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Disappearing Acts: Gender, Power, and Relational Practice at Work

by Joyce K. FLETCHER, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999, 166 pp., ISBN 0-262-06205-4.

At a time when organization theory is attempting to come to grips with major changes in the workplace, and the effect of those changes on employees, this book marks an important step in understanding current conditions and advocating change. Joyce Fletcher's work has a dual thrust. On the theoretical side, the study described here uses qualitative methods to explore the social construction of gender in the workplace and, specifically, how relational practice—activities construed as “feminine” that serve to establish and maintain connection between coworkers—is devalued in organizations. Fletcher creates an active verb, “to disappear”—i.e., to make invisible—to describe this devaluing. In practical terms, the book makes it very clear that organizations cannot thrive without these activities and initiatives, which make teamwork and collaboration possible in an environment that (whatever the espoused values) rewards individual and self-aggrandizing behaviour over more selfless approaches. Taken together, these insights give rise to the central paradox that the book outlines and illustrates: “relational activity is not needed and women must provide it” (p. 112).

Fletcher is obviously aware that her work will rouse skepticism, and the book is carefully constructed to bring the reader along, in understanding if not agreement. A brief introduction provides an overview, explaining the structure of the book and the logic behind each chapter. Chapter 1 is an intellectual autobiography: Fletcher explains the genesis of her interest in the topic of relational practice and its links with gender and power, on the one hand, and the nature of work in organizations, on the other. Chapter 2 outlines the three theoretical perspectives that inform the study and allow interpretation of the findings:

feminist poststructuralism, the sociology of work (again, from a feminist standpoint), and relational psychology. Chapter 3 describes the study methodology. Chapters 4 and 5, the heart of the book, detail the findings, and Chapter 6, “Getting Beyond Disappearing,” contains recommendations for what individuals and organizations can do to address the problems created by the “disappearing” syndrome.

Fletcher's central thesis is that while contemporary organizations claim to need team players, they are often incapable of recognizing, let alone rewarding, behaviour that creates and encourages teamwork: a willingness to collaborate, to forgo individual credit in place of furthering the well-being of a project, and to see others in the workplace as humans in need of emotional gratification. Organizational blindness results, in Fletcher's view, from the gendered nature of work in our society: the belief that efficacy is linked to rationality, quantifiable objectives, and an instrumental approach to tasks and relationships—traits that have been traditionally associated with the masculine gender. The other side of this dichotomy is the “private” sphere of home, connectedness, caring and empathy—the traditionally “feminine” side of life. Feminist researchers have been pointing out for some time now that this dichotomy is not merely harmful, but profoundly unrealistic: human beings do not check in their emotional lives at the door of the workplace. Fletcher's contribution to this argument is twofold: she both demonstrates how emotional work gets done in a masculine context (a high-technology company) and, at the same time, how that work is either not seen or, if seen, is devalued, even by those who do it. This is the “disappearing act” of the title.

The workplace used for the study was one where Fletcher was already familiar to employees as part of a team engaged in a larger project. This facilitated her research, which consisted of structured observation: shadowing six women engineers while taking extensive notes, then debriefing with the study subjects in both individual and group meetings to uncover what the observed interactions meant to them. The result is rich and convincing. Fletcher is able to demonstrate that relational practice is neither a reflexive feminine reaction nor a submission to stereotype: it is a set of strategies consciously engaged in for personal development and to enhance organizational effectiveness. What emerged from the data is that relational practice aids in achieving four goals: preserving (enabling a project to continue), mutual empowering (for instance, teaching someone in a non-threatening way), self-achieving (using relational strategies to attain professional goals), and creating team (establishing background conditions of trust and communication so that teamwork can flourish). At the same time, the women in the study found it frustrating that this type of work was more often penalized than rewarded. Others took advantage of their time, energy, and willingness to share information without necessarily giving them credit. In addition, the gendered language of organizational life made it almost impossible for the women to describe what they were doing in terms that were not self-deprecatory: as being "nice," "polite," or "nurturing." For Fletcher, this is another, at least equally, powerful manifestation of "disappearing." Acts that have organizational benefit are placed on the private, emotional side of the public/private, rational/emotional divide, and it becomes impossible to see how they play into individual, group, and organizational success. Not being seen, they are unlikely to be celebrated or rewarded, and so the disappearing becomes part of a vicious cycle.

Given these findings, Fletcher's recommendations are fairly predictable. She is interested in how organizations can begin to make visible and value the kinds of interaction (helping, teaching, exploring, creating empathy) that are described in her data. She stresses that new organizations, with their emphasis on continuous learning and empowerment, are badly in need of employees skilled in relational practice. Her suggestions for individuals who want to not be "disappeared" are along time-honoured lines: negotiate greater visibility for that touchy-feely assignment, develop support networks inside or outside your workplace, and so on. More intriguing are her recommendations for organizations: give the human resources assignment to a male fast-track manager, not a woman already known for her relational skills; encourage employees to bring skills developed in the private sphere into their relationship with coworkers; and, most radical of all, make some form of family or community involvement with others a prerequisite for promotion.

In my view, at least, the focus of the book is more psychological than sociological, and this raises some interesting questions. I would like to see Fletcher, or someone familiar with her work, explore potential links to research on organizational commitment and citizenship. Implicit in some of Fletcher's comments is her recognition of the paradox eloquently described among others by Peter Cappelli: organizations now demand more time, energy, and creativity from employees than ever before, and at the same time the implicit contract that promised employment security in return is dead, seemingly beyond resuscitation, in many workplaces. What are the implications of this one-sided bargain for relational practice at work? Will anyone want to invest time and energy in creating bonds with co-workers who may not be around in the very near future? And if they do, does that not reinforce the

masculine view of such activity as naïve and gullible?

These are pressing questions, and their answers have implications that extend beyond the workplace. Fletcher's work has provided a valuable, if somewhat utopian, roadmap to a better future.

The book deserves to be read, discussed, and used as a springboard for further exploration. It would be great to see the roadmap become an agenda.

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Work and Family: Research Informing Policy

edited by Toby L. PARCEL and Daniel B. CORNFIELD, Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1999, 288 pp., ISBN 0-7619-1307-6.

Research into the interface between the spheres of work and family life continues to be of crucial importance to Western developed economies. The increasing participation of women in paid work, the decline of the male breadwinner/female homebuilder model that typified the twentieth century, and changes in family structures, have all fuelled debates about the effects of maternal work and, latterly, the tensions involved in attempts by both sexes to balance work and family. The authors focus on two main issues in this volume of readings. The first is that of time, both in terms of the "juggling" of time in families to reconcile conflicting demands, and the proportion of time devoted to these demands over the life course. The second main issue is that of social policy, both public and private, and how policy alleviates or exacerbates pressures on families. The editors have asked each contributor to consider the implications their findings might have for policy-makers, both employers and governments. They feel that sociological research can yield important implications for social policy, as well as inform theory.

The volume is divided into three parts, the first of which traces the historical context and the effects of social policy on work and family. The two chapters offer an interesting contrast between the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the United States. The former, a state-socialist society where policy was rigidly centralized, the latter

a democratic society where policy-makers were lobbied by pressure groups and their decisions affected by such things as electoral cycles. The life histories of the German women were crucially affected by state policy to bring about rapid economic development and the availability of childcare was important in facilitating work during family formation. In the U.S., the authors suggest that the strength of public opinion and the continued efforts of interest groups were essential to effect changes in policy that affected work, family and gender. Without them, these issues would have slipped to the bottom of the political agenda.

The second part develops the theme of time and identifies strategies used by families to manage work and family responsibilities. The chapters investigate the extent of choice in working time, the effect of marital status on non-standard work, and the interplay of social policy, gender and economics as factors affecting decisions about returning to work at the family-building stage. The chapter by Jerry Jacobs and Kathleen Gerson on working time questions Hochschild's view that workers prefer work over family time, and that the value of family life is in decline. The authors conclude that most workers want gratifying work experiences but also value their families, and this holds for both sexes. However, it is social-structural trends, over which individuals have little or no control, that are making it more difficult for working parents to succeed in both spheres.