processes'. Joan Acker (1987; 1992) has studied both public and private organizations and outlined four sets of processes that reproduce gendered social structures: the production of gender divisions, the creation of symbols and forms of consciousness that deal with those divisions, the patterned social interactions enacting gendered relations, and what she calls the internal mental work of individuals in their construction of gendered understandings of their world of action (1992: 252-4). Building on Acker's work, Barbara Reskin and Irene Padavic (1994: 6-12) start with a list of three gendering processes in working life: the sexual division of labour, the devaluation of women's work, and the construction of gender on the job.

Both Acker's and Reskin and Padavic's list display a multileveled understanding of gendering – it is not just one thing or one process, but many simultaneous processes. Both take first up the division of labour (whether the term is 'gendered' or 'sexual') as a process, something that has an evident structural result. Acker's processes seem to have a more methodological orientation, telling us on what level of sociological abstraction we ought to look, where something important might be happening: on the structural level, in interactions, in symbols, in thoughts. Reskin and Padavic get closer to the theoretical content and location of gendering: what is taking place is devaluation, and it happens on the job. Interestingly, though, the basic difference between the two lists lies in the concept of gender. Although both talk about social construction of gender, Reskin and Padavic see gender as construction of exaggerated differences between natural biological categories of sex (1994: 2-4), while

Acker is very conscious also of the social construction of the body, sex and sexuality (1992: 251).

The weakness of a system concept is that while it necessarily includes processes, it may neglect the human (individual or collective) actors in the system. Her studies have led Joan Acker to think that systems should be studied through practices, through the ordinary things that people do as they go about their daily activities. Many such concrete activities are gendered in the meaning that they are consonant with assumptions about differences between women and men – as Acker suggests in the Foreword – and often, in their repetition, contribute to the reproduction of those differences. We shall use the concept of gendered practices in a roughly similar way in the book.

The important step from a concept of processes to a concept of practices is the necessity of looking for concrete social actors. Process is a concept related to the reproduction and change of a system. It just takes place, requiring no subject, imputing no intentions, no responsibility, offering no lever for change. Practice is what people do, again and again. With practices we can ask about who is doing, and how, where, when, in what circumstances. The concept of gendered practices as a methodological tool has helped us to start our study from everyday concrete practices, from the actions and voices of living people. Practices are local, situational – and alterable.

There are by now several studies of concrete practices that maintain inequality or either improve or impair women's position in work places, organizations and on the labour market. The experience of equality policies has shown that there are huge gaps between legislation or programmatic declarations and practical measures, and that these gaps cannot be bridged without serious consideration of the forms of cultural resistance that appear in concrete practices, such as those local recruitment and career advancement practices that restrict women's input in organizations (Cockburn, 1991; Buswell and Jenkins, 1994 – to mention a few examples from many studies). This has meant an emphasis on local knowledge also in working life research (Cockburn 1991: 239-241). Methodologically important has been the aim to deconstruct and reconceptualise: neither women nor men should be treated as dichotomous and internally homogenous groups, and many different kinds of masculinities and femininities in working life need to be considered (Cockburn and Ormrod, 1993). That is an aim we also want to share.

Peta Tancred (1995) discusses the contribution of feminist writings on women's work to the sociology of work. She argues that the basic categories of analysis were originally adopted without due consideration of gender, and this still hampers their use both for the understanding of women's work and the changes that are taking place in men's work. She lists three key areas: the definition of work, the nature of the firm or organization, and the conception of skill. Our book will relate to all three problem areas. We shall include both explicitly gendered and such seemingly gender-neutral practices that have implications to the gender system. We do not limit work to a separate sphere, we try to analyse the gendered and gendering logic of organizations, and the profound importance of gender in the social construction of skills.

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The methodological metaphor of our approach has been a house of several floors with windows facing in many directions. Depending on from which floor and to which direction

you look, you get a different view. From one window you can see wide panoramas, from another window you can zoom in on details.

An idea of the place and terrain of the house emerges when the viewer takes the trouble to go around inside it. We have been able to show each other the view from our respective locations. We have come to understand that there is not one master scene but different takes of manifold scenes. Together they tell of the multiple processes where gender is overtly or covertly involved. This insight has led us to accept a basis of theoretical and methodological pluralism, not in the sense of arbitrary eclecticism, but as a principle that obeys the logic of the gendering processes. Institutionalised structures, textual practices, symbols and face-to-face interaction can all express and maintain gendered practices. Each of them requires a research approach relevant to the particular object of study.

Part One gives a background for the other parts of the book. It outlines how the structures of working life are related to the gender system. The present outcome of gendered divisions and hierarchies is connected to the historically formed gender contract which defines the social rights and duties of women and men. In our Nordic welfare state women's right to participate in wage work is also their duty, a matter of course in social life. The chapter tells about the problems and solutions that people have to reconcile the often conflicting demands of social production and social reproduction in the context of the welfare state, and about the intrinsic tensions the solutions imply in the gender system.

Part Two looks at those practices which continually reproduce hierarchic differences between men and women and between the masculine and the feminine in wage work. When we learn how concrete actors meet and modify cultural understandings and textual interpretations about men and women and their position in working life, we obtain a deeper insight into those understandings.

The analyses introduce us to the circular relations that prevail between the workers' own evaluations and ideas, cultural conceptions, and the texts that report on and regulate working life. Merja Kinnunen studies the power of textual definitions to control the material world. Searching for the cultural basis of categorisations, she parallels the labour force categories of official statistics, the interpretations that social scientists give to work contents, occupations, hierarchical positions and to gender, and people's own definitions of their work. Riitta Martikainen examines the construction of a seemingly gender neutral text that takes part in the production and reproduction of the gendered working life reality. She focuses on the bargaining practices where the text of collective agreements is negotiated and formulated. Päivi Korvajärvi takes us to the work place level, to the everyday processes of doing gender. She is especially interested in how fixed or transformable the boundaries are between spaces defined as masculine or feminine.

While Part Two uses the example of the white collar worker and her work, looking at it on several levels, or from different floors of the methodological house, Part Three opens a window to the wider scenery where work appears as one – partial – area of human life activity.

In research as well as in organizational practice work is often seen apart from the rest of life. An abstract worker has no body, no gender and no personal goals outside work. If a link is seen between work and the life outside work, it is seen in a negative light and particularly

connected with women: women's family obligations and orientation towards the family restrict their full involvement in working life. Part 3 repudiates such rigid division into life spheres. The authors take the concept of everyday life as their guideline when they examine women's and men's ways to combine work and family. Their special focus is use of time. Riikka Kivimäki studies the relations between work and family responsibilities in different types of work places. She tries to show how certain types of work places present typical possibilities and limiting conditions to combining work and family. Minna Salmi asks how a homemaker's daily time use differs from the everyday time of the average wage worker. She also wants to know how women's and men's typical way of doing home-based work reflects the structural constraints of their everyday life.

Part Four follows two accounts of threatening or challenging gendered processes in working life. Here the women come to realize that they face practices which may seriously undermine their activity as autonomous individuals. In the process of sexual harassment described by Hannele Varsa the gendered practices are penetratingly oppressive, and much more subtle in Marja Vehviläinen's case of information technology use in a bureaucratic organization. In both cases the women concerned have to actively orient themselves to the situation and to find their own words to account for it to themselves. The authors are interested in the processes where women strive to order the situational elements in a language which is familiar to their thinking, and from their own standpoint. They examine what happens during this process of definition to the women as individuals and subjectivities.

Parts One to Four take up persistent practices that maintain inequality between men and women in the working life, but also breaking points where new ways of thinking and new practices may emerge. Part Five specifically focuses on strategies that have been intentionally used to improve women's position in working life. These strategies are a subject of contention in the international feminist movement. The adherents of each strategy have differing theoretical and practical arguments to support their way of thinking. The cases in Part Five represent different strategies and are based on somewhat differing discursive traditions. Leila Räsänen tells about an experiment to break up gender segregation, Tuula Heiskanen about an application of comparable worth ideas. Instead of gauging the power of arguments for each strategy, the authors focus on the basic social processes which come into test in the work for change. Part Five leads us to see what requirements of recognition, learning and social problem solving are involved in trying to change gendered practices.

The empirical cases of the book provide a view of the mutual play of such gendering processes Joan Acker describes – production of divisions and symbols, interactions between people and constructions of personal understanding (1992: 252-4). The cases reach from work place level to the level of institutions regulating working life, and from individuals to collective actors. The common organizing theme that runs through the cases is the logic of the gender system: difference and hierarchy. Together the cases try to characterize the principles according to which concrete practices maintain gendered divisions, distinctions and differences in working life, and – as a contingent but non-obligatory result – inequality between women and men. The role of the empirical cases is both to illustrate the principles and to show how they function.

The definition of gendered practices points out that it is a situational, local matter. That does not contradict the fact that practices may be very similar from one country or culture to

another or that a practice may originate extra-locally. In any case, however, to speak about gendered practices requires knowledge about the specific context where they take place.

In addition to the international discussion above, the approach of our book has definitely been formed by the local context of the Nordic feminist research and equality discourse where the writers themselves have participated. The Nordic feminist research on working life is strongly connected to concrete research and search and support for new practices. It emphasizes the material context of the action of women and women's groups, and their shared cultural community. That kind of approach has widened working life research from the boundaries of the employment relationship to the study of women's everyday life-totally (Strandell, 1984; Davies, 1989; Salmi, 1991). Studies of women's work, whether care work in public organizations or work in offices and street level bureaucracies, have stressed the importance of the logic of action women share in their work place communities. An implicit frame of technical and/or bureaucratic rationality in sociology of work has proven both grossly insufficient and in itself gendered masculine. Instead, these studies of women's work have produced concepts such as rationality of responsibility (Sörensen, 1982; Korvajärvi, 1990) and rationality of care (Boman, 1983; Waerness, 1984; for a review see Ungerson, 1990) or reproductive work orientation (Rantalaiho, 1985, 1986), which take into account the context of social relations in women's work. In the main(male)stream traditions of sociology, the study of social structures and the study of cultural dynamics from a structural perspective have a solid position, but they are rather indifferent to the problem of subject or agency (Alapuro, 1995). In contrast to that, studies of women's work have emphasized an actor perspective (Rantalaiho, 1986; Korvajärvi, 1990; Simonen, 1991; Silius, 1992).

Also as researchers we are located in a specific context. The authors of this book have had the opportunity to work together as a group for several years: we have shared the house of our research. Twelve resident women, with different life events and ideas, tend to have a variegated life. During the research process we have shared both harmony, controversy, sulking, and the joy of working together. The most important research method maintaining the house turned out to be our shared discussions. Around the same table theoretical debates and concrete diaper changes overlapped into a continuity, instead of separate levels or spheres. Economically, sharing this house was possible by employment relationships to the Finnish state as well as state benefits for maternity or unemployment. As researchers, we lived in the very world we studied.

We are aware that based on their life experience the social actors of this book – the researchers as well as the people who have supplied their experiences for the writers to interpret – all share a collective gendered understanding that acknowledges women's public and professional competence. It is not possible for us to see full time commitment to the labour market as a 'male characteristic' (cf. Witz and Savage, 1992: 12) or to agree with a clear-cut division of public and private spheres. The stage-set of the book's case studies is a society where women have a substantial role in public life – although not quite as substantial as men. Little Red Riding Hood has acquired a key that has opened doors to political life and public administration, to decision making about social issues together with men. She has found new possibilities, but she also encounters new pressures and constraints. This book tries to bring out the gender conflicts that may emerge when women widen their room of action.

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