

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION: GENDERED PROCESSES AND EQUALITY IN SELF-MANAGING TEAMS

The task of this final chapter is to summarize my main research findings and to discuss the possibility of improving organizational gender equality through self-managing teams. I also reflect upon the theory of gendered organization and elaborate on some difficulties involved in making visible an organization's "gendered substructures" (Acker, 1990). The conclusion briefly outlines future directions for the study of gendered processes in work organizations.

#### 6.1. Summary of Findings

I found that gendered processes shaped teamwork in all four case-study teams, although the processes varied across the teams. I focus here on two factors that, in my view, influenced the ways in which gender shaped teamwork: the organizational status or position of a team and the professional status of team members. In order to visualize the intertwining effects of gender and organizational position, I present the key findings in Tables 6.1 through 6.3. This format also displays the multiple case study design and allows for a comparison across the teams. Most importantly, the table format illustrates that, while gender shaped work in each team, the processes were different. Since I explain the processes in great detail throughout the chapters, here I briefly summarize the key findings in a bullet format along six key dimensions that emerged from the findings: (1) gender division of tasks and (2) gendering in customer service, (3) division of technology and technical skills, (4) spatial unity, (5) emotions, and (6) metaphors. To make visible the intersection of organizational hierarchy, occupational sex-segregation, and gendered processes, I list the teams from higher to lower organizational status: the management-level Omni City County team, the Motorcol CSN team, Eastern Alliance Special Projects team, and, finally, the Employee Credit team.

Table 6.1.

Summary of Findings: “Division of Tasks” and “Customer Service”

| <b>DIMENSION</b>                         | <b>CITY COUNTY</b>   | <b>CSN</b>  | <b>SPECIAL PROJECTS</b>   | <b>EMPLOYEE CREDIT</b>   |
|--|--|---|---|--|
| <b>(1) Gender division of tasks</b>      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Both men and women in managerial level jobs; team leaders, however, men</li> <li>• Relational tasks devalued, community relations expert often interrupted in meetings</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Despite a cross-functional task-sharing attempt, male-dominated occupations (engineering and field service) shy away from or directly refuse to perform clerical tasks, such as phone service</li> <li>• Answering telephones seen by engineers as a feminine job, which creates conflict</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Everyone involved in masculine work, i.e., technical tasks; less gender division</li> <li>• Answering telephones is a problem as men prefer to lunch together, leave phones to be attended by women</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unifunctional team of feminized, phone service tasks</li> <li>• A former branch manager becomes a team coach after he is viewed as performing gender-atypical tasks in phone service; as coach, he unobtrusively monitors the (mostly women) team members’ interactions with customers</li> </ul> |
| <b>(2) Gendering in customer service</b> | n/a  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Callers from outside treat women as engineers’ secretaries; women claim responsibility for engineers’ clerical tasks is not part of their information work</li> </ul>  | n/a   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Customers phoning in for loans often ask to speak to a man, although the women in the team have more experience and higher lending limits</li> </ul>  |

Table 6.2.

Summary of Findings: “Division of Technology” and “Spatial Unity”

| DIMENSION   | CITY COUNTY  | CSN  | SPECIAL PROJECTS   | EMPLOYEE CREDIT   |
|---|--|--|--|---|
| <b>(3) Gender division of technology and technical skills</b> | n/a  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women seen by engineers as “information-oriented,” not technologically adept; regardless, women have learned the basic make-up of engines they sell</li> <li>• Engineers plan for a web-based engine ordering, which may reduce or replace the information women’s jobs; possible connection to technological displacement of clerical tasks</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women work with large, mainframe systems; men program PCs</li> <li>• Men consider women experts in mainframe computer systems</li> </ul>  | n/a   |
| <b>(4) Spatial Unity</b>                                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Off-site, 3-day long team meetings create a sense of unity, cooperation, and commitment among team members</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some team members claim to enjoy working in close proximity of each other; some male engineers feel “exposed” and complain about lack of privacy</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Men complain about lack of privacy after their offices are replaced with cubicles</li> <li>• Cubicle spatial arrangement may bring greater interaction into mixed-sex teams, but not necessarily greater gender parity</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individually-based phone service agents sit in low-walled cubicles but each person faces the wall</li> <li>• Proximity aids in talking about work and customers</li> </ul> |

Table 6.3.

Summary of Findings: “Emotions” and “Metaphors”

| DIMENSION            | CITY COUNTY  | CSN  | SPECIAL PROJECTS  | EMPLOYEE CREDIT  |
|----------------------|--|--|---|--|
| <b>(5) Emotions</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Team meetings favor aggressive interaction; displays of vulnerability devalued; women repair hurt feelings in the restroom</li> <li>• Labeling a woman’s concern for the client as “being oversensitive,” men are able to devalue her contribution</li> <li>• Clear separation of emotions and rationality; women deny being “emotional”</li> <li>• Women report having to “tone down” their direct style to protect team peace; “relational work”</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Team members rarely have storming disagreements; tears have to be hidden by both women and men; tears and vulnerability are gendered regardless of the person’s sex</li> <li>• Women expected to be aggressive; sometimes women use aggression as gender-atypical behavior to get their opinions heard; resistance</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• With separate tasks, people’s interest do not collide; few disagreements in team meetings; meetings rare and mainly informative</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women’s aggression is discouraged; men’s aggression seen as ‘natural’</li> <li>• Team meetings are informational and controlled by the team leader, which discourages open emotion displays and disagreement</li> </ul> |
| <b>(6) Metaphors</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Team described as “family” (intimacy) and “football team” (division of labor, strategy)</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Team as “family” (intimacy, marriage, expressive tasks); task division among subgroups described as “baseball team”</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Team as “family” (close-knit relations)</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Team as “family” (parental relations, “mothering,” expressive tasks)</li> </ul>   |

The tables illustrate concretely the differences and similarities in the gendered processes across the four teams. It is evident that the organizational level, the team's task, and the members' professional status also shape the ways in which gendered processes occur in them. For example, serving external customers poses similar gendered processes for women in customer service jobs across teams: the women in both the CSN and the Employee Credit team were subjected to similar gendered expectations from customers who either saw them as the men's secretaries (CSN) or as without power to make definitive loan decisions (Employee Credit). The similarities of these women's experiences also indicate that, despite a team's organizational status--for example, the CSN team was clearly a self-managed team--external customers continued to expect gender-appropriate behavior from women members.

Possibly because of the City County team's higher organizational position compared to the other case-study teams, gender, more than task divisions, shaped the team's interaction patterns. While the City County women felt empowered, willing, and able to express themselves directly and aggressively in the team meetings, they still had to continuously dissociate themselves from more feminine emotions, such as vulnerability. In the lower-level Employee Credit team, however, women were discouraged from being direct, while a man's aggressive outburst was justified as natural. Moreover, while gendered task divisions existed in all teams, they were shaped by the nature of the team's general task. Interestingly, the gendered task division concurred with perceptions of women's technical inability when technical and non-technical jobs were housed in the same team (the CSN team). However, I did not find similar perceptions in a team where everyone had a "technical" job (Special Projects). Hence, the persistent gender division of tasks in teams proposes an important question for the future of teamwork, that is, whether teams will be able to bring about more egalitarian gender relations if they are cross-functional and, as such, are likely to include both masculinized and feminized jobs.

## **6.2. Discussion: Can Self-Managing Teams Foster Gender Equality?**

The initial motivation for this study was to explore in depth the premise that teams will bring about more egalitarian organizational relations, although my interest was not so much in finding how teams fostered more egalitarian *employee-management* relations as in examining if and how they facilitated more equal *gender* relations. My findings indicate, however, that the two structures, organizational hierarchy and gender hierarchy, are intertwined and that to break down or maintain one will always affect the other. For example, self-management took on different forms at different organizational levels and, as the tables show, gender relations were mediated by the professional and organizational status of the team. Embedded in the notion of "organizational level" is the overarching sex-segregated labor force, which predisposes teams to gendered jobs and work tasks. Especially in the service sector, teams that combine several functional tasks will likely host occupations that are sex-segregated and thus divide teams into masculine and feminine jobs, sometimes even before they begin their work.

How can teams that involve sex-segregated occupations then overcome the persistent devaluation of female-dominated jobs and the attitudes against them? One answer to this question is to draw attention to the increased interaction among these sex-segregated occupations, especially in self-managing teams. Self-managing teams often depend on their ability to work together and interact well across functions in order to survive in a competitive organizational environment. Hence, by

increasing team members' exposure to different occupations, jobs, and their holders, self-managing teams could potentially help men members re-evaluate their attitudes toward women and men (e.g., engineers' claim that women are not technically oriented). While that could be one way to challenge gendered occupational boundaries, of course, it would be a long-term development and one that could be hampered by the constantly shifting market imperatives that also influence organizational structures and management strategies. In other words, a move away from team-based management might easily nullify any gender-egalitarian "side-effects" of self-managing teams.

Finally, based on my findings, I conclude that self-managing teams may indeed provide a stepping stone for developing gender equality at the micro-level of teams. However, as long as teams exist in hierarchical organizations, the possible benefits (predicted by team advocates) that could result from intra-team equality are unlikely to spill over to the broader organization. Also, the fact that U.S. companies have adopted and developed a distinctly American team model (Appelbaum and Batt, 1994) which stresses team leadership (e.g., coaches and leaders) and supports the implementation of teams within hierarchical organizational structures may project a brighter future for increased profit rather than heightened equality.

### **6.3. Developing the Theory of Gendered Organization**

The strength of Acker's (1990; 1992a) theory of gendered organization is that it enables the researcher to identify specific gendered processes as well as locations where they might occur. Although her theory is not the only way in which gendered processes could be detected; however, it is thus far the most comprehensive attempt to see organizations as whole systems that produce and reproduce gender inequality. But the strength of Acker's theory is also its weakness: by loosely outlining the different levels of analysis at which gendering takes place, it simultaneously overlooks some of the more situated, micro-level gendered processes. For that reason, I complemented the gendered processes of the "interactions between individuals" and the "internal mental work of individuals to shape their identities and behavior to fit the organizational gender norms," with Joyce Fletcher's (1998) concept of "relational practices," which allowed me to analyze the ways in which women, through interaction, also could resist gendering.

In fairness to Acker, I must note that she does not suggest a specific method for finding gendered processes. It is therefore possible that relying predominantly on in-depth interviews may not fully reveal all four gendered processes. Others who have conducted extensive ethnographies with long-term participant observation (see, for example, Jennifer Pierce, 1995) have shown gendered processes in more depth than this study does. I therefore suggest that some of the shortcomings of the theory of gendered organization may have been exacerbated by the research method used in this study. Longer participant observation in the four teams might have enabled me to better articulate the nuances in the gendered processes that I now could only describe through the team members' accounts.

The fact that many members, especially women, so adamantly spoke against the idea that their teams did have a gender bias led me to wish for a more theoretical understanding of the "gender denial" phenomenon. It is obvious that gender is a confusing matter for organizations that operate on the principle of "gender neutrality." Hence, the fact that members of organizations and teams discredited gender makes sense. But, how should a researcher tease out evidence for the *presence*

of gender when a respondent argues for the *absence* of it? And, more importantly, how should a *feminist* researcher approach such a situation, when he/she has learned to always be open to the participants' own interpretations of their experiences, even to the point of validating his or her findings by having the respondents read them? Since the issue emerged in this study, I propose one way to approach the participants' tendency to discredit gender.

By identifying the locations where gendered practices occur (e.g., division of labor, hierarchy, symbols, etc.), one also can use the theory of gendered organization to make visible the gender ideologies of organizations. For example, when a woman corporate manager denies that gender could be an obstacle against advancing in her organization and, instead, blames her disadvantage on the organizational hierarchy, she refers directly to a gendered process of reproducing organizational hierarchy. In addition to hierarchy, team members also referred to other practices 'at fault', including corporate structure, titles, education, technical profession, functional tasks, and technical knowledge. In other words, when a team member claimed gender was not the root of a problem but, instead, that the blame should be placed on the fact that "there are few women in the corporate structure" or that "women do not take technical courses in school," they referred to structures and processes that *are* gendered. What the denial of gender reveals is, in fact, how strongly the ideology of organizational gender-neutrality is embedded in the workplace and in society and is reproduced by the workers themselves. To conclude, while teams may change the visible architecture of opportunity by masking the "ceilings" that used to impede women's upward mobility, my findings show that organizational hierarchies continue to live inside (especially cross-functional) self-managing teams through the values team members place on masculine and feminine occupations and tasks.

#### **6.4. Avenues for Future Research on Gender and Organizations**

The study of gendered organizations has become an important area of research during this decade (Acker, 1998). Despite the increasing number of participatory initiatives in the workplace, which also include self-managing teams, at this time, I am not aware of any studies on gendered processes in work teams. Therefore, this study provides an important contribution to the understanding of how the current use of self-managing teams is gendered.

The literature on self-managing teams and teamwork is mostly silent on gender issues. Gender issues often are lumped together with a broader topic of "organizational diversity" (e.g., Jackson and Ruderman, 1995; Chemers, Oskamp, and Costanzo, 1995), which emphasizes organizational responses to the increasing presence of racial-ethnic minorities in the workplace. Since women are already a relatively steady presence in the workplace, especially in the service sector, gender can easily become overlooked as organizations educate their members to deal with racial-ethnic diversity.

Interestingly, teams have acquired a relatively benign image among gender researchers. For example, Acker (1992a: 260) touches upon the possibility of flatter organizations (and teams) to dismantle oppressive gender hierarchies, at least at the higher organizational levels (see also, Iannello, 1992). Therefore, studies are needed to examine in more breadth to what extent teams can foster gender equality. Moreover, studies are needed also to "test" some of the popular notions of teams as "women-friendly" or "feminine" structures (e.g., Peters, 1990), in which women can flourish and become empowered. Certainly, in the light of this study, teams are still a

long way from such a state of empowerment. Perhaps studies that identified some concrete strategies that women in teams use to resist organizational gendering would be infinitely more informative.

It is likely that the theory of gendered organization will continue to guide feminist organizational research and that future studies will fine-tune the theory to better fit the reality of organizations. I therefore think it critical to take into account the idea of resistance in developing Acker's framework. Although Acker (1992a: 253) touches upon the idea that gendering can also involve resistance, to date, most studies have focused predominantly on gender oppression (Alvesson and Billing, 1997). As a result, we know a great deal about how organizations are biased against women and much less about how women at different organizational levels resist gender subordination. Researchers as well as women who work in organizations and teams would undoubtedly benefit from knowledge of these practices. Knowing how to resist gendering at the level of daily routines and interaction might prove to be more effective for women's advancement than waiting for organizational structures to become more egalitarian.