

Understanding Gender and Organizations

Mats Alvesson and Yvonne Due Billing



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Preface

Gender is a fascinating subject that can leave nobody untouched – even though many people are satisfied with their own convictions and 'truths' and are not interested in exploring the subject intellectually. It is also a very difficult subject, bound to frustrate the person who believes in absolute truths. Those who are not satisfied with apparently clear, stable patterns and simple explanations will look behind these and find variation, changes, ambiguities, contradictions and confusions. A specific difficulty in dealing with gender is that everybody has experience and intimate knowledge of the subject. This might create problems for the researcher who has problems with establishing herself or himself as an authority on the subject as many people consider themselves experts on gender. It might also create problems for the researcher because personal experience is not only an invaluable support in knowledge development, but also a source of taken-for-granted assumptions and bias, giving inquiry a predetermined, insufficiently reflective and self-critical direction. One's implicit beliefs and knowledge about men and women may prevent openness, curiosity and ability to be surprised. Good empirical research should lead to new insights and ideas. All research – social research is certainly no exception – must struggle with established wisdoms, and gender studies are certainly no easier to defend against accusations of embracing dogmas and biases than other politically and pragmatically 'hot' fields of social knowledge. The researcher/author – and the reader – must struggle carefully with this element. This book attempts to do so and aims in particular to inspire reflection and sensitivity towards gender issues.

Our reason for writing this book, therefore, is to provide a qualified, nuanced introduction and overview of the field of gender and work organization. We also aim at suggesting some ideas for theoretical development. We intend to focus more on ideas, theories and qualitative studies than rely on statistics and results of questionnaire studies. Rather than trying to provide 'facts' and 'truths' about gender issues in work organizations we aim for an interpretive, open and broadly critical, including self-critical, style.

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1

Introduction

Texts on gender and organizations often start by showing the sexist nature of contemporary society. Reskin and Padavic (1994), for example, start their book by referring to a US television programme in which two people, similar in age, qualifications and ethnicity, but of different sexes, apply for the same jobs. They receive highly different treatment. The male gets more offers and more qualified and well-paid jobs. The female is repeatedly less well treated in terms of employment possibilities. Other texts start by referring to common knowledge or statistics showing that women in general have lower wages than men even within the same occupation and at the same level, that women experience more unemployment than men, that women take more responsibility for unpaid labour, that they are strongly underrepresented at higher positions in working life, that they have less autonomy and control over work and lower expectations of promotion (e.g. Chafetz, 1989; Ve, 1989). There is massive empirical evidence on these issues (Reskin and Padavic, 1994) and those arguing for the existence of a gender order or a patriarchy, which gives many more options and privileges to men, particularly in working life, but also in life in general, have no problems in substantiating their case. Clearly gender – ‘patterned, socially produced, distinctions between female and male, feminine and masculine’ (Acker, 1992: 250) – is a key concept for understanding what is happening with individuals in their working lives and for understanding how people encounter encouragement, scepticism, support and suffering in organizational contexts. These viewpoints are based on ideas about fairness and social problems. They typically emerge from assumptions about women’s interests in removing sources of inequality, through counteracting male dominance. The perspective is typically feminist-sociological.

Gender issues may, however, also be worth focusing on from quite a different point of departure: the business-managerial one. From a management perspective, there are reasons to be concerned about the ineffectiveness in terms of the utilization of human resources contingent upon contemporary gender pattern. Counteracting sex discrimination and conservative gender patterns would make possible a more rational way of recruiting, keeping, placing, training and promoting labour. Utilizing diversity – e.g. by employing and giving voice to men as well as women in terms of viewpoints and experiences – may also facilitate organizational learning and creativity. A flexible work force, untrammelled by conservative ideas about ‘men’s work’ and ‘women’s work’, that is what is natural

and appropriate for men or women respectively to do, may be used more effectively. Therefore there are good reasons for management to address organizational cultures, structures and practices in terms of gender. To maintain ways of thinking and acting, as well as social structures, that prevent almost half of the labour force from being fully utilized in terms of their qualifications and talents may be said to be a prime example of irrationality. And although rationality in organizational settings – as in human life in general – is more often preached than practised, too obvious deviations from what appears to be profitable should have a fair chance of triggering changes, or at least attempts at change.

These two motives for taking an interest in gender and organization – injustice and profitable management – are strong and it is hardly surprising that gender studies, in general, are expanding, and that there is a rapidly increasing interest in this topic in organization and management theory as well as in organizational practice.

However, simple and straightforward empirical descriptions and arguments seldom work easily in social science. Social reality is complex and contradictory. In terms of management considerations, for example, it is possible that there is a surplus of talent in relation to high-level jobs and it cannot be taken for granted that top priority is given to encouraging and utilizing an increasing number of career-oriented people. Companies often benefit from women having learned that their place is in relatively low paid jobs, and the lack of ambition conventionally ascribed to women and their expectations of finding fulfilment in the family sphere facilitates adaptation to the many modestly skilled jobs available in contemporary working life (Acker, 1994). A gender division of labour which means that compliant and cheap female labour is accessible may be more beneficial for many companies than taking equal opportunities seriously, at least if the latter should call for major changes. In addition, the career-oriented person, giving priority to work over family matters, may be preferable in the business world, as a strong commitment to equality would often mean a re-balancing or downplaying of corporate matters in relation to family obligations and values. These complications are worth considering before assuming too much management interest in gender fairness. Even for managerial jobs it may be optimal for companies if most women are not strongly committed to promotion to top jobs. A manager of a large UK retail company said,

what I can't have is sixty very ambitious people as store managers. I only want ten very ambitious people. Fifty I see as being hardcore managers, permanent in the areas where they are. And what I'm looking for, crudely, is thirty- to forty-year old females, with a good retail background, who are very effective and very efficient in their job but, because of their domestic circumstances, won't want to move. (cited in Cockburn, 1991: 49)

Rather than focusing on 'objective interests', as if there were such, it is better to explore how people in companies define priorities, think and act in this type of matter. Rather than trying to find the average we believe that

studying complexity and variation contingent upon different industries, labour markets, occupations and organizational cultures and even specific situations is worth pursuing. Presumably there are very different opinions among executives about whether or not a progressive corporate practice on gender pays off. Although equal opportunities are increasingly espoused by more and more companies, this may often be more a matter of lip service for legitimacy reasons than serious business intended to permeate corporate practices.

In terms of universal gender discrimination in working life and society, the common picture briefly outlined above may, however, be too self-evident. Let us complicate the picture somewhat. First, men do not have a monopoly on privileges and women in some respects score more points on the goods of life. That men are much better paid, have far more formal power in organizations and hold the most prestigious jobs is beyond any doubt. But equally clear is that men's life expectancy in the Western world is much shorter than women's, they end up in jail much more frequently, lose conflicts about custody of children after divorces, are forced to do military service in many countries (which for some may be seen as a privilege, but for most it is a mixed blessing or strongly negative), and more men than women commit suicide, at least in Scandinavia.

In Sweden at the time of writing, half of the cabinet members are women.¹ Women are also well represented in parliament and in many top-level public sector positions, such as university presidents. It is clearly seen as positive, indeed important, to elect or appoint women to such posts. One may argue against the representativeness and significance of these examples, seeing them as purely symbolic examples of something done for reasons of legitimacy and to appeal to female voters. One cannot, however, disregard the fact that these jobs belong to the most powerful, prestigious and broadly visible in society. The impact in substantive but perhaps even more in symbolic terms should not be underestimated. The election of women and the espoused value of having women in top positions reflects people's basically positive attitudes to females in top positions in politics and many public sector organizations. This, of course, does not mean that there are no problems for women getting and functioning in top jobs, but it shows that there are also broadly shared 'pro-women' attitudes. (In business, the situation may be different.) Of course, people may express one opinion regarding relatively distanced holders of top positions – safely located far away from one's immediate life/work context – and another when it comes to women being their own managers. Attitudes are seldom consistent.²

One may argue that the above examples are only relevant to Sweden – and a few other (gender) progressive countries – and stress that, generally, women are if not totally absent then strongly underrepresented in top jobs in most countries (including the parts of the world that this book addresses, i.e. the Western world). But in most of the Western countries the number of women in top jobs is increasing, albeit slowly. The case of Sweden is not

that atypical; even though the country is often believed to have a high degree of gender equality, the overall picture is highly contradictory and in most respects not in harmony with the espoused general positive view on female political leaders and public sector top administrators. The gender division of labour is as pronounced in Sweden as in most other Western countries. In most high-level jobs, male overrepresentation is very strong. Only about 10 to 15 per cent of higher middle³ and senior managers and seven per cent of all professors are women.⁴

There is a much higher percentage of female managers in the USA than in other countries, but also in the USA very few women reach the top jobs (Reskin and Padavic, 1994). Although women's share of management jobs has increased, the gender hierarchy in organizations has not been altered substantially. Women managers are concentrated low in chains of command, they tend to supervise workers of their own sex, and their role in decision making is primarily providing input into decisions made by men (Reskin and Ross, 1992). Only one to five per cent of all top managers are women. (The numbers differ depending on how one defines a top manager.) That does not mean that women are necessarily disadvantaged in assessments and recruitment to top jobs. A study of applicants to senior executive positions in US federal government showed that women received significantly higher performance appraisals and were more often hired than male applicants (Powell and Butterfield, 1994).

If the reader now feels a bit confused, he or she has got the message. Our point, hardly original, is that gender patterns are complex, often contradictory. There is considerable variation in signs of biases against women and subtle social mechanisms and cultural ideas disfavouring women, and there are indications of the opposite. Case studies of organizations show much variation in the work lives of men and women, in terms of careers and work conditions as well as the structures, cultures and processes affecting options, actions, values, satisfactions and sufferings (Billing and Alvesson, 1994; Blomqvist, 1994). It is not easy to discover universal mechanisms or structures below or above empirical 'surface variation'. Efforts to impose a strong notion of a universal 'patriarchy' or 'gender system', as some scholars do, are problematic and are often not very useful for the understanding of organizational phenomena, since such a notion overstates broad patterns and consistency and disregards variety and change.

For us, and this book, it is not only gender discrimination and obstacles to the realization of equal opportunities in work organizations that are important to illuminate. Nor is it solely male domination and female victimization and lost opportunities that are to be focused upon. Also of interest is the rich variation in the way organizations carry gender meanings and how men and women live their organizational lives. Work organizations are not just representative of privileges for men, compared with women, but they also – as they do for women – bring about conformism, constraints and suffering for many men. From the other angle, women

experience joy and benefits not just from wage labour but also from everyday organizational life. Some of the constraints in organizations – such as the pressure to give priority to work over family – do not solely originate from male domination, but are also contingent upon the workings of capitalism and the idea of organizations effectively and competitively producing goods and services, making a high material standard of living possible.⁵

The exploration of gender-in-organizations, the mapping of what happens to men and women at workplaces, as well as of gendered organizations, and seeing organization cultures in terms of masculine and feminine values, ideas and meanings, may lead to the telling of many stories, with different morals. Many of these stories are explicitly and intentionally pro-women, opposing male domination and aiming at improving the conditions for women. This is the single most important theme to pursue and we tend to follow this route. But we also believe that it is worth addressing how women may act conservatively in relation to equality ideals, perhaps against their own interests, and how organizational cultures may affect many men in unfortunate ways. In addition, a gender perspective on organizations can give us important insights into how organizations function, for example in terms of leadership, strategy, organizational culture, groups, communication etc. In other words, the approach goes beyond questions about positive and negative outcomes of gender patterns. This variety of significant issues on the topic of gender and organization is, for us, part of what makes the subject so exciting.

Organizations and gender – a neglected area

Why consider organizations in terms of gender? There are many good reasons for taking an interest in each of these areas and also for combining the two. Organizations are central economic institutions that take care of the production of goods and services and of a major part of the control and care of the citizens. Most of us are in daily contact with (formal) organizations, taking part in organizational activities every day, working in them or relating to them as clients or customers. Organizations are workplaces, public as well as private, sites for childcare and education, institutions taking care of social services and health, and for most people organizations fill up maybe one third of their lives. Organizations are the context of, and decisive for, our paid working life and for our well-being, and it is therefore of great importance how they function, which logic (goals and means) dominates, which actors and groups set the agenda and how the relations between people are formed. Organization theory is accordingly a large and expanding field.

Organization theory – here broadly defined – has traditionally and up to the 1980s neglected gender aspects; employees have been viewed either from a supposedly gender neutral (male) perspective or from a point of view that considers only the male part of the employees as interesting

(Hearn and Parkin, 1983; Mills, 1988). In a *Handbook of Work and Organizational Psychology* (Drenth et al., 1984) one short article out of 42 deals with 'women and work', while gender aspects are not addressed in any of the other chapters. The massive literature on organizational culture in the 1980s, often driven by an interest in the meaning of life at the workplace, hardly considered gender at all. Also many recent books on 'people' in organizations hardly address gender, women, men, masculinity or femininity (e.g. Hosking and Morley, 1991; Legge, 1995). It has not been considered what impact this might have on the resulting analysis and interpretations. Neither the fact that only men (with a very few exceptions) have participated in the process of developing knowledge and understanding of organizations nor the possible impact of this on the research process have been taken into consideration. Men's expressed views on the world – or to be less inexact, primarily the views of elite groups of men – have been the only really significant contribution in the field of management and organization and have been considered valid for the whole of humanity, critics argue. Of course, the female sex in no way guarantees an interest in gender – the books just referred to have female authors⁶ – any more than the male biological sex excludes an interest in the topic. But there is a tendency for a one-sex area in social science to neglect gender aspects. More broadly, one may question if and how a 'shift in perspective from men's to women's points of view might alter the fundamental categories, methodology, and self-understanding of Western science and technology' (Benhabib and Cornell, 1987: 1).

Masculine dominance in academic as well as organizational life has had an important influence on the kinds of questions raised and the answers subsequently produced in management and organization studies (J. Martin, 1994). Some subjects have not been considered at all or they have at least not been considered from a gender point of view. At the same time this established research is presented, and may for the 'naive' reader appear, as objective and neutral. It has been implicitly assumed and communicated that organizations are neutral to gender or that it is a man's world. The manager is assumed to be a 'he'. It is therefore rightly maintained that it is the life and work of men that has been considered the research standard, both within the human relations' school, strategic management research, cultural theory or any other known schools and fields of organization theory. This holds true for great parts of science as well. Research often uncritically reflects cultural beliefs. The traditional American concept of leadership may be described as 'a pastiche based upon a masculine ego-ideal glorifying the competitive, combative, controlling, creative, aggressive, self-reliant individualist' (Lipman-Blumen, 1992: 185). Arguably, the whole management field has a masculine bias (Collinson and Hearn, 1994, 1996); and according to Cullen (1994), even a seemingly more 'neutral' theory, such as Maslow's need hierarchy, may have a similar bias.

We shall just mention a few themes which call for attention to gender. How are organizations – as sites or scenes for human action and as

materialized structures – central to the production of values, conceptions and gender relations? How are the values people bring with them when entering organizations influencing the way things are done within the organization? Are these values influencing the way relationships are established, how power is formed, distributed and exercised, and how organizations are viewed and developed? How are attitudes, conceptions, visions, interests, values and ideals related to the 'fact' that most organizations are populated with different sexes? Gender must then be appreciated both in terms of how certain previously established orientations associated with the sexes are imported into the workplace context and how gender processes in organizations actively constitute and shape gender.⁷

A gender perspective implies analysing the importance, meaning and consequences of what is culturally defined as male or masculine as well as female or feminine ways of thinking (knowing), feeling, valuing and acting. A gender perspective also implies an analysis of the organizational practices that maintain the division of labour between the sexes. The vertical division of labour according to sex can be intimately related to conceptions of the masculine/feminine, that ascribe to phenomena a gendered meaning that is contingent upon the cultural beliefs of what are typical or natural orientations and behaviours of men and women. Hence gender symbolism will be of special interest to the organization researcher, that is the tendency that jobs (or functions) are associated with a certain understanding of gender or have a certain gender aura around them, and that, in general, the (de)valuation of feminine work gives women a lower status and a poorer pay than men. For example, ideas and norms for leadership may express a strong masculine undertone which makes leadership appear to be more natural or easy for men than for women to engage in (Lipman-Blumen, 1992; Schein, 1973).

The use of a gender perspective on organizations would lead to a higher degree of sensitivity to contradictions and ambiguities with regard to social constructions and reconstructions of gender relations, and to what we consider to be discrimination and equal opportunities at the workplace level. It is important to stress that gender relations are not statically structured and defined once and for all but are emergent and changeable. Apart from studying discriminating practices and gender bias in organizations it is also important to study the elements of modern organizations that produce tendencies towards equality between the sexes. This last aspect has been very much neglected in gender studies. As we shall see later on, a great deal of the literature tends to be somewhat one-sidedly critical and 'negative'. 'Misery stories' and an emphasis on problems are popular. There are strong reasons for a critical approach, but arguably some modern societies and many organizations have social values and rules that promote the espoused interests and opportunities of women and do not only or mainly discriminate against them – even without the use of special legislation. These (social) rules are probably of greater importance to middle-class than working-class women. Modern societies praise themselves for

being meritocratic and most (younger) people in Western societies probably claim to be in favour of an ideology that gives equal opportunities to both sexes, even though this is sometimes restricted to lip service. The possibility of letting organizations play a progressive and 'rational' part should not be excluded – even though this progressive and rational part has its limits; for example it may give women better options of employment and promotion, but it does not address wider issues such as the goals, values and interests that form organizational life in a capitalist society.

A gender perspective will not only mean dealing with the way men and women are constructed as individuals – how they are formed and reformed through social processes, how they act, how they experience their working life (as well as their private life), how they are supported and discriminated – but will also include a broader view on organizations. Some ideals and values could be seen as expressing male dominance, for example, companies that ruthlessly exploit nature, 'human resources', consumers, and so on. Ideals such as profit and maximum growth, aggressive competition, the tendency to make quantitative ideals (money) the ultimate measure of success, could be related to masculine conceptions and a male rationality. The limits of the explanatory/interpretative powers of a gender perspective are of course disputable, and it is certainly not the best perspective for the study of *all* aspects of organizations and working life. Being sensitive about the limits of its analytic and interpretive range hardly implies that women should cope with their under-privileged position in working life by a one-sided adaptation to structures, goals, languages and logics that have for ages been influenced by a strong masculine dominance. A gender perspective on organizations would imply studying these phenomena and focusing on fundamental questions of rationality, e.g. the structure and aims of the organization, maintaining a balance between a broad and an all-embracing view. The trick is to interpret gendered meanings sensitively in non-obvious situations without totalizing organizational life through seeing everything in terms of gender.

Besides studying general patterns and tendencies within organizations when we deal with the construction of gender it is also important to be aware of existing variations. Most researchers have analysed what they argue are the typical and dominant trends and patterns aiming at a general picture of gender and organization, even though diversity and multiplicity have received more attention recently.⁸ Women and men have been socialized differently, they have different educations, occupations and experiences and they take part in the process of constructing and organizing the working place according to gender in different ways. Also, organizations differ very much when it comes to historical and reproduced gender biases in social practices, just as the gendered meanings that characterize different fields of work, functions, professions and positions differ (Billing and Alvesson, 1994).

Organization theories have been developed over the years by reinterpreting, more or less radically, former understandings (Reed, 1996). The human

relations school from the 1930s stressed the social dimension of organizations. It stopped viewing work organizations as machine-like phenomena to be optimized almost regardless of the human dimensions and drew attention to attitudes, norms and group relations. The contingency theory opposed the former ideas of finding one ultimate superior form of organization and during the 1960s it started considering how differences in size, technology and environment influence the way an organization is managed and how it should be designed and structured. By the end of the 1970s critical perspectives emerged within organization theory. Instead of viewing organizations as results of a rational consensus about means and ends satisfying the needs and wishes of the majority of participants, power and the self-interests of dominating groups were stressed as important to the organization structure. Class aspects and social domination were in focus. During the 1980s the cultural dimension has been included, drawing attention to how the values and understandings of different groups influence the way they view organizations and act within them. Recently, also variation among societies in terms of how companies are organized has attracted interest and it has been apparent that Western ideas about management and organization are not exhaustive of business practices. Nowadays we have not only become conscious of, but almost take for granted, the importance of group norms, organizational environments, organizational politics and corporate as well as societal cultures.

After these new dimensions have been incorporated into the conventional 'know-how' they appear as self-evidently important, and it seems almost unbelievable that once they were not seriously considered especially significant to research and higher education. It is likely, therefore, that new central themes will emerge and qualify our understanding of the way organizations work and how people live and act within them. It is only recently that gender has moved into focus in organization theories, and in a few years it will probably appear as very narrow-minded that it was not until the mid 1990s that large numbers of researchers realized that organizations are not just composed of gender-neutral components, but populated by men and women, and that organizations are characterized by gender-related practices, values, goals, logics, languages, etc.

The idea of gender studies: sensitizing thinking

Most conventional general thinking as well as social research concerning gender aims at finding out 'how it really is'. Does leadership by women differ from leadership by men? What are the causes of unequal payment? Why are there so few females at higher organization levels? How common is sexual harassment? Which values are held by women and men respectively? One idea of gender research is to provide authoritative answers to such questions and to develop valid theories about these matters. There are, however, great problems with an approach aiming to establish the 'truth' in

gender studies as well as social science in general. The problems are of a historical, political and methodological nature.

Gender is a historical phenomenon. Gender is understood, developed and changed differently in different cultural contexts and times. There is variety between, as well as within, societal cultures. Men, women and gendered practices are dynamic, at least in modern society: they were different a decade ago and they will be different in the future. Social science is part of, and contributes to, culture and thus affects how gender understanding and practice will look in the future. Social science is affected by the historical context and intervenes in the making of history as part of the general cultural understanding. Consequently, social science does not only study gender, but contributes actively to the construction of gender as well. Cultural ideas and social practices rather than genes account for the ratio of male/female housepersons, clerks, nurses, engineers and managers. Social science is fused with cultural ideas and contributes to their development.

All statements and reasoning about gender issues are informed by value judgements and are never politically neutral. The idea of studying gender is one political choice, as is of course the 'non-choice' (not paying attention to gender). To treat the distinction between 'men' and 'women' as crucial is another. One may see other distinctions – age, sexual orientation, work orientation, ethnicity, life style, religion – as equally important or even more so, or simply refuse to divide up humans into two sexes, seeing the significance of this distinction as problematic in social science as it obscures variation and misleadingly indicates that the categories of 'men' and 'women' are universal and homogeneous.

Also how one treats different phenomena and exercises judgement is politically informed. Does one, for example, choose to emphasize what may be perceived as relative equality or relative inequality in gender relations? In Sweden, within the same occupation, women on average earn one to eight per cent less than men, when age, education, position, working time and experience has been accounted for (SOU, 1993: 7). In a Swedish context this is typically seen as inequality by those referring to these statistics, but in many other countries, where the difference is much greater, the gap may be seen as a sign of a relatively high degree of equality.⁹ Values also inform choices at other levels. How does one strike a balance between voluntarism and determinism in accounting for human action? To what extent is a particular gender division of labour treated as the outcome of 'free choice', and to what extent does the researcher emphasize constraints in the form of discriminatory practices or sex stereotypes that produce different kinds of preferences and work orientations among women and men? 'Free choice' is never a simple matter but may be understood in terms of how cultural prejudices and expectations operate as forces of power and produce certain gender-stereotypical orientations and constraints discouraging people from engaging in sex role-incongruent behaviour. On the other hand, the researcher cannot just assume that she or he 'knows best', treat women and men as ignorant 'cultural dopes' or passively

shuffled around by societal structure and disregard their espoused wishes and preferences as simple outcomes of the operation of power or false consciousness. There is no clear-cut or easy way of dealing with such issues, but how they are treated undoubtedly reflects the researcher's values and priorities. How the researcher deals with these issues is never politically neutral. In social science generally, it is impossible to avoid either questioning or reproducing existing ideas and institutions (Alvesson and Sköldberg, forthcoming).

Gender research – like other social research, but perhaps even more saliently – is thus clearly a political project. It intervenes in the negotiation of how gender is understood and thus in the (re)production of gender relations and society. This does not reduce its intellectual value and significance. Its value is, however, related to other matters than the offering of 'neutral' truths accomplished through the use of a scientific apparatus. The potential value is as a source of intellectual inspiration and as an input in ongoing conversation about how one should live one's life and shape political institutions, including companies.

Methodologically, gender relations and dynamics must be seen as a particularly difficult subject area. The most significant aspects are hidden and elusive. How social processes and cultural understandings produce and re-produce certain gendered social relations may only rarely be observed. Interview accounts about these matters may be more or less reliable. They tend to be strongly affected by the interview context and may be seen as part of a conversation following social norms for interaction rather than mirrors of pure experience (Silverman, 1985, 1993). Responses to survey questions are notoriously unreliable when it comes to issues which do not have a clear and simple meaning. Most complex and interesting issues are difficult to grasp through standardized questions. The research subjects attribute their own meanings to the questions – meanings that may deviate heavily from the meanings intended by the researcher. A particular problem concerns the subjectivity of the researcher. Although scientists are never objective, neutral and distanced towards their research, gender issues in particular are among the most personally sensitive topics one may study, meaning that existential matters, personal background and convictions, including political sympathies, are more at stake than if one is studying, for example, formal organizational structures or mergers and acquisitions or any other 'dry' subject.

Without denying that there are sometimes clear-cut answers to questions about gender which have some validity outside local space and time contexts, the major contribution of gender studies is not to produce robust and unquestionable research results which claim to establish the truth once and for all. Empirical research is undoubtedly valuable and should be central, but one must be open to the ambiguities involved and the historical and situated character of the empirical object as well as of the constructed and interpreted character of so-called data (Alvesson and Deetz, forthcoming; Calhoun, 1992; Fraser and Nicholson, 1988).

Gender over- and under-sensitivity

The purpose of gender studies is, in our opinion, to facilitate advanced thinking and reflection about gender and, thereby, about social relations, society, organizations and working life in general. Such thinking may be discussed in terms of counteracting under-sensitivity about the meaning and significance of gender in various contexts.

On the one hand gender studies should therefore aim to 'sensitize' academic disciplines, politics, management and organization decision making and, in particular, everyday life interaction of organizational practitioners about the genderedness of thinking, feeling, valuing, acting, material and social practices and structures. The major task of gender studies therefore is to oppose the persistent under-sensitivity and gender bias inherent in a lot of academic and everyday life thinking and social practices claimed to be gender-neutral. As we said, organization and management theory and managerial and working life practice often disregard the issue of gender. This book will show this in some detail.

On the other hand, however, the opposite problem also sometimes occurs in gender thinking, an inclination to gender 'over-sensitize'. This refers to a tendency in some research as well as everyday life to see gender as relevant and decisive everywhere, to emphasize the gender dimension consistently without fully considering other important aspects and dimensions. A gender perspective which assumes that male domination or patriarchy is the mechanism behind all sorts of miserable phenomena will legitimize indiscriminatory critique. Some authors do not seem to consider that it is possible to overstress a gender perspective – or the critique that it normally implies. Alternatively this risk is regarded as not significant enough to be worth taking seriously. One could of course argue that no distinction in society is more crucial than the one between male and female, that no areas therefore are gender-neutral. According to this line of thinking, everything thus bears a significant gender meaning and reflects or constitutes gender bias, normally to the advantage of men or to forms of masculinities. This argument may, however, be accepted while still insisting on the problems with gender over-sensitivity. That everything could be perceived as having some gendered meaning or that it may be difficult to point out non-trivial areas or issues that are perfectly gender-balanced or gender-neutral does not imply that a gender aspect is worth emphasizing all the time. Also aspects including a grain of 'truth' may be overstressed. Any perspective runs the risk of being used in a one-eyed fashion, reducing all phenomena to issues of men and women or masculinity and femininity.

Gender over-sensitivity thus means not considering or too quickly disregarding other aspects or possible interpretations. It means an over-privileging of gender and a neglect of alternative standpoints. It makes gender the only decisive factor, and this way gender as a mode of understanding becomes totalizing. The metaphors of masculinities and femininities take precedence and repress other metaphors/perspectives as

interesting points of departures for interpretations and theories. One could in this case also talk about gender reductionism: everything becomes a matter of gender and not much else.

There are different themes to consider in terms of gender over-sensitivity. One relates to the political function of gender studies. If the political aspect is stressed too strongly, it may be perceived as propaganda. There is an inherent dilemma in gender studies – as in much other critical work – between intellectual curiosity and academic criteria about constrained political commitment on the one hand and political engagement involving a wish to speak for the underprivileged and encourage social changes to their benefit on the other. This dilemma – or set of dilemmas – may be formulated in different ways: between gaining academic respectability and saying something important unfettered by academic norms and conventions; between open-minded curiosity and a wish to use one's privileged position and skills to change the world in a liberating direction; between a wish to be as honest as possible and a drive to facilitate one's political cause (or career prospects) through the selective reporting of (and at worst manipulating) findings, arguments and language.

Making strong political points may call for emphasizing simple, coherent, politically correct descriptions and arguments, and reducing the scope for investigating and writing about complexities and contradictions. In particular, it involves a specific kind of rhetoric. Recognizing and emphasizing signs of increased equality or conservative tendencies among women in, for example, occupational preferences or family life orientations may weaken the case for female politicians and academics as well as perhaps risking impoverishing the base for one's own career as a researcher of gender studies, as this is normally tied to the strength of a case for discrimination and suppression of women.

A related aspect of gender over-sensitivity concerns the seductiveness of gender concepts and ideas. They may be used to account for – or at least illuminate – all types of phenomena: from nuclear power to analytical thinking and creativity and language use. Instead of open-mindedly and self-critically using ideas about masculinities and femininities, these ideas may control the researcher. One may see gender and gender bias everywhere. One element here is the extreme intensiveness of the very personal and emotional character of gender. As mentioned above, gender issues involve much more of the researcher as a person than most subjects. This may be inspiring and enrich the research process – private experiences may be used productively as input – but there are also problems associated with over-sensitivity worth taking seriously. Balancing rich experiences with qualified interpretative and reflective work calls for self-critique and scrutinizing of one's own biases, use of vocabulary, selective memorizing, over-generalization from single cases and repressing alternative viewpoints. Or to say it more plainly, to be (pain)fully aware of the strong tendency not to believe it when one sees it, but to see it when one believes it (Weick, 1979).

It is hardly possible to state what is under- and over-sensitivity once and for all and seldom easy to evaluate when either of the tendencies imprints itself in a specific case. These terms have little to do with what is 'true' and 'false' and it is impossible to prescribe an appropriate degree of gender sensitivity. The terms signal problems worth reflecting on and talking about. Critics may be of help in pointing out imbalances. Sometimes the signs that somebody has fallen into one of the two traps of under- or over-sensitivity are strong. In the case of under-sensitivity for example, it is not an atypical experience during a lecture on gender that someone, sometimes a woman, protests against the claim that gender is significant in organizational contexts and suggests that 'we are all individuals'. This is of course not untrue, but the meaning of an 'individual' is hardly gender-neutral. 'Female' and 'male' individuals are encountered and do encounter themselves in various ways, involving expectations, constraints and rewards/punishments associated with dominating discourses about gender. In this section, we focus primarily on the issue of over-sensitivity, as this point is underscored in the gender literature and it is not the primary topic in the remains of the present book. Here are two examples.

A feminist friend met a woman whose (feminist) paper she had (anonymously) reviewed for a scientific journal. The paper was rejected and the author mentioned this outcome and attributed it to the journal's not wanting feminist papers. This conclusion seemed to be somewhat premature. The journal had sent this paper to be evaluated by people who encouraged and were positive towards feminist work (such as our friend). The paper was, however, rejected because it was simply not good enough ('logically flawed'), according to the opinion of people that, in principle, were supportive of feminist work.

The author in this case felt discriminated against because she was doing feminist work and this experience is undoubtedly valid in many cases, although perhaps decreasingly so in many countries. The problem is that one might end up attributing all kinds of negative outcomes to discrimination. One simply 'knows' that women and feminist academic works are often discriminated against. One is a woman, doing feminist work – ergo, one is the victim of discrimination if the paper gets a negative treatment when submitted to an academic journal. In this case, however, the paper may have had substantial scientific problems and was rejected for this reason (according to our informer).

Another example was that of a female professor at an American University who complained about sexual harassment when a reprint of Goya's 'Naked Maya' was placed in the lecture room (according to the Danish daily newspaper, *Information*, June 1994). This may be seen as taking the concept of sexual harassment rather far; little space is left for other considerations about the painting, such as the value of art or the preferences of others (men and women).

The story has another point too and also illustrates a case of under-sensitivity to gender. The Danish newspaper journalist (a male) describes

the episode as a 'bizarre example' of developments in US society. This strikes us as somewhat unreflective. Even if the interpretation 'sexual harassment' by the female professor appears to be a too mechanical, puritan and intolerant way of reacting to the painting's presence in the lecture room, the label 'bizarre' suggests that the reaction is closer to pathological than understandable. Given the domination of males gazing at objectified female bodies and its consequences for gender relations and stereotypes, the 'bizarre' overreaction of the female professor could also be understood less pejoratively and more empathically. Her experience could be respected, even though the act of complaining and demanding a removal of the painting could be seen as a lack of consideration of other values rather than avoiding anything that may be perceived as sexually offending.

The gender literature includes many examples of empirical material which is used in a way that makes it relevant to discuss in terms of gender over-sensitivity and reductionism. We will comment more specifically upon this later in the book.

How can one minimize the risk of gender over-sensitivity? Of course, this is a matter for careful discussion between people in relation to specific instances. In academic work, feedback and the sharing of opinions may also lead to better judgement. One possibility is to broaden the interpretive repertoire – the set of concepts, metaphors, theories, ideas and other interpretive resources that one masters, or others expose one to, and which makes it possible to see and note different kinds of aspects and use a variety of vocabularies and arguments when approaching empirical phenomena or developing theoretical arguments (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, forthcoming). Instead of solely reading and utilizing gender theory, other theories should be an active part of intellectual work. Marxist ideas on class, critical theory ideas on technocratic consciousness, the possibility that the one-dimensional domination of consumer societies is turning citizens into clients and submitting consumers to administrative control, as well as Foucault's notion of the interrelatedness of knowledge/power and the production of subjectivity, may be valuable (Foucault, 1980, 1982). Instead of just incorporating these ideas into gender theory and using them only to support gender interpretation, these other theories and aspects may also make it possible to produce other kinds of interpretations than the gender-related one, i.e. to use another vocabulary and stress other points than gender. The common impression after reading a gender study is that not much but gender really matters. Even though it is usually recognized that there are considerable differences within the category of women, differences associated with class, race and ethnicity are normally seen – or at least treated – as secondary, as representing variations of a general pattern. It is common that researchers 'add' class and race to gender as sources of oppression (West and Fenstermaker, 1995). Of course, the whole idea of gender studies is to focus on and develop knowledge of gender, but this main focus does not need to imply a sole emphasis on gender issues and a total neglect of themes conceptualized in other terms.

To take the problem of over-sensitivity seriously, gender studies should have access to other vocabularies and be open to the use of these. Alternative aspects and interpretations to those favouring gender as a concept should be routinely considered. What is hidden or downplayed by the use of terms such as masculinity(ies)/femininity(ies), patriarchy, sexual harassment etc. should be reflected upon and the research text be 'opened up' so that some of the cracks in the approach become visible, counter-acting totalizing writing. The reader is thus activated in relation to the text and alternative interpretations can be considered (cf. Alvesson and Sköldbberg, forthcoming; Rorty, 1989; Steier, 1991). Of course, gender studies are not only a matter of using sound judgement concerning *when* to invoke gender concepts. More crucial is *how* gender perspectives are used and interpretations are made. That is the theme of this book.

This book thus aims to contribute to a more intensively multi-level reflective way of doing gender studies, in which the researcher (or practitioner) considers alternative aspects, vocabularies and interpretations and carefully considers and acknowledges the limitations and shortcomings of the line(s) of inquiry taken. Of course, all research involves elements of reflection, but often the researcher devotes much more time and energy to developing and persuading readers about the reliability of empirical results or the virtues of a particular theoretical point. This is important enough but disregards basic uncertainties and problems. Taking a broader perspective, where not only knowledge about gender and organization but also various ways of knowing, problems in developing knowledge in politically hot and personally engaging fields are taken seriously, a more careful, reflective mode of understanding may be adopted. In the present book, we try to encourage such work in gender studies. We therefore address some different levels: (1) empirical reality, i.e. women and men in organizations 'out there'; (2) existing theories and ways of developing knowledge neglecting or focusing on gender in organizations, i.e. the frameworks that dominate research and education; (3) more general theoretical problems and pitfalls in the basic approaches – among researchers and other people – towards this fascinating but complex and difficult area of knowledge. The third point is meta-theoretical and relates to the more general theme of how a more reflective social science may be developed. Gender and organization may be seen as an example of social science in general, and some of the ideas expressed here of potential interest for reflective work in other areas. Throughout the book we, however, maintain a gender and organization focus and do not elaborate on the more general aspects in social science.

In the book we comment critically on parts of the literature and even on widely held views within the subject area. This should not be read as if we are particularly sceptical to gender studies or that this field is more problematic than most others. A reflective approach means that established ways of doing social science are critically illuminated and a reorientation is suggested. Earlier work by one of us, in which various research areas, for example organizational culture or leadership, have been reviewed and lines

of development suggested has not been more affirmative than what is expressed in the present text (e.g. Alvesson, 1993; Alvesson and Deetz, forthcoming; Alvesson and Sköldbberg, forthcoming). As gender studies are often marginalized and are faced with little understanding, not to say hostility, from conservative and gender-ignorant circles, we are eager to avoid our intentions being misunderstood or misused. We feel confident that a critical-constructive approach also addressing problems in developing knowledge about gender, and shortcomings in substantial parts of the existing literature, will be beneficial for gender and organization studies.

On readership and limitations

We have had a rather broad and mixed audience in mind when writing this book. We hope that it will be of relevance for academic and student readers in all areas of social and behavioural sciences interested in gender, organizations and working life. Organization and working life are of interest in, for example, management, sociology, psychology, anthropology, public administration and education. We use literature from all these fields, and also from history and philosophy. We are, however, taking studies from economics into account only marginally. In relation to anthropology we use culture theory to a considerable degree but we do not cover 'foreign' societies as we concentrate on Western, industrialized societies. In relation to psychology the emphasis is more on social psychology than on individual psychology associated with psychoanalysis.

The book has a broad focus, but is more oriented to qualitative issues of meaning and understanding than focused on quantitative concerns about frequencies, correlations and explanations. This does not mean that we want to emphasize the conflict between the qualitative and the quantitative, that we are very negative to the latter, or do not take such research results into account. We also utilize and discuss quantitative research and think it has value in relation to certain questions. Our emphasis is, however, interpretative.

The book is a mix of research and textbook; in other words, we aim to present an overview of the field and introduce gender perspectives while still hoping to make research contributions, e.g. add novel critique, ideas and a developed theoretical framework to existing knowledge. The research contributions are more prominent in the final sections of the book.

The book is international in scope, but not in the sense that we aim for constant comparisons. Comparison across several countries often implies a quantitative approach, and we are somewhat sceptical about what statistics may reveal about subtle issues. The international orientation is expressed instead through our attempt to utilize literature from a variety of countries. A restriction is that throughout the book, with a few minor exceptions, we only address highly (post-)industrialized countries, similar to our own. We assume that most of what we are saying is of relevance for Western

European, North American and similar countries – although variations between these (and, of course, variations within countries) should be borne in mind. We live in Scandinavia and our text reflects this; some of our comments may also be heavily influenced by the area in which we are located. We do not consider the book as a whole to be very ethnocentric, however, as we have read vast amounts of North American and European literature – in the reference list in particular US and British texts greatly outnumber Scandinavian works. We frequently remind the reader – and ourselves – that empirical studies must be considered in terms of where they come from and the specific empirical terrain they cover, for example, US female managers in the 1980s rather than female managers *per se*, and through referring to the national origin of a particular text. (The time period referred to in a study is normally indicated by the year of publication, so it is seldom necessary to point out the time of the research to the reader.)

In the book we have given priority to certain areas, especially gender division of labour, work and organizational cultures, identity, masculinities and femininities, work orientations, socialization, leadership and promotion patterns. Some areas are included but receive less attention, including sexual harassment, unpaid work, family and work, race and ethnicity, and earnings. We also devote little explicit space to how planned change may be accomplished, although it will be clear that we have greater faith in consciousness raising and learning than in efforts to accomplish changes from above through the use of, for example, sex quotas. Our emphasis in the book reflects our interests, competences and societal context, but also the wish to achieve sufficient depth, which makes it difficult to cover 'everything'.

The outline of the book

Above we discussed why and when to use a gender perspective on organizations. In the following chapter we will outline the different perspectives found within gender research. This field of research has become increasingly complex. The traditional view focusing almost exclusively on women as a neglected group or category within organizations has been replaced by a situation where several perspectives compete and where few assumptions can be taken for granted or be left unchallenged. In Chapter 3 we will deal with gender segregation, the horizontal and vertical division of labour. We will discuss the phenomenon of gender labelling – how jobs and tasks are defined not as open or neutral in terms of gender, but as masculine or feminine and thus more congruent with the male or female anatomy respectively. A related issue is why male jobs tend to be more valued and, in particular, are better paid than female. A particular aspect is that top-level jobs are generally viewed and characterized as masculine. But why is division of labour according to gender and gender segregation still

common, and why have so few women reached top-level positions? These are questions we will explore in some depth in subsequent chapters. In Chapter 4 we deal with how constructions of masculinities and femininities permeate social life, and guide and constrain people's behaviour, in particular through defining the identities of men and women. Arguably, understanding masculinities and femininities is an important key to understanding gender division of labour and other organizational phenomena. In Chapter 5 we treat organizational culture in terms of gender and also discuss the construction of masculinities (and femininities) in specific organizational contexts. We will explore how rites, material expressions of culture and language reflect and actively construct gendered meanings. As most organizations are 'created' and/or headed by men, masculinity is the dominant characteristic of work functions and cultures. This chapter therefore to some extent focuses on masculinity rather than femininity. In Chapters 6 and 7 the focus is on women in management, especially promotion and leadership. While Chapter 6 summarizes the development of, and current research situation on, women in management, the subsequent chapter reviews contemporary assumptions and ideas about women in management from a four-way perspective. We look at some alternative positions in accounting for women's leadership style, difficulties encountered by women in attaining managerial jobs and some of their problems, such as a high stress level, when working as managers. In Chapters 8 and 9 we discuss the field of gender and organization from a broader perspective, treating organizational issues on the border between gender and other critical perspectives. We discuss some basic problems in gender organizational studies and suggest some ideas for an organization analysis that is sensitive to oppositions, ambiguities and local variations in different organizations, this way advancing our understanding of organizations as complex and interesting phenomena, where people live different lives responding to different initial conditions. We also touch upon how gender studies may avoid being ghettoized and cut off from mainstream concerns – still neglecting issues of gender. Moving to something in between gender-blind and gender-one-eyed understandings of organizations is seen as a vital task.

Notes

1 Although women on average only have 16 per cent of cabinet seats in the EU, there are wide variations within Europe. From Sweden where women account for 50 per cent of the cabinet members, to 39 per cent in Finland, 35 per cent in Denmark, 35 per cent in the Netherlands, seven per cent in the United Kingdom and four per cent in Greece.

The proportion of women in national elected assemblies in the EU also differs very much. The percentage of female members in all the national parliaments varies from 25 to 40 per cent in Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden to 12 to 17 per cent in Belgium, Ireland, Italy, Luxemburg, Portugal and Spain, and finally to six to seven per cent in France, Greece and the United Kingdom (European Network of Experts, 1996).

2 In terms of gender equality we believe it is safe to say that almost no one escapes contradictions and inconsistencies in the attitudes expressed in different situations.

3 Of male employees three per cent are managers, whereas less than 0.5 per cent of female employees are managers in the private sector; in the public sector six per cent of male and 1 per cent of female employees are managers, according to official statistics (SCB, 1996).

4 In Sweden, as in most other European countries, senior positions (professorships) are held by a limited number of university teachers: most faculty members are lecturers. When the above statistics about the low degree of female professors were published, they were interpreted by politicians and others as a clear indication of gender discrimination in employment practices and the parliament decided to have 30 professorships plus a number of junior positions reserved for women, in order to improve the imbalance. A more cynical interpretation would be that they wanted to do something that would serve as proof of commitment to equality. Then some investigators showed that the number of women appointed as professors was in almost perfect correlation with the number of women applying for the positions. In other words, a female applicant had the same chance of getting the position as a male applicant. This, of course, does not prove that universities are in fact gender-neutral. It is likely that there are complex patterns associated with the way science is constructed – often in dry, impersonal terms – and that various kinds of gender biases, perhaps more pronounced some time ago than at present, account for the limited number of female professors. Many academic cultures may be based on masculine values. This is not different from what is typical for most parts of working life, in Sweden and in other countries.

5 One may argue that capitalism, or at least certain versions of it, carries a heavy ingredient of male domination and that gender equality would mean abandoning or domesticating capitalism. Capitalism cannot, however, be reduced to male domination, but needs to be explored also in non-gendered terms.

6 They have, however, addressed gender in other writings (e.g. Dachler and Hosking, 1991; Legge, 1987).

7 Sex and gender are overlapping concepts. Sex is typically seen as referring to biological sex, i.e. the fact that nature produces people as men and women. Gender refers to how men and women are being formed through social and cultural processes. The distinction will be critically discussed later in the book.

8 Often diversity is reduced to considering the formula of gender, class and ethnicity (e.g. Ferguson, 1994). While acknowledging the risk of getting caught in complexity and detail, it is important to be aware of variation also within these sociological standard categories. There may be interesting diversities within black middle class US women, for example. People may also differ depending on which of their parents they primarily identify with: far from all identify with the parent of the same sex. Life style, nationality, sexual orientation, age, religion and family situation also account for variation as do individual differences.

9 Gender wage differences are more pronounced between women's jobs and men's jobs, i.e. in occupations dominated by males and females respectively. In Sweden, on average, women earn about 75 per cent of what men earn. In the UK women's average pay is around 72 per cent of men's (Rees, 1992) and in the US women's wages average 70 per cent of men's (Reskin and Padavic, 1994).

2

Different Perspectives on Gender

In the previous chapter we argued for a gender perspective and touched on some of the main problems in a general way. This chapter presents some alternative perspectives and their respective problems and difficulties.

Gender studies are dominated by feminism. 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. Chafetz, for example, 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' (1988: 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. Many contemporary feminists also think it is important to consider class and racial oppression as part of feminism.

We prefer the concept gender studies to feminist studies for several reasons. The most important is that gender relations can and should be investigated in other ways than strongly 'pro-female' ones, 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, a growing although still undeveloped subfield. An isolated focus on women appears too narrow as women can hardly be understood without considering gender relations. It 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. 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 committed) attitude.

The main part of gender studies seems to evolve around three major points: (1) the notion of gender is central to 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, oppressions and oppositions; (3) gender relations are seen as social constructions. They are not naturally given – offsprings of biology – 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 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. The social nature of how men and women are developed has motivated a preference for the label 'gender' instead of 'sex'. The latter is often said to refer to biological sex, while 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 (see Chapter 1, note 7). The distinction is somewhat unclear (Hallberg, 1992), as ideas about biology are social phenomena – understanding biology is not just a matter of letting nature speak for itself (Kaplan and Rogers, 1990) – and most people interested in gender nevertheless take biological identity as a given point of departure and talk about 'men' and 'women' as unproblematic, easily identifiable categories. Sex thus dominates. Therefore we are not inclined to stress the sex-gender distinction, but follow praxis and use 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 distinguishable.

The various positions within feminism can be identified and classified in different ways. A common way is to classify positions according to their *political standpoints*; that is, distinguishing them according to the way they view society and what they consider to be desirable changes, one typically talks about liberal, radical and socialist feminism. *Liberal feminism* aims at gender equality but does not seriously address or question any other aspects of society than the ones which directly influence and disfavour women and their opportunities. A slightly ironic interpretation of this position would be that the idea is only to make 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. Society is seen as worthy of critical scrutiny only in those respects which clearly disfavour women's access to the same options as men and where men obviously are oppressing women (e.g. sexual violence). 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 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 to 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. 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. *Socialist feminism* is partly inspired by Marxist theory and studies society in a critical way with the ambition of contributing to a radical change where new gender relations are included as central elements. A significant example is dual systems theory which is based on the idea of an alliance between capitalism and patriarchy in early capitalism (Hartmann, 1979). This alliance is believed still to exist at a social level today as men hold the formal positions of power in politics and work life. 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 feminism focuses on changes in society in a more general way that will also benefit other unfairly treated groups, including groups that are not restricted to only one sex (the poor, the working class). The oppressive features of capitalism are highlighted. It also takes issues such as ecology seriously, seeing exploitation of nature as an inherent characteristic of capitalism and its dominating, masculinistic logic.

Another common way of classifying gender positions is according to the researcher's view on *knowledge*. 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 elements 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, explicitly or implicitly imprinted in theoretical frameworks and methodological ideals. Research ideals such as objectivity, neutrality, quantitative measurement may, for example, be seen as gender-neutral or strongly masculine.

We will follow Harding's (1987) distinctions and vocabulary here. She classifies the dominating orientations into: gender as a variable, a feminist standpoint perspective and poststructuralist feminism. It seems to be the most commonly used framework for review purposes (e.g. Olesen, 1994).¹ It identifies the three most common orientations, especially in the context of organization studies. We will also incorporate some of the other

distinctions that overlap her three categories. Even though the evolution of gender research could be described in terms of phases, this does not imply that the development is one-dimensional or that one phase follows logically upon the other. In a certain way all phases are present at the same time and different subjects are rooted more or less firmly in different phases. Most research on organizations where gender is considered is rooted in Phase 1 (gender as a variable) even though this is at times combined with Phase 2 (feminist standpoint theory), while an expanding body of research has Phase 3 (post-feminism) as its starting point. Often this is, however, combined with elements of the political commitment salient in Phase 2.

Of course, all distinctions and ways of dividing 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. A number of authors and texts are difficult to press into the scheme. 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 model is of pedagogical value and adds to the understanding of the field of gender studies, at least for the newcomer.

The 'gender-as-a-variable' perspective

The first line of approach views gender (sex) as a variable and maintains women as a relevant and unproblematic research category. One is basically interested in comparisons between men and women in terms of inequality and discrimination and aims to explain 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). The gender-as-a-variable perspective investigates 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. We should therefore take possible differences between men and women into consideration when we want 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.²

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.

Variable research 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 1960s, 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 the variable 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, 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).

The method of this approach can be quantitative as well as qualitative, but the former is probably most common. The variable perspective matches what Harding (1987) calls feminist empiricism; it finds that social inequalities and negative attitudes towards (or thoughtlessness about) women influence research. Feminist empiricism aims at making research more scientific – more objective, neutral and exact – by eliminating irrational (prejudiced) elements such as gender stereotypes hidden in the research design or in ways of reasoning. This view often ends up promoting a kind of gender-conscious positivism in which the sophisticated and non-biased treatment of the sex variable is emphasized. Even if some versions of feminist empiricism dissociate themselves from deduction, hypothesis testing and quantitative measurements, as is the case in certain empiricist qualitative methods, such as 'grounded theory', these versions can still be associated with a soft form of (neo-)positivism (Alvesson and Skoldberg, forthcoming; Guba and Lincoln, 1994).³ Values such as objectivity and neutrality are held high, and assumptions about a robust reality out there which can be rationally studied through the rigorous application of the correct procedure are central.

Critique of the gender-as-a-variable approach

As mentioned, variable research is the dominating approach especially within management and psychology but also within other fields of gender studies. This approach has, however, been very much criticized, especially when it comes to the notion of science, the question of method and its