

*Class and Gender in Organizations*¹

Why class matters. New organizational forms, the nature of inequality in organizations, and the relationship of class with other social processes like gender demand that we address class as an important issue in today's organizations. While class is ever present in organizational life, it is rarely discussed directly or with legitimacy. Nevertheless, comments such as "teams do not include support staff in their meetings and do not recognize their contributions," "senior managers are distant and out of reach, with too many perks and privileges," and "managers talk of empowerment, but their actions do not match," are all revealing of class relations in an organization.

Why is it important to address class and why consider its interaction with gender? First, as organizations restructure and re-engineer – changes which lead to flatter structures, downsizing, more teamwork, more contracting out, peer assessment, and other innovations – new relations are required among people in different positions. These roles shift many of the traditional functions of management to teams and workers. In this changing context, ways of working based on hierarchical role differences are no longer effective. For example, in self-managed teams, workers must make important decisions. When managers hold on to traditional internalized hierarchies of class, it is difficult for them to coach and mentor workers in the new team structure and it is difficult for workers to feel empowered. Second, technology and information access are revolutionizing decision-making, creating the need for people in organizations to relate in new ways and across different levels. Rigid, hierarchical models of communi-

cating no longer fit. Third, class – in addition to race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, and other social differences – shapes individuals' social identities, their perspectives, and their needs and interactions in the workplace. By not including class as one of the dimensions of difference and identity, we miss a vital piece of the dynamics of gender and diversity in organizations.

For example, when a group of women in a manufacturing plant were asked to describe what it was like to work in their organization, they all mentioned, "we have to prove ourselves." But, for the working class women on the production line this meant, "swearing like a man, dressing like a man, and behaving like a man," while women in office and managerial positions could wear skirts and behave more femininely. All the women suffered from a lack of accessible daycare, but women on the line had more difficulties balancing child-care and work needs, given their changing shift schedules. The working class women also lost "points" every time they were late to work because of family care problems; ten points and they would be suspended. Office and managerial women, who were not under the point system, did not have this additional threat to their jobs. While they all "pulled together as a group of women," important differences in how working women and office/managerial women experienced work were revealed by attending to the intersection of gender and class.²

The lack of attention to class in the context of diversity initiatives and powerful myths about class hinder our understanding of class inequalities, their impact on

organizations and work, and class' relation to other social differences. I will show that the same technology of education and systems change that is used to address differences such as race, gender, and sexual orientation in the workplace can be adapted to address class differences.

The silence on class in organizations. While new organizational structures, technology, and the diversity of the workforce demand a break from the traditional ways in which we think about and approach class in organizations, there are few models and strategies that help managers, workers, and consultants approach the issue. My research identifies three important barriers to directly naming class as "a difference that makes a difference" in organizations.

The first difficulty is the belief that the United States is a classless society where class differences do not exist. Yet, the gap between the "haves and have nots" is larger than at any other time in the United States.³ The image of a classless society is supported by a belief that class is like a ladder with people in the lower, middle, and upper social groups "moving up or down" according to individual will and hard work. But much sociological evidence contradicts this myth, like the fact that the best predictor of one's social class is the class and educational background of one's parents.⁴

The second hindrance to our ability to speak about class in organizations is a cultural environment that does not allow any critique of capitalism or its negative effects. Thus, if a person questions some negative consequences of the economics

of capitalism, like the public costs of private corporations⁵ or the exorbitant salaries of CEOs,⁶ s/he is labeled a leftist, a radical, or worse, an idealist without business savvy. Not good things to be in a corporation. This creates a climate of intolerance and silence that hinders understanding of how capitalism involves many forms of class relations that impact how organizations function.

Third, many of us have been taught to believe that class is an issue “out there” in society and that social class and societal class relations are not reflected in the apparently neutral shape of organizational hierarchies. Organizations are supposed to be meritocracies where only individual

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effort and ability, not one’s class, determine access and opportunities. This belief does not help us see how social class,

like gender, is reflected and reproduced in the everyday practices of organizations: job hierarchies, compensation, and judgments about which work is more or less valued. The macro-practices of class at the societal level get translated into specific micro-practices internal to organizations.

Given that class issues are increasingly important and that powerful myths work against addressing class in organizations, what can be done? We need to open the conversation and make a space where class can be talked about and understood as an important dimension difference in today’s organizations. While initiating and facilitating a dialogue on class is not easy, following is an educational approach to class that can help.

An educational approach to class. The purpose of this educational approach is three-fold: 1) to increase the individual’s understanding of the complex dynamics of class in organizations; 2) to begin to identify alternatives to the current class divides that hinder good work relations

and productivity; and 3) to commit to actions to ameliorate the negative consequences and unfair practices of current class arrangements in organizations. The approach is based on concepts and activities commonly used in many diversity initiatives, where personal awareness combined with understanding and behavior change are the basis for individual learning and change.⁷

The method of work combines group exercises, discussions, and ample dialogue in which participants engage with each other and explore the models presented. It is important to use this approach as part of a long-term change effort in structures, policies, and culture and not to present it as an isolated activity or program.

The first activity is called *Questions to reflect on class background and current situation*.⁸ It is an experiential exercise where participants reflect on a set of questions about their background and current class situation. The conversation that ensues helps break the silence on class and introduces class as an important dimension of one’s identity, experiences, and perspectives in the world.

Then I use a *Model on differences and power*. This helps us to understand class as a dimension of social identity that impacts who we are and how we view the world. To explore which are the class differences that get ranked and which groups have more or less “class” power in their organization, I ask participants to brainstorm on which groups are ‘one-up’ and which ‘one-down.’ Common answers are: “salaried people are up, non-salaried people are down;” “degreed people are up, and non-degreed people are down;” and “owners are up, workers are down.” Thus, given the opportunity, people are able to name some of the perceived class differences in their own workplaces.

Understanding class as an element of identity involving differences, ranking, and power initiates the conversation, but there is usually a lot of confusion about what exactly class is and how it is different from race and gender. The confusion is partly because of the inextricable in-

teraction between class, race, and gender, and partly because class is a complex dynamic that involves economic status as well as social status. Class is reflected in the way one dresses, the clubs to which one belongs, the neighborhood in which one lives – that is, one’s social status. But class is also about one’s wealth, the kind of work one does, and one’s education and income – that is, one’s economic status. In my programs, people mention “salary disparities,” “how you talk,” or “your degree and the school you went to” as examples of the ranking of class dimensions which result in differential treatment and access to opportunities in their organizations.

I then move to a *Model of the class structure in organizations*. This is an adaptation of Joan Acker’s analysis of gender processes in organizations. It focuses on the class processes within organizations that produce and reproduce class differences.⁹ The internal class structure of an organization can be studied by identifying three aspects of organizational life: 1) class divisions; 2) class symbols and identities; and 3) class interactions. When we are able to identify how these elements operate in an organization, we can then begin to change the micro-practices of class that act as barriers to good work in today’s organizations.

- Class divisions are established and maintained in many organizations through the requirement of degrees and educational criteria for jobs, especially for managerial and technical positions. Workers in an organization for which I consulted described the educational degree as setting up a class division, which functioned like a drawbridge: “Unless you have the diploma, the drawbridge doesn’t go down to let you move up the organizational hierarchy.”

Some may say, “Well, that is the way it is; people work hard for their degrees and acquire the necessary skills and there is nothing wrong with hierarchies and educational criteria.” But degree requirements can create unfair class divisions. For example, in many organizations, people at the bottom of the hierarchy are not given

the same opportunities and encouragement to pursue a higher degree. Shifts and irregular schedules combined with family responsibilities make it almost impossible for production workers to take advantage of part-time educational programs. Thus, workers do not have equal opportunities to get the educational credentials needed to advance. In addition, many workers know how to do the job. They perceive the degree not as a requirement, but as a hurdle that sustains class differences and produces unnecessary frustration, lack of commitment, and waste of human talent. Skill-based and experience-based systems of compensation have been successfully implemented in many organizations as one way to eliminate this contested system of “credentialing.”

- Class symbols and class identities are constructed in many ways and forms in organizations. Consider the following example. In an insurance company I visited, the claims agents worked on the sixth floor of a large gray building. The floor was divided into cubicles, each woman assigned to a small, cramped area. A big monitor located on the middle of the floor flashed the number of calls waiting to be answered. In one corner of the floor was the supervisor’s “office,” a small space with a metal desk, a couple of chairs, and a few family pictures. I was then taken to meet the company’s Vice President of Human Resources. We walked next door to a building with white and black marble floors. A huge chandelier, a wooden staircase, and a bronze sculpture converged in the middle of a magnificent entrance. I was led to a spacious office where an assistant courteously asked me to wait. While I waited, I peeked into the VP’s office and marveled at the exquisite décor: a large and elaborate mahogany desk with a matching set of period chairs, pink and olive green colors for the walls, and soft light illuminating the original paintings. When we met, I could not help but contrast the classic dark, wool suit and silk blouse of this well-dressed managerial woman with the pants and casual sweaters of the agents working in the other building. The morning had provided me

a tour of the symbols of class in that organization.

How often does this VP visit the agents’ cubicles? How many of the agents have been invited to the VP’s office? Symbols such as office space and privileges like assigned parking forge identities that support class divisions. Managers and workers, even when they are all women, become estranged from each other, less knowledgeable of what each one does, disconnected by their very different workstyles, and less able to communicate and work toward a common goal across these class differences.

- Class interactions are the ways in which people behave with one another that enact differences of class and job position creating privileges and exclusions. For example, in a session I conducted, a group of white, male hourly workers drew a picture to describe the organizational climate. The picture showed a leg in a big boot: on the boot was the inscription “management-decision makers” and between the boot and the floor was “everyone else.” The picture conveyed their anger and disappointment because they felt disrespected and ignored by the managers, “who don’t care about what we say,” and oppressed by the structure of work (a seven-day shift) and a rigorous point system. The picture drawn by the managers, on the other hand, showed a cruise ship moving forward under sunny skies, though a few dark clouds and sharks threatened its voyage. The managers in the room were surprised by these different perceptions and hurt by the workers’ generalizations: “You’re stereotyping us. Not all managers are like that!”

The conversation that followed helped participants clarify some of the events and behaviors that contributed to these perceptions and demonstrated how individuals throughout the hierarchy – workers, supervisors, and managers – were making assumptions about each other based on their class positions. These assumptions were blocking information-sharing, creating animosities, and limiting the contributions of each across their different jobs and positions. This dialogue led to

increased understanding, especially among the managers present, of the need to change some of the behaviors and structures that were creating unproductive class interactions.

The session ends with *Action planning*, a dialogue that helps participants consider what can be done differently and what individuals can do to apply learnings about class to their own situation. I ask people to identify some of the negative consequences they have observed with regard to the class structures discussed. The secretaries in a non-profit organization say, “We don’t get invited to the team meetings because we are not professional staff,” and thus important perspectives are not considered by the team. “I cannot repair my truck because I don’t have a minimum budget to order the part I need, so I sit and wait for my supervisor,” offers a senior maintenance worker of a major oil corporation. “Every time the supervisor walks out on me when I’m talking I feel disrespect,” adds a young woman in a manufacturing plant. Participants begin to identify the concrete ways in which the class divisions, symbols, and interactions have a negative impact on the organization’s climate and performance.

What can be done to begin to change some of these negative consequences? Examples from the literature and benchmarking studies show what some organizations are doing: re-structuring work into self-managed teams diminishes the hierarchical class divisions that limit authority and decision-making for workers; arrangements like flextime and telecommuting are offered to employees across different hierarchical levels, so that they are not just privileges of the professional and managerial classes; cooperatives, share option plans, employee ownership schemes, bonuses across the board, and reducing the salary differentials between the highest and lowest paid in an organization help re-distribute the economic rewards of the organization more fairly among all employees who are responsible for the profits made. In Europe, governing councils that include managers, employees, and shareholders give voice to workers and include them in

making key organizational decisions. Profiling the stories and contributions of workers helps to change class images that narrowly focus on the successes of the founders and presidents of the corporation.

The future of gender and class in organizations. The educational approach discussed has enabled organizations to begin addressing issues of class, together with race and gender, in an integrated diversity program. While having a dialogue about class is not the solution to class relations, it is possible to begin a process of understanding and openness about an issue that is present in organizations, yet remains one of the least talked-about social differences. Engaging in this process will benefit organizations because using the lens of class allows managers to see differently and become aware of organizational dynamics that require new solutions. For example, gender equity efforts in many organizations focus on glass ceiling issues that mostly benefit white professional and managerial women. Naturally, women of color and working class women tend to be skeptical of their opportunities for advancement in this context.¹⁰ The lens of class helps include groups and issues that may have previously been invisible. Also, attending to class strengthens the meaning of inclusion, diversity, and fairness. When class becomes an integral part of how we think about organizational equality, a new set of issues beyond racial representation or access to jobs is generated. Organizational justice now includes fair pay, work-life solutions for all workers, access to information, decision-making authority and autonomy in all jobs, valuing all jobs, and treating all workers with respect. By expanding the meaning of equality this way, we can forge new alliances for change and build coalitions with others who might traditionally have been left out.

The struggles led by the labor movement have resulted in gains for the working class toward economic fairness and better working conditions. The diversity movement has increased awareness in organizations about the need for gender, racial, and social equality. Workplace practices that promote innovative work systems produce benefits such as increased productivity, better financial performance, and higher wages for workers.¹¹ By bringing class into the gender and diversity change agenda, we have the possibility of a more intentional, integrated, and effective approach to changing organizations for increased justice and organizational health.

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² See Ely, R. and Meyerson, D. (March 1999) for a similar analysis of the intersection between gender and ethnicity. *CGO Insights, No. 4: Integrating Gender into a Broader Diveristy Lens in Organizational Diagnosis and Intervention*. Boston: Center for Gender in Organizations.

³ For example, the top 1% of households own more of our nation's (United States) wealth than the entire bottom 95% combined. See United for a Fair Economy's newsletter, *Too Much*, and their educational materials. Contact United for a Fair Economy by phoning 617/ 423-0191 or on the web at www.stw.org; and Wolff, E.N. (1995). *Top Heavy*. New York: The New Press.

⁴ Demott, B. (1990). *The Imperial Middle*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

⁵ Estes, R. (1996). *The Tyranny of the Bottom Line*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

⁶ *Too Much*, Vol. V, No. 1. United for a Fair Economy.

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⁸ I acknowledge the work and influence of the Social Justice program at the School of Education at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, from which some of the exercises used to explore class identity are adapted.

⁹ See Acker, J. (1999). *Revisiting Class: Lessons from Theorizing Race and Gender in Organizations*. Working Paper No. 5, Boston: Center for Gender in Organizations, SIMMONS Graduate School of Management; and Holvino, E. (1999). *Class: The Unmentionable Difference in T-Groups*. *Reading Book for Human Relations Training*. Alexandria, VA: NTL Institute, pp. 117-119.

¹⁰ Catalyst.(1999). *Women of Color in Corporate Management: Opportunities and Barriers*. New York: Catalyst; and Mahony, P. and Zmorczek, C. (1997). *Class Matters: "Working-Class" Women's Perspective on Social Class*. London: Taylor and Francis.

¹¹ Appelbaum, E. (2000). Taking the High Road: The Benefits of High-Performance Work Practices. *EPI Journal*, Winter, pp. 1,6.

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