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# RELATIONAL PRACTICE: AN EMERGING STREAM OF THEORY AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR ORGANIZATIONAL STUDIES

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This has been a thoroughly collaborative paper.

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This paper explores the key elements of relational practice as a theoretical perspective that is emerging at the intersection of three streams of feminist research: feminist psychology, a feminist sociology of work and feminist critique. It argues that exploring relational work from this feminist perspective highlights unique aspects of this activity that are absent from more traditional, presumably gender neutral representations. The paper delineates the intellectual roots of relational practice, outlines its key attributes and characteristics, the belief system and skills associated with it, and the unique contribution a feminist conceptualization of relational work can make to organizational theory and practice.

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# I. INTRODUCTION

## A. Relational practice: An Emerging Stream of Theory and its Significance for Organizational Studies

A substantial body of work has emerged urging organizations to rethink traditional structures and practices in favor of more relational approaches. Increasingly, organizations are being encouraged to foster teamwork, collaboration and systems thinking (Hammer & Champy, 1993; Kearns & Nadler, 1993; Senge, 1990), to value emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995, 1998), "intimacy" as well as "mastery" skills (Kofodimous, 1993), to relax the boundary between work and family (Bailyn et al., 1996; 1997), to appreciate the social and interactive dimensions of learning (Gergen, 1994; Marsick & Watkins, 1993), and to understand the importance of a type of work that stands outside traditional measures of job performance called "organizational citizenship behavior" (Organ, 1988, 1990; Konovsky & Organ, 1996; Konovsky & Pugh, 1994).[1]

While this body of work challenges current organizational principles and suggests that newer more relational ways of organizing are needed, it does not offer a theory of relational effectiveness that would help us understand the challenges and implications of making this type of change. The lack of a cogent, practical "relational theory of organizing" limits the ability of organizations to respond to calls for transformational change and accounts, at least in part, for the fact that progress in making or sustaining these changes has been slow (Fletcher, 1999). We believe that an emerging theoretical construct in feminist research, relational practice, can make a significant contribution to the development of such a theory.

## B. What is Relational Practice?

Relational practice is a term used by Fletcher (1994b) to refer to a way of working that is rooted in a "growth-in-connection" (Jordan et al. 1991) model of human psychological development. We have broadened the term and use it here to refer to other forms of relational work and to a theory of work practice that is emerging at the intersection of three bodies of feminist research: feminist psychology, a feminist sociology of work and feminist critique. The premise these three research perspectives share is that organizations—their practices, processes, structures and underlying theories of effectiveness—are gendered. (e.g., Ferguson, 1984; Acker, 1987; Mills & Tancred, 1992; Calás & Smircich, 1996). Indeed, a fundamental axiom of this research is that organizations implicitly privilege traits that have been culturally ascribed to males and identified as masculine, such as independence, rationality, and individuality, while de-emphasizing other, equally important aspects of work that are more relational in nature, such as enabling, emotionality and connection, that have been ascribed to females and identified as feminine. From this perspective, organizational efforts to move from traditional to more relational modes of organizing can be thought of as efforts to move from a stereotypically masculine world view to one that is more stereotypically feminine. What differentiates the construct of relational practice from other concepts of organizational relationality (cf. Gergen, 1994) that are assumed to be power- and gender-neutral is the explicit recognition of the inherent gender/power dynamic within organizational discourse.

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## II. INTELLECTUAL ROOTS

The initial objective of the feminist activity that emerged in the U.S. in the 1960s, was to decry the marginalization of women in society (e.g., Freidan, 1963/1983). Soon after writers from a variety of perspectives began to confront the relationship between the marginalization of women and the marginalization of a cluster of values and practices socially coded as feminine. This was an important shift. While women's exclusion from positions of authority and wealth can be rectified by demographic changes (such as affirmative action legislation), excluding feminine values and practices from our understanding of the normal person and the good society has required rethinking basic social constructs of reality and subjectivity as well as knowledge making itself (e.g., Harding, 1986). The intellectual roots of the relational practice are based in this tradition (cf. Humm, 1992) of challenging primary social constructs from a feminine perspective in order to envision new social structures. It is important to note that the reification of the masculine and the absence of the feminine have little to do with the characteristics or intentions of individual men or women. Reification is a social process that idealizes certain practices and "disappears" the experiences of both women *and* men that do not fit this ideal. Two additional caveats are important for understanding the intellectual history of relational practice as we present it here. First, the citations given represent only a portion of a vast, multidisciplinary reference literature. Second, we present only a portion of relational practice as a linear construct even though we know this practical constraint obscures the richly complex interconnections underlying its development.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Women and Economics* (1898/1966) and the nearly forgotten *Why Women Are So* (Coolidge, 1914) show the themes we raise to be as old as the industrial organization itself. However, we trace the development of relational practice from a more recent perspective, drawing on micro level literature we label feminist psychology, a macro level literature we label a feminist sociology of work, and a body of work rooted in critical studies we label feminist critique.

### A. FEMINIST PSYCHOLOGY

**1. Psychology of women**. Like most areas of feminist inquiry, women's psychology began with the observation that theories of the human self had been produced largely through the study of boys and men. This raised the question of whether the normal self of psychological knowledge was based on humanity or on a subset of the population that might differ systematically from the understudied (female) remainder of the species. While this critique has been a marginal theme throughout the history of psychology (e.g., Westcott, 1986), we will begin with two highly influential theorists of the 1970's, Chodorow (1978) and Miller (1976).

Drawing on object relations psychology, Chodorow documented the pervasiveness of mother-dominant child-rearing practices worldwide, noting that this posed an asymmetry for boy and girl children. The girl grows through continued identification with her primary parent experiencing development as occurring in a context of connection. The boy learns early that development means becoming an

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individual different from the primary parent experiencing growth as a process of individuation and separation.

At about the same time, Miller (1976) began drawing heavily on her clinical experience with women to propose a model of development—growth-in-connection— that occurred through a process of connection rather than a process of individuation. Although she developed the tenets of what she and colleagues now call relational theory (Jordan et al., 1991) by listening for and to the experiences of women, Miller asserts that this model of growth highlights important and overlooked aspects of *all* human development. She cites several studies indicating that early infant development occurs in a context of connection and mutual influence. This suggests that even in the earliest days of life an infant influences the emotional field between self and caretaker and begins to develop an "interacting sense of self." Quite early, however, boys "are encouraged to dread, abhor, or deny" aspects of this relational field such as vulnerability, emotion and interdependence, "whereas women are encouraged to cultivate this state of being" (Miller, 1976:29). The dilemma for men of denying something in themselves that is critical to human growth and development is resolved by their relying on women to be the "carriers" of these traits in society.

The model Miller and her colleagues at the Stone Center articulated as growth-in-connection has made several important contributions to psychology, but for our purposes, three are most noteworthy.

1) *It identifies specific conditions and outcomes of growth-fostering relational interactions*. Growth-in-connection is not conceptualized as occurring in *any* relationship, but through a *specific kind* of relational interaction. Growth-fostering interactions are those characterized by mutual empathy and mutual empowerment, where both parties recognize vulnerability as part of the human condition, where both parties approach the interaction expecting to grow from it, and where both parties feel a responsibility to contribute to the growth of the other. Outcomes of growth-fostering relational interactions, something Miller and Stiver (1997:30) call "five good things," are zest, empowered action, increased knowledge, increased self-worth, and a desire for more connection.

The importance of this contribution to the development of an organizational theory of relational practice is twofold. First, it posits *growth* as opposed to *affect* as the motivation to engage in relational interactions. Second, it moves the discussion away an undifferentiated ideal that "relationships are good for business" toward a discussion of the characteristics of growth-fostering relational interactions as differentiated from non-growth-fostering interactions and relationships.

2) *It identifies relational skills within a language of competency*. Miller and her colleagues suggest that engaging growth-fostering interactions is a complex affair requiring a number of competencies and relational skills (Jordan et al., 1991; Miller, 1976). These include empathy, an ability to acknowledge vulnerability, an ability to experience and express emotion, an ability to participate in the development of another, and an expectation that relational interactions will be sites of growth for both parties. Miller notes that articulating these attributes as strengths and skills is quite different from the language of deficiency (weakness, hysteria, dependency) presently used in psychological discourse to describe these same attributes, "Even the very words, the terms in which we conceptualize, reflect the prevailing consciousness—not necessarily the truth about what is happening" (Miller, 1976:94). She uses as an

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example the term *passivity*, which is currently used to cover a great variety of behaviors and experiences that, she notes, are really quite different. These include, for instance, "listening to another, taking in, receiving, or accepting from another" (Miller, 1976:54).

Detailing the inadequacies and limitations of current definitions highlights the need for a new language of competency grounded in an epistemology of relational experience. It also highlights one of the basic tenets of 20th century philosophy which posits that language is not a mere collection of labels, but is a powerful force shaping and reflecting our reality (Jones, 1975). Developing a language of competency to describe relational skills is, then, a powerful act, involving a critical epistemology of experience and an explicit theory of knowledge (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Calás, 1987; Calás & Smircich, 1992; Alvesson & Deetz, 1996).

3) *It situates relational activity within a gender/power context*. The third contribution this branch of feminist psychology makes to a theory of relational practice is that it calls attention to the gender/power dynamic inherent in relational interactions, whereby shouldering the responsibility for relational growth is something that marks one as feminine and allowing it to be shouldered by another marks one as masculine. Through this gendering process, women accept the obligation to enact growth-in-connection invisibly in order not to challenge what Miller calls the "myth of independence" and individuality upon which this society and most of its structures rest. This highlights the way in which the invisibility of relational practice is not a benign or passive artifact in society but an active exercise of power reinforcing the contradiction that "relational activity is not necessary and women will provide it" (Fletcher, 1996a).

Thus, the Stone Center work highlights the fact that it is impossible to detail a theory of relational practice without addressing the issue of power. To do so (as in some of the "female advantage" work summarized below) is to construct a model that is functionally deficient and to invite misinterpretation of women's relational activities as evidence that they are natural carriers of these traits for all of society. As Miller notes:

> It may be important to differentiate [relational theory]... from other ideas... For example...Yin and Yang, Jung's notion of the hidden woman in every man and vice versa... [and] the opposition of agency and community...Christopher Lasch has described a period when, in response to the first wave of feminism it was advocated that women move into public affairs to do "social housekeeping" for the society, in order to bring their cleanliness and morality into the corrupt world. These formulations fail to take seriously the inequality of power and authority between men and women. It is hardly women's task to go into the dominant culture to "cleanse" it of its problems. This would merely be repetition in another form of "doing for others" and "cleaning" for others—now cleaning up the "body politic"... The notions of Jung and others deny the basic inequality and asymmetry that exist; they are also a historical... The present divisions and separations are, I believe, a product of culture as we have known it—that is, a culture based on a primary inequity. It is the very nature of this dichotomization that is in question. (Miller, 1976: 79-80)

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This framing of power also offers a means of developing relational theorizing beyond male/female differences. In her introductory chapters, Miller attempts to contextualize relationality with reference to a more general discussion of dominance and marginality, often building upon the experiences of African-Americans. For instance, Miller theorizes that women may, at this time, "have a much greater sense of the emotional components of all human activity than most men," because "anyone in a subordinate position must learn to be attuned to the vicissitudes of mood, pleasure and displeasure of the dominant group." "Black writers," she then states, "have made this point very clearly" (Miller, 1976:38-9). While our elaboration of relational practice has been primarily a reflection of white, middle-class, female, American experience; another path for developing relational theorizing would be to move from a theory of gender difference within the dominant culture to one more reflective of the interaction among race, class, culture, and ethnic social identities. The task of expanding relational theory in this way is beginning as theorists explore how other aspects of social identity interact with gender to influence growth-in-connection. Two important new contributors to this work are Maureen Walker (1999) who has written about the effect of historical oppression on individuals' ability to establish connection across racial and cultural divides, and Gelaye Debebe (1998) who is studying the specific relational skills needed to establish effective cross-cultural connection.

Relational theory's analysis of power highlights how understanding the operation of relational practice is inseparably connected to the operation of the social forces through which dominance and marginality, voice and silencing, visibility and invisibility are constructed. Moreover, it reminds us that sensitivity to relational phenomena and a willingness to act based on relational considerations are not inherently male or female traits. Rather, it highlights the need to focus on the complexity of social processes through which both men and women learn to expect that this work will be provided mainly by women.

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**2. Women's voice.** Women's psychology has spawned a large body of work that has challenged or proposed additions to a number of mainstream theories. One of the most influential statements of this perspective is that of Gilligan (1982), who put relationality within the metaphor of voice. *In a Different Voice* was a study of moral reasoning in girls and women, focusing on Kohlberg's (still) popular theory of moral development. For Kohlberg, maturity of judgment is indicated by a thinker's ability to make decisions using increasingly universal, rule-based principles abstracted from immediate experience. Gilligan, noting that Kohlberg's research had been conducted primarily on boys, argued that girls had a different form of moral/ethical reasoning grounded in the experience of connection articulated by Miller and Chodorow. While this has sometimes been interpreted as sex-based universalizing by critics (e.g., Kerber et al., 1986), Gilligan took pains to disclaim such an association. She notes that her work was never intended to speak for all women, only to highlight how certain voices and certain perspectives are *arbitrarily* devalued in current conceptualizations of morality. In her later work (Brown & Gilligan, 1992), she addresses the issue of universalizing women more explicitly by stressing the contingency of gender socialization among female subjects of different cultural backgrounds.

Also influential is a later work that acknowledges debts to Gilligan and Miller and sought to articulate "women's ways of knowing" (Belenkey, et al., 1986). In this book, the authors explore the connection between relational experience in the world and relational approaches to learning, knowing, teaching, and communicating. A point these authors raise is that to take relational theorizing seriously is to

acknowledge such fundamental categories as self, truth and value to be highly contingent upon social experience. This means that it is not sufficient to look at relational practice; it is also necessary to ask how all practices look when viewed through a relational lens. Relational theorizing involves more, then, than new objects for analysis. It requires different paradigms to conceptualize epistemological, methodological and ethical philosophies of knowledge. This challenge has been taken up by Grimshaw (1986), Tronto (1987), Kittay and Meyers (1989), and Larrabee (1993), among others.

The contribution these and other "voice" perspectives make to relational practice is that they further develop a language of competency to describe behavior that privileges connection over individuation. Furthermore, by re-presenting women's experience within its own value system and framework, this work presents a model of how to challenge currently accepted schema from a relational perspective and begins to articulate the belief system underlying this challenge.

**3. Female advantage.** Loosely labeled "female advantage" studies, women's voice perspectives in the management literature have proposed a connective model of managerial behavior that differs from traditional, hierarchical norms (Loden, 1985; Grant, 1988; Jelinek & Adler, 1988; Fierman, 1990; Helgeson, 1990; Peters, 1990; Rosener, 1990; Tannen, 1996). With few exceptions (e.g., Calvert & Ramsey, 1992; Liou & Aldrich, 1995), this type of analysis has not recognized the need for a new epistemology of work experience or the asymmetrical power relationship between relational practice and "normal" management practices. As a result, what has appeared has either essentialized relational activity as a female trait or has lacked the critical framework to resist being interpreted that way by others. The tone of this literature has been that women and organizations could mutually benefit from women's relationality. This assumption ignores two key points. First, relationality has been theorized as a social influence, not something inherent in women. Thus, it could not be a useful principle to guide individual hiring decisions; it would only apply stochastically to women as a whole. Second, it ignores issues of power. Within a context of asymmetrical power, "when women act on the basis of this underlying psychological motive, they are usually led into subservience" (Miller, 1976:89). It is not necessary that men seek to dominate for this dynamic to apply. It is sufficient that men (and women) be unaware of the need to actively resist dominating (Jacques, 1997a). Thus, to a great extent, a woman's success in work organizations is likely to be proportional to her ability to dissociate herself from relationality.

Although this work has been critiqued for these limitations, (Calás, Jacobson, Jacques & Smircich, 1991; Pollitt, 1992; Calás & Smircich 1993; Fletcher 1994b) it is generally recognized as having contributed to the understanding of relational practice in two ways. First, it calls attention to the potentially strategic importance of relational attributes for organizational effectiveness. Second, it contributes to the development of a language of competence rather than a language of deficiency to describe behavior that privileges connection, and begins to make visible the notion of intentionality underlying this behavior.

To summarize, feminist psychology has identified several factors important to the development of a theory of relational practice. These contributions are summarized in Table 1 below.

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| ***Table 1: Contributions to Relational Practice from Feminist Psychology*** |
| --- |
| Offers a model of "growth-in-connection": An alternative to mainstream models of growth and development giving preeminence to relational interactions as the locus of human growth and development. |
| Posits *growth*, as opposed to *affect* as the primary motivation in enacting relational principles. |
| Distinguishes between relational interactions which are growth fostering and those which are not. Identifies specific characteristics, pre-conditions and outcomes of interactions that foster growth. |
| Offers a nuanced analysis of the gender/power dynamic that predisposes women to enact this model of growth and development *invisibly*, obscuring such activity. |
| Moves from focus on individual behaviors to social-structural power dynamics linking subjective behaviors and durable social identities. |
| Highlights the role of language in shaping "reality" and "experience." |
| Identifies a complex set of skills needed to enact a relational model of growth and begins to create a language of competence to describe them. |
| Calls attention to potentially strategic significance of relational activity. |

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## B. Feminist Sociology of Work

**1. Domestic sphere.** Since Hartmann (1981) and others noted that the labor theory of value focuses only on the production of commodities, while ignoring the also-necessary labor of producing, maintaining and reproducing the producers themselves, there has been some attempt to broaden theories of work to include domestic labor (cf. Oakley, 1974, 1976; Rich, 1976/1986; Ruddick, 1989; Hochschild & Machung, 1989; DeVault, 1991). Exemplars of this type of analysis focus on the social structuring of work from a woman-centered perspective. As such, they treat "women's work" as a legitimate object of analysis and in doing so, implicitly or explicitly show that this large domain of work is both necessary to the operation of work organizations and society in general, and peripheral to the concept of "real" work.

One of the more ambitious examples of this type of analysis is Ruddick's (1989) description of maternal practice as a set of behaviors rooted in a philosophy—or way of thinking—she calls maternal thinking. This way of thinking conceptualizes child rearing as the practice of responding to three separate, and at times contradictory, sets of relational demands—(1) for preservation, (2) for growth, (3) for social acceptance—placed by children on anyone doing maternal work. Responding to these demands requires a type of relational behavior that balances thinking, feeling and acting. Ruddick asserts that the complex underpinnings of maternal practice—whereby, for example, the contradictory demands of preservation (e.g., safety) and growth (e.g., exploration) must be resolved in the immediate moment—

are obscured by the concrete, ordinary actions that make up the work. The job is to oversee the whole and make sure that connections with others who are critical to the child's well-being are in place and are maintained. Drawing on Miller, who suggests that from a relational perspective "[w]hat one learned yesterday is not good enough and does not apply today" (Miller, 1976:56-67), Ruddick notes that the model of change underlying maternal practice is one that welcomes rather than seeks to manage or control change[1].

As a form of management, maternal practice "does not require enthusiasm or even love; it simply means to see vulnerability and to respond to it with care" (Ruddick, 1989:19). Ruddick's observation that maternal practice is not based on what one is feeling, but on what one enacts helps to challenge the idea of such work as merely a labor of love or a natural expression of femininity. This de-naturalization also makes it more possible to explore men's "maternal" practices and to understand that the process of devaluing women can be distinct from the process of devaluing "feminized" work practices—whether those practices are performed by men or women.

DeVault's (1991) work on feeding the family highlights yet another aspect of relational practice in the domestic sphere. By listening carefully to how women describe the different activities that go into creating a family meal she makes visible a number of relational dimensions of the work. For example, she notices that women describe attending to family member's preferences in food selection as a way of making sure that individuals experience the feeling of being valued family members whose needs, desires and expressed wishes are listened to and taken seriously. She also notes how women describe specific actions they take to create an atmosphere during the family meal in which members can interact and build a sense of intimacy and trust with each other. These actions include things such as smoothing the conversation, engaging those who are withdrawn, or introducing topics that will be of interest to certain members. Highlighting these relational aspects of the work has the effect of expanding the definition of what it means to feed a family. Feeding the family becomes a relational practice.

These and other studies that delineate the structural aspects of work in the private/domestic sphere make several important contributions to a theory of relational practice. First, they highlight the relational underpinnings of what appear to be mundane, straightforward tasks such as feeding a family, cleaning, or watching children. Highlighting the structural nature of work in the domestic sphere differentiates this practice from affect-based notions of caring in which relational activity is assumed to be motivated by feelings of affection. This differentiation creates the opportunity to articulate not only a way of thinking underlying the behavior but also the relational skills necessary to enact it effectively.

An additional, more general contribution this body of work makes is that it suggests that in order to understand the significance of relational practice, it is necessary to study it in terms sympathetic to the values it represents. Otherwise, if simply interpreted from the perspective of the dominant discourse, it is likely to be trivialized, overlooked or actively "disappeared." For example, Howe (1977:238) cites a government job rating system which, by using standard measures of skills, equates the difficulty of the work of child care attendant with that of parking lot attendant; the work of home health aide with that of mud-mixer helper. Studying relational practice from the perspective of the belief system that motivated the behavior and from the experience of those enacting it, avoids this type of disappearing. Indeed, a theme connecting these explications of work in the domestic sphere is that they all began by attempting

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to understand experiences from the perspective of the domestic actors embedded in them. The purpose was not to shape the experiences to fit existing models, but rather to develop models of understanding rooted in the values and realities of those who were studied.

**2. Organizational Sphere.** [2] There is a growing body of organizational literature that seeks to challenge the gendered nature of work from the vantage point of female experience. One approach has been to challenge the supposed gender neutrality of organizational systems by exposing the ways certain organizational roles recreate domestic, patriarchal relationships in formal work organizations through secretarial work (Kanter, 1977; Pringle, 1988; Sotirin & Gottfried, 1997); nursing (Reverby, 1987), "pink collar" occupations in general (Howe, 1977) and service work (Hochschild, 1983; Leidner, 1991). This body of work calls attention to the gender/power relationship in relational interactions and the way in which women are expected to shoulder the emotional or relational burden of such interactions. For example, building on Hochschild's (1983) work on emotional labor, many studies have sought to make visible the capitalization of emotion in work settings (Leidner, 1991; Rafaeli, 1989; Sutton & Rafaeli, 1988; Wharton, 1993) and the gender implications of this practice. In the same vein, Anne Huff (1990) and Deborah Kolb (1992) have each written on the "invisible work" of emotionally supporting co-workers. Both observe that men *and* women seem habituated to using contact with a female co-worker for sharing and processing emotional issues that would be more difficult to present to a male colleague. They note that although this time-consuming work adds value in terms of preserving an effective work group, there is no organizational reward for doing it. On the contrary, there appears to be an *expectation* that women will do it—one that women themselves accept—that operates with a *simultaneous* devaluing of the activity itself such that it would never, for example, qualify one for a promotion or count in tenure considerations.

This type of research makes two valuable contributions to the development of a theory of relational practice. First, it implicitly makes visible the unrecognized and unrewarded skills and organizational benefits associated with relational attributes such as support work and emotional competence. Second, it offers a concrete example of the contradiction in organizational belief systems noted earlier in which relational attributes like emotionality are simultaneously devalued as inappropriate to the workplace and exploited for their usefulness in achieving organizational goals.

Another important body of work in this area is research that seeks to make visible the structural dimensions of "caring work" in organizational settings. For example, Parker (1997) articulates the relationship between medical personnel and clients not simply as the context for such work nor as a personal attribute of the care-giver (bedside manner) but as the *technology through which the work of delivering medical care gets done*. In the same vein, Benner and associates (Benner & Wrubel, 1989; Benner, Tanner & Chesla, 1996) describe the relational aspects of expertise in nursing—things such as attentiveness, involvement and empathy—not as affect-based behavior moderated by the nurses' emotional attachment to the patient, but as structural practices that are cognitive, intentional and have a predictable positive effect on quality of patient health and measurable medical outcomes.

Jacques' (1992) study of nurses as knowledge workers highlights another structural aspect of the medical caregiver/care-seeker relationship. He observes that through a seemingly automatic process he calls "information passing," nurses serve as the conduit for critical patient information among medical

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personnel an average of *87 times a day*. The important contribution his work makes to the development of a theory of relational practice is the way in which he articulates the invisibility and the preventive potential of what he calls "caring/connecting" work. He notes that, despite the obvious impact on organizational effectiveness, the information passing was not included in the formal definition of the work, was not recognized in the hiring, evaluation, promotion or reward structures of the organization or noted as a valuable resource. It was, instead, left to happenstance, its presence assumed and the costs of its absence ignored. As he notes, information passing may be just one example of an

> *"entire economy of work practices that begins out of sight and ends at what theorists of work consider to be the beginning of analysis. An innate characteristic of this work is that, when it is performed competently, the worker and the work disappear, leaving no evidence that something had to be done in the first place (Jacques, 1992:247; emphasis in the original).*

In later work drawing on relational theory to further understand the behavior he observed, Jacques (1993) argues that in addition to understanding relational practice[3] as a form of behavior, it must be understood both as a "structural practice" and a "way of seeing ..., that is, as a world view with bundled assumptions about what is real, true, and important, and with its own methods for knowing" (Jacques, 1993:7).

The contribution this stream of work makes to an understanding of relational practice is that it further articulates structural dimensions of relational work that are absent from commonsense definitions of what it means to "care for" others and calls attention to the effectiveness dimension of doing caring work with these relational/structural underpinnings in place.

Yet a third stream of work in this area has sought to define relational attributes of work in settings not commonly associated with caring and/or support. For example, Lynn Zimmer's (1987) work with female prison guards identified a type of relational work that entailed listening to prisoners, mediating disputes, and calming potentially incendiary situations through interpersonal interactions. Significantly, she notes that the potential cost savings of these measures and their effectiveness in preventing fights, damage and personal injury were not recognized by formal measures of effectiveness. In fact, the guards who employed these techniques received lower performance ratings from a system that gave behaviors such as skill in breaking up fights its highest rating.

In a similar vein, Fletcher's (1994b; 1998) study of female design engineers[4] identified a way of working that stood in marked contrast to traditional norms of engineering practice and as a result, "got disappeared" as work. She used the term relational practice to refer to this way of working. The set of behaviors that made up relational practice were motivated by what she called a relational belief system, a belief that effectiveness and growth, in this case work-related growth, occur best in a context of connection. Relational practices included activities related to *task* (actions rooted in an acceptance of a "responsibility for the whole" and intended to preserve the life and well-being of the project)[5], behaviors focused on *other* (actions intended to enable or empower others to achieve and contribute to the project); behaviors related to *self* (actions using relational skills to enhance one's own achievement);

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and finally, behaviors related to *team* (actions intended to construct the social reality of "team" by creating the occasion and the environment in which positive outcomes of group life could be realized)[6]. She notes that these four categories of relational practice required a set of relational skills—such as empathy, an ability to admit mistakes with no loss to self esteem, emotional competence and an ability to acknowledge one's vulnerability and operate in a context of interdependence—that are not commonly thought of as skills in organizational discourse and not commonly associated with organizational effectiveness.

The major contribution of this work was the identification of the process through which these activities were rendered invisible, something she calls the "disappearing dynamic." She delineates three dimensions of this disappearing dynamic, a process that resulted in the behavior "getting disappeared" as work and getting constructed as something other than work. These three dimensions include: the attribution of the behavior as inappropriate, the lack of organizationally strong language to describe it as work, and the social construction of gender in which the work is conflated with idealized images of femininity. These forces appeared to operate in concert, reinforcing each other and providing strong structural disincentives to engage in these types of activities, while simultaneously creating conditions in which exactly this type of work is required and some (largely female) workers were expected to do it. The attributes of relational practice that got disappeared in the process were the strategic intentionality of the behavior, the relational skills needed to enact it, and the potentially positive organizational benefits of this way of working.

In more recent work, Dutton, Debebe & Wrzesniewski (1996) examine the relational aspects of another task assumed to be straightforward, unskilled and non-relational: hospital maintenance work. They note that maintenance staff use relational schema to understand the impact of the way they do their work on patient health and well-being and the relational dimensions of their tasks. These dimensions include things such as understanding the patient's medical requirements, sensitivity to the interruption of interpersonal dynamics, and efforts to "connect" with patients to bring them out of themselves and remind them of the outside world. They elaborate the mechanisms through which this work is devalued and include dimensions of the process that focus on race and class as well as gender.

The contribution of studies such as these is that they have begun to identify a typology of behaviors associated with relational practice. In addition, they have further elaborated the relational skills required to enact these behaviors effectively and have begun to identify the relational logic of effectiveness that underlies them.

A summary of the key contributions, this feminist perspective on the sociology of work makes to a theory of relational practice, is presented in Table 2 (on the next page).

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| *Table 2:* *Contributions to Relational Practice from Feminist Sociology of Work* |
| --- |
| Highlights the relational aspects of structural tasks assumed to be straightforward, mundane and non-relational. |
| Offers concrete examples of "caring" work that are motivated by desire for growth, not affect. |
| Offers a model of listening to female experience, interpreting it within its own value system and using it to challenge, supplement and more fully represent knowledge about all human experience. |
| Begins to identify a typology of behaviors (task-directed, other-directed, self-directed, group-directed) motivated by a belief system which privileges connection over individuation as the primary source of growth and achievement. |
| Highlights the potential benefits of doing these tasks with their relational underpinnings intact and the potential costs of not doing them this way. |
| Further identifies and develops a language of competence to describe the complexity of relational practice and the skills needed to complete it effectively. |
| Further identifies the motivation to enact relational practice as rooted in a way of seeing the world, a way of thinking and a belief system that stands outside the organizational discourse on success, effectiveness, growth and achievement. |
| Calls attention to the patriarchal processes through which the worker is bonded to the work through gender socialization and though which a failure to be competent at this work can be experienced as a failure to be a woman. |
| Identifies the dynamics through which relational practice, the belief system motivating it, the skills necessary to enact it and its potential contribution to effectiveness "get disappeared" in organizational discourse. |
| Identifies the implicit contradiction in organizational discourse whereby relational attributes such as emotional competence are simultaneously devalued as inappropriate to the workplace and exploited for their usefulness in achieving organizational goals. |

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## C. FEMINIST CRITIQUE

A third stream of research in which relational practice has its roots is a body of literature loosely described as feminist critique. Unlike feminist sociology, which seeks to observe and capture elements of work as it is enacted, this body of work seeks to destabilize and denaturalize organizational theory and systems of knowledge production in order to show the influence of gender not only in shaping female and male *experience* in organizations (P.Y. Martin, 1993; Collinson & Hearn, 1994; Connell,

1995; Jacques, 1997a; Maier, 1997), but also in shaping "normal, objective" knowledge about organizing itself (e.g., Smircich, 1985; Mills, 1988; Calás & Smircich, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1996; Mills & Tancred, 1992; J. Martin, 1990; Mumby & Putnam, 1992; J. Martin & Knopoff, 1995; Gherardi, 1995).

Typically, these analyses expand organizational concepts by articulating a "feminine" alternative that has been silenced or ignored in the current definition. For example, Dennis Mumby and Linda Putnam (1992) challenge the way emotion is denigrated and rationality reified in theories of organizational decision making. They note the impossibility, indeed the irrationality, of ignoring the influence of emotion on the decision-making process. They offer a model that includes the ability to assess and consider the emotional context in which organizational decisions are being made and assert that this model might not only be more effective, but also more reflective of the current situation. In the same vein, Joanne Martin & Kathy Knopoff (1995) reveal the way in which Max Weber's principles of organizing value the masculine side of gendered dichotomies such as objective/subjective, abstract/concrete and rational/emotional while dismissing the feminine as inappropriate to the business of organizing. In discussing the way in which objectivity is reified and subjectivity denigrated in organizational norms, they too note the impossibility of understanding organizational phenomena from a purely objective stance. They offer an alternative model that incorporates rather than ignores subjectivity and suggest that this model actually offers a more accurate picture of organizational practice.

In analyses such as these, expanding existing theories by offering a feminine alternative is meant to shake up the organizational status quo by challenging unquestioned masculine assumptions, or at least raising them for discussion. Once an alternative, arguably more complete definition of an organizational concept has been offered, the analysis turns to the issue of power. That is, the question of why certain aspects of the feminine have been absent from these concepts is explored. It asks, for example, who is benefiting from the current definition? Whose interests are being served? What power relationships are being maintained and reinforced by defining the concepts in this way and silencing the feminine? What alternative structures suggest themselves when the feminine is added to these concepts? What alternative systems of power?

By destabilizing what were once presumed to be gender neutral theories of organizing, this research provides a space within organizational discourse to begin theorizing relational practice and examining the gendered lens through which knowledge about organizing is constructed. More specifically, it calls attention to the strong forces operating to disappear any activity associated with the feminine—whether that practice is done by males *or* females—thereby alerting us to the negative attributions (weak, soft, inappropriate, evidence of emotional dependency, etc.) that are likely to be made about relational work when it is done in organizational settings.

The contributions of this literature are summarized in Table 3 (on the next page).

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| ***Table 3***<br>***Contributions to Relational Practice from Feminist Critique in Organization Studies*** |
| --- |
| Moves organizational gender studies from a focus on discrimination of women to broader consideration of effects of gender on men, women and organizational phenomena. |
| Highlights the power of gender to determine organizational practice, structure and behavior. |
| Calls attention to the congruency between masculine and organizational norms, values and practices. |
| Calls attention to the congruency between masculine norms, values, practices and the norms of organizational knowledge production. |
| Illustrates the social contingency of subjectivity. |
| Destabilizes the monolithic nature of organizational concepts by offering alternative, suppressed and/or formerly invisible aspects of these concepts. |
| Illustrates the degree to which commonsense understandings of organizational phenomena are constituted in language, which is inevitably value and power laden. |

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To summarize, relational practice is emerging as a stream of research at the intersection of a micro-level literature of feminist psychology, a macro-level literature of a feminist sociology of work, and a postmodern literature of feminist critique. Its relevance to current issues of organizational change and transformation stems from the evolution of more relational ways of organizing to facilitate the loosely structured, group-oriented work practices that are gaining prominence in knowledge-intensive, post-industrial work situations (Jacques, 1997b).

# III. ELEMENTS OF RELATIONAL THEORY AND PRACTICE

It is now possible to summarize some elements of an organization theory of relational practice. We outline these elements under three headings: the work, the skills workers need, and the contextual factors which influence its disappearance in organizational discourse (see Tables 4a-4c).

## A. THE WORK

Specific behaviors associated with the work itself, listed in Table 4a, encompass any tasks intended to create conditions in which growth-in-connection (achievement, effectiveness, new knowledge, creativity, etc.) can occur. Thus, relational practice expands the current definition of "real" work to include a broad range of preparatory activities. These include activities that range from the mundane, set-up activities, such as making meeting arrangements, to more sophisticated preparatory efforts like creating mealtime environments where family members can interact in an atmosphere of trust and acceptance, team meetings where member's contributions are affirmed, or engaging in individual enabling activities that teach others new skills or pass on information that will enhance their ability to be effective. Recognizing these activities for what they are requires an expanded definition of the work task itself.

Another general characteristic of the work is that it is preventive in nature, making it difficult to measure. As one engineer noted "if nothing bad happens it is assumed that nothing bad was *going* to happen" (Fletcher, 1994a). Yet engaging in relational practice—doing the preparatory work noted above, smoothing conflict, engaging in behind the scenes peace-making in offices, creating an experience of team for individual group members by listening and building connections with their ideas, passing on seemingly mundane nursing information that is critical to patient care, taking the time to pass on knowledge and embed competency in others—has great potential to prevent future problems that are often quite costly to resolve.

The problems prevented can be as serious as a patient getting the wrong medications or as mundane as wasted time. For example, a high-tech company with which one of the authors was working recently followed the trend of "hoteling" workers—giving them a car phone and fax and removing their access to permanent office space. One such group, dispersed over the West Coast of the U.S., met in Seattle one day but found that no one had arranged a room for the meeting, or a speaker phone for the member calling in from a distance. Several days of work and thousands of dollars were wasted because the preparatory work, creating the concrete context within which the group goal could be achieved, was not done. The devaluing of such preparatory tasks is reflected by the fact that they routinely are assigned to lower level "support" staff and are taken for granted. Their critical nature is noted only when the tasks are not completed. The consequences of failing to create emotional contexts where individuals feel valued and free to speak with little threat of ridicule are even less tangible and perhaps are more costly to organizations than other preparatory work. This work is classified as "maintenance-" or "process-" oriented work in current discussions of organizational theory. Setting relational practice apart from task-oriented work subtly divorces preparatory tasks from measures of effectiveness and ignores the functional benefits of prevention.

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Another distinguishing characteristic of the work is that it expands the definition of outcome to include results embedded in others and in social interactions. Taking the time to pass on skills, to teach in ways that are most likely to enable others, to put effort into creating conditions in which the positive effects of group life can be realized, are all work activities whose products are currently invisible in most assessment and evaluation systems. Including them as work activities and defining them as part of the job requires expanding the concept of "outcome" to cover these less tangible results.

The last feature of the work is that it expands the concept of the "other" in relational interactions. Relational practice is characterized by something Fletcher calls "fluid expertise" (1998) which is a view of the other as co-actor, co-learner, and co-teacher. This is quite different from traditional views of relationships (mother/child, teacher/learner, boss/subordinate) in which expert status is assumed to be static during the course of the interaction.

**Table 4a**
**Characteristics of Relational Practice: The Work**

| | |
|---|---|
| Taking responsibility for the whole and doing whatever it takes to connect the task to the resources it needs to survive.<br><br>Resolving conflict and disconnections that might interfere with task goals.<br><br>Enabling, empowering others through sharing information, teaching (fluid expertise).<br><br>Using emotional data (others' emotional realities, one's own emotional responses) to understand and respond to organizational phenomena. | Enacting an expanded definition of "outcome" to include outcomes embedded in others, such as increased knowledge or competence.<br><br>Enacting an expanded definition of "outcome" to include outcomes embedded in social situations, such as creating conditions in which "team" or group life can be experienced.<br><br>Enacting an expanded definition of "task" to include preparatory work. |

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## B. THE SKILLS

Competent engagement in rational practice requires that workers have the skills summarized in Table 4b. Generally, the basic skill is an ability to bridge a number of gender dichotomies: thought/feeling, abstract/concrete, mind/body, task/process, self/other, predictable/ambiguous, compete/collaborate (Fletcher, 1994a). This has significant implications for doing this work in gendered organizations (Mills & Tancred, 1992) where "real" work is qualified by those behaviors closely aligned with idealized masculinity.

Significantly, growth-fostering interactions require a level of mutuality and authenticity that precludes using relational practice to "one-minute manage" or to superficially sell a predetermined agenda. It also requires the worker to be embedded in the immediate work process, which conflicts with the bureaucratic norm of hierarchical authority.

Relational practice is the property of a worker who has some characteristics of the employee (low reliance on formal authority), some characteristics of the manager (responsibility for the whole, enabling and empowering others) and some characteristics of the employed professional (complex work, discretionary activity, without being well described by any of these three categories. S/he exists outside of what Jacques (1996:147-9) terms the 'tripartite box' of organizational subjectivity. Perhaps this complex subject is a key to understanding another elusive subject—the knowledge worker. It is entirely plausible that as work is changing, the central problems of the workplace are shifting outside of the area illuminated by traditional management theory into the shadows where relational practice has existed as an integral yet silent partner with the world of organizational work.

**Table 4b**
**Characteristics of Relational Practice: The Skills**

| | |
|---|---|
| Empathic competence: ability to understand others' experience and perspectives<br><br>Emotional competence: ability to understand, interpret and use emotional data<br><br>Authenticity<br><br>Ability to connect or "build relationships" with others' ideas<br><br>Ability to enact "fluid expertise" and move easily between the expert and non-expert role<br><br>An openness to being influenced by others' emotional, intellectual and physical reality | Ability to empower, enable or share information with no loss to self-esteem<br><br>Vulnerability: ability to admit "not knowing," to seek others' help and expertise with no loss of self-esteem<br><br>Ability to engage synergy of thinking, acting and feeling<br><br>Ability to affirm others with no loss to self-esteem<br><br>A welcoming stance toward change |

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## C. The Context

In the context of organizations, several institutional forces, listed in Table 4c, interact to influence relational practice and discourage its inclusion in current definitions of work. First, the strategic work-related intention of the practice is often invisible because relational practitioners are often assumed to be seeking affect (they need/want to be liked, etc.) rather than effectiveness.

Second, the complex set of skills need to enact the practice competently "get disappeared" because the language used to describe relational aspects of work (helping, listening, responding to emotional contexts) associates these behaviors with personality traits as opposed to skills and competencies. Third, the organizational benefits of the practice are obscured by another type of semantic eclipse. That is, the language used to describe the behavior has, in many cases, already been incorporated into organizational discourse in ways that fail to capture the essence of relational practice. For example, empowerment, mentoring, collaboration, teams, and people skills are all relationally-based terms.

However, when explored from a relational theory (growth-in-connection) perspective, the concepts are subtly but powerfully different from their typical organizational definitions. For example, relational theory offers a different definition of other in the self/other relationship, different definitions of "expertise" and power, and a different definition of the primary path to growth and effectiveness.

The fourth contextual factor is related to the social construction of gender in the workplace and the language used to describe relational activity associates it with femininity and the domestic sphere. This brands the behavior as inappropriate to the workplace, stigmatizing women who enact it as inappropriately domestic and men who enact it as effeminate. These negative attributions discourage both men and women from enacting relational practice.

The last contextual factor has to do with the fact that, because the work's importance is not recognized, it does not appear in reporting and evaluating systems which structure the primary organizational reality. Not only does this provide a strong disincentive to engage in the behavior, it also limits the organization's ability to assess either the supply or use of this resource.

| **Table 4c**<br>**Characteristics of Relational Practice: Contextual Factors Related to Disappearing** | |
|---|---|
| Motivation underlying work is assumed to be affect (need to be liked, emotional dependency, etc.) as opposed to effectiveness<br><br>Skills reduced to personality characteristics (nice, dependable, thoughtful)<br><br>Identification with the work (being known to perform or discuss it) detrimental to career because of its association with femininity and the domestic sphere<br><br>Work does not appear in formal organizational reporting and evaluation systems | Consequences of work not readily visible or quantifiable using traditional organizational measures<br><br>Because its consequences are invisible and the costs of its absence is not calculated, relational practice is vulnerable to evisceration by seemingly unrelated organizations' actions such as downsizing, restructuring, relocation, etc.<br><br>A limited language of competency to describe the work<br><br>The dynamic of "semantic eclipse" inhibits recognizing the potential, the consequences, the importance of the work |

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## IV. RELEVANCE: RELATIONAL PRACTICE AND EMERGING PROBLEMS OF ORGANIZING

When considering paradigmatically divergent theory development it is important to note that our theories are not organizational phenomena, but constructed representations of these phenomena. Thus, our theoretical frameworks are fragile templates we place provisionally over selected domains of organizing, those of interest to researchers, funding sources, managers, consultants, and students.

As times change, these areas of interest shift. In their place, other issues emerge. In general, today's issues are centered on understanding knowledge intensive and group-oriented work, within fluid organizational and environmental boundaries, where a variety of factors make command-and-control authority an ineffective means of eliciting the best effort of workers. In this new context, the task management concept of the worker who does repetitive action as a pre-planned step in a laterally- and vertically-differentiated production process is worse than irrelevant; it is a hindrance to effective management. In the same vein, it may be that our current models of scientific inquiry are not only inappropriate for exploring emergent topics such as relational practice, they may actually be hindering our ability to recognize, understand and appreciate the very phenomena we propose to study. We believe there is a homologous relationship between the challenge posed to organizations by today's changes and the challenge relational theorizing poses to organizational theory development. We have identified three areas where this challenge could make an important contribution to the theory and practice of organizing.

First, a theory of relational practice offers an opportunity to detail a more nuanced representation of relational interactions in the workplace. For example, the fundamental concept of mutuality in growth-in-connection models of development suggests that the one-directional representation of relational interactions common in organizational discourse inadequately captures the dynamics of growth. Two-directional models that capture the action, interaction and involvement of both parties, such as the "relational work" patients do in the doctor/patient relationship (Parker, 1997), would more accurately represent the dynamic that occurs. These models could offer new leverage points for enhancing the growth potential of such interactions. For example, applying this two-dimensional lens to other relational interactions thought to be crucial to organizational learning, such as communities of practice (Seely-Brown & Durguid, 1991), multifunctional teams (Lipnack & Stamps, 1993; Slater, 1994), and collaborative learning efforts (Marsick & Watson, 1993) has the potential not only to surface formerly obscured dimensions of these knowledge-producing interactions, but also to suggest changes in organizational structures—such as team formation, reporting relationships and reward systems—that would foster these conditions (Fletcher, 1999). Additional characteristics of growth-fostering interactions such as empathy, involvement, authenticity and fluid expertise could be used to more accurately detail the activity that occurs in these interactions and the relational skills necessary to engage them effectively. This type of analysis could greatly inform current efforts to articulate new models of organizational concepts that are more appropriate for knowledge intensive environments.

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The second contribution a comprehensive theory of relational practice offers organizations is the potential to make visible the hidden costs of doing business as usual, especially in knowledge intensive environments where relational practice is or could be enhancing effectiveness. For instance, one of the authors recently worked with a high-tech sales team who, as they described their work, articulated a complex and mobile web of relationships that had to be maintained in order to sell effectively. Because the importance of these behind-the-scenes relationships was invisible to management, they inadvertently destroyed them through a cost-cutting initiative that eliminated personnel, substituted support people with technology, reduced travel budgets and increased sales quotas. The result was a reduction in sales that sparked further personnel cuts. The spiraling, negative effect of their actions was invisible to them. Even when failure to attend to relational practice was the source of serious 'hard' consequences for the organization, these 'soft bottom line' consequences did not appear as management information. Further theoretical development of relational practice will allow its effects—and the costs of ignoring these effects—to be documented and made "real" in the managerial decision process.

The third contribution relational practice offers is a way to understand the powerful forces that discourage, diminish and devalue relational work in organizational settings. The gender/power dynamics inherent in the disappearing of relational work highlight the way in which this work is coded as feminine and therefore inappropriate to the workplace. This suggests that any effort to change organizational structures and processes to increase the occurrence of growth-fostering interactions is likely to engage serious resistance. Attempting to undertake change of this type recognizing—and developing specific strategies to address—the gender implications of the change, are likely to be seriously undermined in subtle, invisible and yet powerful ways.

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## V. TOWARD A THEORY OF RELATIONAL PRACTICE: POSSIBILITIES AND CHALLENGES

We believe that further developing the concept of relational practice has great potential for the theory and practice of organizing in knowledge intensive environments. One challenge in moving forward is exploring how a theory of relational practice can help us extend or critique existing theories. There is clearly an overlap of domains between a theory of relational practice and transaction cost theory, network theory, social identity theory, etc. How can the differences of foci and incompatibilities between a theory of relational practice and these other theories help us to see new things and envision new organizational structures, patterns and practices?

There are several practical, methodological and epistemological problems that must be simultaneously addressed in the design, conduct, interpretation and application of research on relational practice. For example, how does one design field studies to capture relational practices before they 'get disappeared' and without distorting them into something else? Devising methodologies that will simultaneously capture micro-level practice, the macro-level determinants of that practice, and the process of disappearing important elements of the practice in the interpretive process, present some significant challenges to traditional field study or large scale survey research design. Capturing additional aspects of the "disappearing dynamic," are critically important in addressing questions of practical applications. For example, how can relational practices be formulated so they are representable in budgeting systems? In management reporting? In performance evaluation and recruitment criteria? Perhaps even more critical is the question of what procedures can be developed to value relational practices as organizational assets.

The questions, "what adds value?" and "who is entitled to what portion of that value?" will resurface as theories and applications of relational practice develop. These questions divided industrializing societies but were settled by the relative strength of managerial capitalists and labor interests rather than by mutual agreement. The questions are prominent in the classical writings of the field up to Barnard (1938), then disappear from the management disciplines except within critical management studies. Because of the questions' heated and sometimes violent history, one can perhaps see why they were put aside. Emerging organizational problems will bring us back to these difficult issues. Organizational effectiveness requires that management systems identify the roles that add value to the organization, reward those roles proportionately, and secure their development and steady supply, even if this process disrupts the current gender/power relations.

Articulating a theory of relational practice and further developing its key principles of mutuality, fluid expertise and co-influence, can make a significant contribution to the task of re-thinking organizations and re-valuing the type of work—and the type of worker—critical to organizational success. The challenge relational practice presents to current organizational notions of what does and does not add value has the added power of disrupting organizational discourse to create "discursive space" in which new ways of thinking, new ways of working and new ways of organizing might evolve. In summary, we

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believe that while the challenges of developing a relational theory of effectiveness are great, the potential contributions and the costs of not doing so are too high to ignore.

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# ENDNOTES

[1] It is interesting to note that this concept of 'learning for change' is highly congruent with the problems of learning and change management presently being articulated as key issues of 'organizational learning' and 'knowledge intensive firms' (cf., Jacques, 1997b).

[2] To date, most research on gender in organizations has been a part of the literature on women in management (cf., Powell, 1993; for exceptions, cf., Calás & Smircich, 1996). Explicitly or implicitly, this has been a body of sex-difference, not gender, research, since it has developed by testing differences between groups of men and groups of women. Driven by the entry of large numbers of women into professional positions in the 1960s and 70s, this research primarily offers empirical evidence to counter the prejudice that women are inferior to men as managers. Other research has focused on the structural determinants of gender differences by exploring the process of gender segregation through which men and women are differentially channeled into jobs, largely to the disadvantage of women (e.g., Acker, 1987; Howe, 1978; Acker & Van Houten, 1974). These types of "sex difference" research, while important, are unrelated to this discussion of relational practice in that they do not seek to define or expand current definitions of work from a relational perspective.

[3] What is referred to in this paper as relational practice is termed "caring work" in Jacques (1993).

[4] The study was done as part of a Ford Foundation sponsored project exploring work and family integration (Bailyn et al., 1996).

[5] This category is similar to and derived from Sara Ruddick's (1989) notion of preservative love as one of the three dimensions of maternal practice.

[6] This category is similar to and derived from Marjorie DeVault's (1991) notion of creating the conditions in which "family" might be experienced.

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