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Action-oriented Gender Research:

A Merger of Gender Research and Learning Theories from Action Research

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Action-oriented gender research is a merger of two theoretical perspectives – the doing gender perspective, with an understanding of gender as an ongoing accomplishment, and learning theory within the action research tradition, with a focus on reflection, learning and especially reflective learning for transformation. By using gender theory together with learning theory in joint learning processes in innovation systems, it becomes possible to uncover taken-for-granted assumptions and power relations that constrain the development of new innovative possibilities in organisations. How the construction and interaction of gender and organisations evolve does affect what is possible to achieve in new innovations. Action-oriented gender research gives a frame to uncover the organisational gendered “culture”. By not only making it visible, but also

focusing on desirable changes, it can contribute to sustainable growth with the assumption of the inclusion of both women and men and the whole society.

Keyword: Doing gender, action research, organizational innovations

Action-oriented gender research is a merger of two theoretical perspectives – the doing gender theoretical perspective, with the first references from West and Zimmerman (1987), with an understanding of gender as an ongoing accomplishment, and learning theory within the action research tradition, with a focus on reflection, learning and especially reflective learning for transformation (Brockbank & McGill, 2002). The aim of the approach is to create more gender-aware organisations, but also to produce interesting knowledge on how gender is constructed in organisations and how these patterns can be changed.

The combination of gender research and action research has helped to establish a fruitful theoretical framework and a methodological foundation for working with development processes at the group and organisational levels (McGill & Brockbank 2004, Aagard Nielsen & Steen Nielsen 2006). There are several similarities between the two theoretical perspectives, which complement each other in a fruitful manner. They share an understanding of reality; that in relation to each other, people construct understandings of the reality in which they take part (Burger & Luckman 1966; Burr 1995), which are different kinds of learning processes (Brockbank & McGill 2002). This does not imply total relativism; of course, there is an ontological reality (something that really exists), but what we understand as the “reality” or the natural order is something formed in social constructions between people. When working with development processes in organisations, with the aim of creating gender awareness, these forms of social construction need to be scrutinised with the focus on power and power relations. In this development work, it is necessary to address and challenge the taken-for-granted, the so-called natural order, which appears to be gender neutral, yet maintains a gendered order in which men and masculinity predominate (Brockbank & McGill 2006; Ely & Meyerson 2000).

Today, there is extensive research on how gender is constructed in organisations (Acker 1992; Andersson 2003; Connell 1995; Gunnarsson et al., 2003; Kvande, 2003, 2007; Korvajärvi, 1998; Linghag 2009; Wahl et al., 2001). Unfortunately, this research has not been applied to development work in the organisational context (Meyerson & Colb 2000). The action-

oriented gender research approach rests firmly in gender research and uses knowledge about gender to anchor and systematise the learning and development processes. However, theories on gender do not automatically make people in organisations want to work with processes of change. Therefore, we believe that it is imperative to supplement gender theory with theories from action research, i.e., learning theories that focus on how learning, and especially transformative learning, can occur.

In both gender research and action research, the aim is for knowledge production to proceed in non-hierarchical relationships. Especially in action research, co-research and joint learning between researcher and practitioners are emphasised (Svensson & Aagaard Nielsen, 2006). Joint learning for improvement can be a first step; our intent is to create joint learning for transformation (Brockbank, McGill & Beech 2002). In these processes, there needs to be focus on both the formal and informal power relations. Also, the gender subtext, i.e., implicit norms and beliefs of gender in organisations, needs to be revealed. However, implicit subtextual understandings can be hard to detect and quite often difficult to change. Furthermore, when trying to change these patterns, it raises resistance when they are often perceived as the natural order.

It is precisely in this latter sense that gender research and action research can be fruitfully combined, in which they complement each other, and where gender research has a lot to learn from action research. Within action research, there has been a long tradition whereby researchers have worked together with practitioners developing organisations with the purpose of uncovering and changing what is perceived as taken-for-granted and as the natural order. The methodology includes dialogue and critical reflection and a search for transformative change. In an overview of action research—*Introduction to Action Research: Social Research for Social Change*—the researchers argue that there are major opportunities to be derived from the synthesis of action research and feminist research (Greenwood & Levin 2007). Action research can offer feminist gender research a greater understanding of the variety of intervention and group process techniques that have been developed through participatory research. These techniques can support the feminist researcher's commitment to activism and social change goals (ibid.). While Gunnarsson (2007) stresses that an awareness of how gender power relations effects the relation between the researcher, practitioners and the development processes can improve the social robustness and the validity of action research.

The text is organised as follows. First, there is a description of the empirical environment in which action-oriented gender research has evolved. After a brief review of the characteristics of the two theoretical perspectives that together form our approach, there will be an account of one network meeting in which the “concentric circle” method was used to uncover the organisational culture and its implicit gendered power relations. Reflection on the organisational context in different steps is a central part of the method. The article ends with a discussion of what we believe to be imperative for working to create gender-aware organisations with the aim of using action-oriented gender research.

The Gender Network

The action-oriented gender research approach was developed within a research and development (R&D) project called the Gender Network. The project, which lasted from 2006 to 2008, was performed within the regional innovation system called Fiber Optic Valley, and was financed by Vinnova (The Swedish Governmental Agency for Innovation Systems). The project was, as the name suggests, organised as a network consisting of thirteen middle managers, both women and men, who came from twelve organisations. The aim was to analyse, or rather uncover, how middle managers, from their positions of power, “do” gender and how it can be changed from that position. Of special interest was an examination of how middle managers act on a daily basis, on what grounds, the conditions that their actions created for co-workers’ opportunities for development and career and the gender implications of the managers’ actions.

The Gender Network met on thirteen occasions. To begin, the meetings were organised as two-day gatherings held every six weeks. The number of meetings was then gradually reduced to two every six months, which alternated between one and two days. All the meetings were led by the process leader, Eva Amundsdotter. The process revolved around three phases: uncovering the “doing” of gender, mobilisation strategies for change and working with change (Amundsdotter 2009b).

During the network meetings, the researcher, Susanne Andersson, kept a low profile, mostly documenting the processes but sometimes, after analysis of the processes and what restricted them, intervening. Between the network meetings, the researcher conducted participant observations for three days at the middle managers’ workplaces. One activating and co-

research method called gender coaching was developed. This method encouraged discussion, reflection and learning between both researcher and practitioners. Given that the middle managers spent a large part of their working days in meetings, this became one of the contexts that were analysed in co-research processes. Often, provided that there was temporal space, the researcher and the middle manager sat down immediately after the meeting and discussed it. In this way, the organisational context was highlighted from different perspectives which created joint learning. When the Gender Network met, some of these observed meetings were subjects for reflection and learning processes primarily for the purpose of uncovering how gender was done in the context. In this article, such a discussion will be presented. But first, the two theoretical perspectives that form the merger of action-oriented research will be presented; the doing gender and action research perspectives.

Doing gender perspective

The “doing gender” perspective is a central theoretical tradition in the research field of gender and organisation, and it is also the theoretical perspective forming one of the legs within the action-oriented gender research approach. The “doing gender” perspective has been developed and used by many scholars for studying the social construction of gender in organisations. The most central article within this tradition is written by West and Zimmerman, published in 1987. Within this tradition, gender is seen as continuous activity in progress and as an interactive act performed between women and men, men and other men and amongst women. Every day, in a myriad of settings, we do gender in relation to each other. However, in each of these situations, there is a historical pre-done understanding of gender that structures how gender is supposed to be done (Andersson 2003, Connell 1987; Gherardi 1994). These pre-done understandings are both a result of previous doings and a rationale for each new interactional situation that forms limitations on what is understood as appropriate (West & Zimmerman 1987; Connell 1987). Women and men in organisations are expected to manage situations in gender-appropriate ways and one is always accountable in terms of gender, even when we are acting in gender-inappropriate ways (Kvande 2007).

Gender is done in the everyday interaction in which symbols and discourses play a central part. The symbols and discourses are used by people interacting with each other to explain, legitimate and sometimes even contradict existing understandings of gender (Acker 1992). Gender is also constructed in relation to machines, positions, units, activities, tasks, etc. in such a manner that they receive either a masculine or a feminine gender marking. Those with

a masculine gender marking have a higher status than those with a feminine gender marking (Andersson 2003). For a man, being in charge of a unit, that is masculine gender marked, is strengthening for his masculine identity. The same reinforcing conditions do not occur for a woman being in charge of a unit that is feminine gender marked.

Using the doing gender perspective, i.e., conceptualising gender as an ongoing accomplishment, makes it possible to see historical change, variations and complexity. This perspective comprises a dynamic approach to gender while, at the same time, making visible structures and power relations (Korvajärvi 1998; Kvande 1998, 2007). The focus of power and power relations is central within this tradition. Those with formal or informal power can decide when and how gender should be relevant (Andersson 2003; Haavind 2000)

Further, the doing of gender takes place simultaneously as the organisation itself finds its form (Acker 1992; Connell 1987). In this way, constructions of gender become integrated parts of the organisation. Even though the social constructions of gender permeate everyday organisational life, it is not conceptualised in that manner. The paradoxical part of doing gender in organisations is that people do gender with precision; however, this is not something of which they are usually aware and upon which they reflect (Martin 2003; 2006). They tacitly know how one is supposed to act and what gender markings different units or occupations have. From a feminist point of view, with the ambition to create gender-aware organisations, uncovering how gender is done in organisations is an important first task of research.

Uncovering how gender is constructed can be systematised in different ways. Counting how women and men are positioned in the organisation can be a way of uncovering the gender order, which gives a quantitative measure. But this is not enough; when working with development processes to achieve gender-aware organisations, we believe that it is important to focus as much on the quantitative as the qualitative aspects of organisational life in order to get more sustainable development processes. For that purpose, and within the frameworks of earlier projects, a special model has been developed. During the development process, Joan Acker's (1992) theoretical work served as the main source of inspiration. Documentation of this development process can be found in Gunnarsson et al. (2003) and Gunnarsson et al. (2008) (See also Mayerson & Colb's (2000) article "Beyond Armchair Feminism").

Acker's (1992) model contains four different processes as follows:

- A. Gender division, i.e., vertical and horizontal division between women and men
- B. Symbols, images and discourses
- C. Interaction
- D. Internal mental work

The model is both theoretical and methodological. It is theoretical in that it brings together much early feminist research on organisations, and it is methodological in that it may be used as a tool for systematising an analysis of an organisation wherein each point may be studied individually or together. Additionally, the model can help to anchor practical equality work in gender research so that quantitative and qualitative aspects of gendered organisational life are also focused on and become subject to change.

Action Research: A Methodology for Reflection and Learning for Transformation

When developing action-oriented gender research, we turned to learning theory within the action research tradition as we felt that these theories could be significantly complementary to gender research both in a theoretical and a methodological sense. Action research has then become the other theoretical leg forming the action-oriented gender research approach. Ever since Lewin, one of the founders of the tradition in the 1940s, action research has been carried out in organisations. Today, action research includes a wide range of methodologies, even grounded in different traditions with separated epistemological and ontological assumptions (Casell & Johnson 2001). Nevertheless, this article is not the place to dig deeper into these differences; what Reason and Bradbury (2001) refer to as the action research “family”. Instead, we will only present the parts that we believe offer a fruitful contribution to gender research. In line with Greenwood and Levin (2007), we believe that action research can offer feminist gender research a greater understanding of the variety of intervention and group process techniques that have been developed through participatory research. We also think that action research can contribute to a deeper theoretical understanding of how people learn in organisations (which includes learning how one is supposed to do gender) and what methods are important to use to achieve transformative learning.

Within action research, Argyris and Schön (1974) are central theorists. They distinguish between what people say (and even genuinely believe) they will be doing in a given situation, and what they actually do. For example, people in an organisation can describe the workplace

as an equal organisation, and genuinely believe that this is the case. A detailed study of the same organisation can show that this is not so. In everyday interaction, people are acting in ways that give rise to unequal conditions, without them being aware of it and, therefore, not reflecting on it. When working with creating gender-aware organisations, an important first step is to organise learning processes with the purpose of uncovering the implicit understandings of gender (Amundsdotter 2009b).

Argyris and Schön (1974) differentiate between single loop or “instrumental learning”; that is, learning for improving the ways in which things are done, but the underlying assumptions and values are unchanged. Double loop learning takes place when assumptions and underlying values are challenged and changed. It is the latter form of learning that is necessary to achieve the creation of gender-aware organisations.

Brockbank and McGill (2007) state that learning is a social process and that the learning contexts are themselves socially constructed. They follow a social constructionist stance in which the individual is not seen as a given entity. Instead, the self is continuously constructed “through the social relationships, discourse and practices of the organizational culture in which he or she is embedded”, and in which power relations play a central role. This conceptualisation of learning has implications for how one believes that change processes should be organised. Brockbank, McGill and Beech (2002) emphasise the importance of organising the learning process in networks in which organising for reflection is of special concern. When people get the opportunity to reflect together with others, it can contribute to double-loop-learning, or what they call “transformative learning”. The following is a quote from Brockbank, McGill and Beech (2002): “Reflective learning for transformation offers the potential for learners to move one step further and reconsider their work in strategic terms, questioning and challenging existing patterns, thereby opening the door for creativity and innovation”.

Joint Learning in the Network through Actual Events at One Workplace

The following is an example of how these reflecting processes were organised in the R&D project, the Gender network, how this was performed and what was revealed during the discussion. The Gender Network had been in existence for a little over six months. Fourteen persons were in the room, eleven women and three men.

In this case, two of the middle managers in the Gender Network, one woman and one man, worked in the same organisation. Co-research had been performed wherein the two middle managers as well as the researcher had observed interactions during the same meeting at their workplace; a meeting with first line managers. During the observed meeting, the researcher noticed tensions and raised voices. One woman began to cry and another woman, also participating in the same meeting, had become marginalised. It was not possible to discuss this with the managers directly connected to the meeting. Instead, analyses of these events took place one month later at one of the Gender Network meetings. The two middle managers and the researcher had dialogue with each other, while the rest of the network listened.

The room was set up as follows: The three persons formed a small circle; two of the middle managers and the researcher. The rest of the group formed a bigger circle though not too close – around them. The process leader managed the exercise and was sitting with the rest of the participants in the bigger circle. The method used is called concentric circle and when using this method it is important to give space for the dialogue between the three persons in the inner circle.

The male middle manager began by relating his interpretation of the meeting. Then, the female manager conveyed her observations. Finally, the researcher shared her report. Both the managers, especially the male, emphasised that they had felt that it was difficult to conduct observations of meetings while, at the same time, being the chairperson of the meeting. In the process of discussing and reflecting, together with the researcher, on what had happened during the meeting, it became obvious that the two middle managers had nearly the same interpretations of it. What separated them from each other was that the woman searched for confirmation from the man when she told her story, whereas he did not seek her validation. The researcher's observation, that one woman was marginalised, was noticed by neither the man nor the woman. They claimed that the woman cried often and that it was not as serious as it seemed. The male middle manager did not even remember that the marginalised woman had taken part in the meeting.

Different understandings, experiences and thoughts were shared between the three participants. Then the word was given by the process leader to the rest of the group, who reflected over the conversation. During that dialogue, the three persons in focus got a chance to listen. Some of the participants in the out circle wondered what kind of “culture” or climate

existed at that organisation. Several also observed and commented on the interaction that took place in the room between the male middle manager and the female one. It looked like she was seeking confirmation from him when speaking.

The word then got back to the three people in the inner circle, who continued their dialogue, with the reflections just made as an input. After a while, the three joined the outer circle for a joint process.

In the reflective discussion, a somewhat harsh workplace culture was revealed, one which strongly affected the two managers. Their interaction in the organisation that they took for granted in their everyday life had been scrutinised not only by the researcher, but also by the other participants who were sharing what they had heard and thought of it. One conclusion to come out of this process was the difficulty for women in general to play a significant role in meetings in the organisation. Also revealed was the interaction taking place in the inner circle between the colleagues from the same organization, the man and the woman. She was repeatedly turning to him, asking for confirmation, a habit about which they were not aware but a practice that was commented on by participants in the outer circle and, therefore, subject to reflection.

As closure, the process with reflection in several steps and on one specific organizational context was commented on from both a methodological and knowledge perspective. One of the middle managers thought that it was a very good format, because it gave room for listening and reflecting. Another expressed that the process had a clear focus – the learning and interpretation of a particular meeting from a gender perspective. The participants in this learning process expressed that by using this method, they had got a deeper understanding and new knowledge of how gender was constructed in organisations. The reflection process made them understand that gender was something done in everyday organisational life, without them being aware of it. In this process, the two middle managers and their quite harsh culture were revealed, but this was not new to them. They knew it tacitly, but it was not something upon which they had reflected before. For the other participants, the reflection process of one organisational culture offered a comparative relief to their own context. The comparison contributed to the others' ability to see their own organisational culture from a more gender-aware perspective. For some of the middle managers, this reflection process contributed to

transformative learning which included new actions by which they decided to organise their meetings in more “democratic” ways.

Action, Reflection and Learning

The learning process was organised as reflection in several steps and from different perspectives. It started with the inner circle, in which the three persons reflected and shared interpretations on a special occasion. From there the focus moved to the outer circle, where the other persons’ reflected on what they had just seen and heard. Then, back to the inner circle again, where the three participants were given the opportunity to deepen the discussion of the others' comments. Finally, the whole group was integrated in a common discussion not only what had been learned, but also reflection on how the learning process had been organised.

The concentric circle is a method for supporting reflection regarding action and learning (McGill & Brockbank 2004: 56).

When using the concentric circle as a method, the reflection processes move back and forth a few times. It concludes with the two circles integrating the knowledge as one group. This is a method that enables a smaller group to benefit from each other’s reflections, and it develops skills in the group for thinking and reflection about each other’s experiences and perspectives. It also supports the skills of active listening and of listening and speaking without interruption.

One important part of these processes is the form of a network group made up of participants who are given the opportunity to reflect with others about their own organisational lives (Amundsdotter 2009a). By learning from experiences through reflection with others, possibilities open up for the reconsideration of past events, making sense of one’s actions and finding new ways of behaving at future events (ibid: 13). One part of this learning is recognising the link between action and learning. The other part is the aim of making the action learning process supportive and challenging.

However, in order to not only confirm each member in a group, but also to be able to create a constructive climate of challenge for each other, confidentiality is an essential precondition. Cultivating trust is another crucial aspect of the work in order to function well and be able to learn through knowing, doing and feeling (ibid: 19).

McGill, Brockbank and Beech (2002) stress the importance for the potential learning relationship to give opportunities for uncertainty and instability. This is what can happen if we reflect on organisational contexts that are taken for granted, for instance. The openness, with feelings or emotions, is needed in order to trust the learning context: “When we really learn, particularly that which is potentially transformative, we lay ourselves open to uncertainty and can be temporarily unstable” (ibid: 9).

The Group: Its Role and Importance

In the empirical example in this paper, what were uncovered, among several things, were norms at the workplace that could be described as harsh norms. The norm showed in how the interaction took place at the actual meeting, with hard words and a demanding attitude between the managers. Also, it was an emotional experience expressed by the two middle managers involved. To challenge embedded discourse is to uncover the taken-for-granted status (McGill et al. 2002). One important part of building a group in which this can be possible – to uncover power relations and interactions – was to build both support and critical reflections. Support is necessary, but not sufficient, to challenge prevalent assumptions and norms in a group (McGill et al. 2004). The learning process gave the possibility to make power relations and norms clear. The feedback given from the outer circle was supportive and critical. A commitment in the group, of wanting to contribute to each other’s learning, made it possible to engage in this kind of learning processes. The point is also that sharing observations and analysing them gave insights and thoughts for the rest of the group around norms, interactions and power relations in their organisations. What guided this learning process, how it was facilitated, was grounded in the connection between reflection and development. A learning process that is built on reflection and closely related to development is evident in development strategies built on innovation systems and networks (Svensson & Sjöberg 2009).

How things were done in the network was very important, which is what this paper analyses. The different knowledge processes, stories from actions, the organisational analysis that everyone did and the gender observations were all starting points for the knowledge process. Process leading is meant to guide the learning process about gender and to create knowledge not only about gender in the different organisations and about the focus on middle managers’ agency, but also about the actual change processes. A central part of action research is a basic

optimism concerning the human ability to learn from joint experiences in groups (Berge & Ve 2000).

Using gender theory meant a critical reflection and understanding of everyday life in organisations. A tendency to “censor” the role of gender, which can be seen as a form of resistance, makes it especially useful for finding ways to intervene in order to create learning through creative and critical reflection (Amundsdotter 2009b). In order to enhance that joint learning and sharing, trust and commitment were the cornerstones for building the group.

Conclusion

Action-oriented gender research is a merger between two theoretical traditions, both gender research and action research, with the aim of creating gender-aware organisations. Presented in this article is how the processes of uncovering, learning and changing have been employed within an R&D project called the Gender Network. A special focus is on the use of activating methods, which are methods that encourage necessary reflection and learning in practice and on practice with the aim of producing change (Argyris & Schön 1974). Focus will also be placed on the importance of groups for learning and what needs to be considered when organising a team whose purpose it is to help each member to reflect, learn and develop new and gender-aware views of his/her own organisational life.

When gender theory is used in combination with learning theory from action research, it becomes possible to uncover the taken-for-granted assumptions and power relations that constrain the development of new innovations in organisational contexts. While it creates opportunities to both highlight and change the restrictive construction of gender, and thereby contributing to sustainable growth in which both men and women enjoy equal conditions of learning and development and at the same time develop new innovative patterns in organisations.

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