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Article

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Abstract Drawing on the category of the ‘social’ in social learning theory as a ‘mini case study’, we argue in this article that gender, race and class are still neglected in the field and practices of management learning. We suggest that feminist work is a growing part of the journal and field of management learning but on limited terms. Thus we argue that feminism has not been mobilized to interrogate core categories and concepts in management learning, such as the ‘social’ in social learning. In addition, we outline how issues of race and class are even more marginalized and raise a number of questions to indicate how management learning might be researched and theorized if race, gender and class were taken seriously as mainstream issues. **Key Words:** gender; management learning; practices

Introduction

The purpose of this short article is to argue that while there are a number of feminists writing in the field of management learning, feminist and critical race theories are still marginalized. Thus we suggest little has changed at the conceptual level in relation to management learning and its understandings of gender, gendering, race, racialization, class and classing practices. To illustrate our argument, we focus on the concept of the category of the ‘social’ in social learning theories. We could have chosen other contemporary learning concepts but we selected this because one of the most noticeable shifts in the field of Management Learning in the past 10 years is the move towards a conception of learning as something that is ‘social’. But what is seen to constitute the ‘social’

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is often undefined. There is, however, a growing view that learning is relational, situated and socially reproduced. Most importantly for our argument here is that the category of the ‘social’ in social learning is rarely understood as something structured and defined by gender, race or class. As such, the lack of critical interrogation of the taken-for-granted status of the concept of the ‘social’ shows how feminist theory and critical race theory is being ignored within and by the field.

In sum, then, a major issue for us as feminists is that the ‘social’ in social learning theory is rarely debated. As a result, the ‘social’ is presented as an atemporal, ungendered, apolitical, free-floating context of relations, almost like a container in which individuals, groups and organizations drift (Fenwick, 2005; Hughes et al., 2007). Ironically, this leads to a conceptualization of learning as dynamic and relational, whilst what is taken to be the ‘social’ is rendered static and one-dimensional. The consequence is that the ‘social’ is constructed as ‘just there’, free-floating outside of the cultural, the historical, the economic, the geographic and the political (Hughes et al., 2007).

In contrast, in wider feminist and critical race theory the ‘social’, and its relation to gender, race and class is much discussed. Furthermore, how the ‘social’ is being reconfigured with changing gendered, racialized and classed relations, is also theorized. Hence, the ‘social’ is not simply understood as static but is conceptualized as something that is structured by gendered, racialized and class relations and being reshaped by the changing nature of these relations.

One central debate within feminist theory is about the nature of the ‘masculine ontology of the social’ (Witz and Marshall, 2004: 21). This means exploring how masculinity as a category has been central to the construction of what we understand to be the ‘social’. In essence, the impetus behind this work is problematizing the assumption that ‘his own sociality ... [is] “generic”’ (Witz and Marshall, 2004: 33). In this view, masculinity is assumed but unmarked in much social theory. Thus, it attempts to operate as a kind of de-gendered universal position, which is actually highly skewed on many counts. This critique of presumptive universality is important for our discussion here on management learning.

Drawing upon feminist and critical race thinking, in this article we want to start to interrogate the category of the ‘social’ in management learning. More specifically, the article suggests that whilst feminism has started to make some inroads into the journal and field of management learning, issues of class and race have yet to get any serious attention. To start this process—and stimulated by a recent discussion involving a group of feminist researchers, drawn together by the common research purpose of drawing attention to issues relating to women, diversity and leadership—the article reviews feminist thinking in relation to management learning. This is followed by a consideration of the lack of attention given to management learning as gendered, classed and racialized. The article concludes with a call for feminist repoliticization of management learning.

Presences

As mentioned earlier, there is a growing presence of feminists and feminist theory in certain spaces in the field of management learning. The current *Management*

Learning editors point out, 'learning implies a continuous need to question the knowledge one has gained before it becomes too solid or rigid' (Vince and Elkjaer, 2005: 6). One way this has been done since the journal's inception is through *Management Learning* authors questioning what counts as 'the mainstream'. The early mid-1990s witnessed a drive to question the instrumentality of the content of mainstream management education (e.g. Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Grey and Mitev, 1995). At this time, *Management Learning*'s principal concerns lay in examining the socio-political implications and consequences of its role in educating managers. Some of this involved a reflection on gender in relation to content and learners, for example Chris Grey's introduction to a Special Issue 'Critique and Renewal in Management Education', debates the need for 'orthodox critics of orthodoxy' to recognize the failure of their approach' (1996: 13). As part of this, Grey invokes Marta Calas and Linda Smircich's (1990) call for academics to critique a 'continuing promotion of a masculinist logic and ethic' (Grey, 1996: 13). This requires, Grey asserts, a need to 'shift ground' and for significant engagement with feminist analyses of management education.

In line with some of this, in more recent years, *Management Learning* has published a number of influential feminist analyses. These articles have started to make important inroads into seeing gender as a key analytic category and as a fundamental systematizing element in organizations, and thus, part of the 'social' (see for example, Hughes, 2000, 2005; Sinclair, 2000, 2007). Importantly, in this work gender has not just been taken to mean women. Hence, feminist accounts seek to do more than 'add women and stir'. Gender is used to refer to the multiple ways in which practices, structures, interactions, symbolisms, cultures, values and so on are imagined to 'have' gendered characteristics and to 'gender' in active ways themselves. For example, as one might expect in a journal on management learning, a number of these feminist studies focus on our practices as educators (Sinclair, 2000, 2007; Swan, 2005). In particular, these have focused on how learning and pedagogies create inequalities in the form of a gendered curriculum, marginalizing women's experiences and problems. They also reproduce particular masculine practices such as being 'confrontational' or being 'humorous'. These types of feminist reflection on how we, as feminist educators, experience asymmetries of gender in our practice, provide a counterpoint to broader considerations of gendering social processes.

As a result of these studies, we can start to see how the 'social' in the concept of social learning needs to be understood as profoundly embodied. The 'social' is something that is lived through and with gendered and gendering bodies, but it is also a set of ideas, relations and processes which produce gendered bodies.

Crucially, gender has been discussed by feminists in the field in terms of how it affects *knowledge production* itself. Thus, the 'social' is intimately tied to knowledges and related practices. Thus, as many feminist social and organizational theorists have noted, gender is not simply about bodies but about the politics of knowledge. Management learning is a growing body of knowledge. It constructs power-knowledge relations. It reproduces its own canon. As a topic, gender typically operates as a subsection of the field, mostly in the form of discussing women rather than as a subject that reconceptualizes the field. These social practices in the field in turn also actually reproduce and create forms of social difference (Lewis, 2000). As Gail Lewis (2000) argues, we need to understand

the conceptualization of difference as a set of social practices produced through knowledge. Consequently, we need to create new 'knowledges' and practices to challenge the hierarchies of differences in the field, in organizations and in wider society. In relation to management learning, this would mean reconfiguring research questions, topics, ideas, methods, and concerns, which tend to reflect the masculine ontology and sociality of the field. In essence it means addressing women's theoretical segregation and their organizational and social segregation (Witz and Marshall, 2004).

In spite of some gains then, there is more work to be done. Recent organizational theory has shown the extent of the gendering of organizations in a way neglected by management learning. For example, work by Joan Acker (1990) and Adelina Broadbridge and Jeff Hearn (2008) show the range of ways in which organizations are gendered: which work is valued; how labour is divided; the distribution of authority and power; the relations of organizational employees to domestic responsibilities; the reproduction of heterosexual norms; the use of gendered images and symbols and the gendered processes in violence such as harassment. Gender permeates organizational practices, cultures, structures and processes. No longer understood as private issues, gender relations are a core part of organizational and work life. And yet, very little of these debates have been extended to management learning theorizing or practices.

If they were, we might start to reconceptualize the field with new concepts and new questions. For example, we might start to ask how the division of labour within the workplace and outside of the workplace affects the way women can access management development and learning, and on what terms? What kinds of masculinities operate as the core curriculum for management learning? For instance, Judy Wajcman argues that 'the dominant symbolism of corporations is suffused with masculine images' (1998: 49), therefore notions of success equate to being 'tough, forceful leaders' (1998: 49). If this is the archetype, how do practices of management development seek to confirm and sustain such masculine images, identities and practices? Gender-neutral training and development programmes are often highly gendered and gendering, encouraging the take up of particular versions of femininity and/or masculinity. At the level of the self—a core focus for much management learning—we might want to examine how men and women differ in terms of their relation to their own identities and the work that they can do on them. For example, feminists Lisa Adkins and Celia Lury (1999) challenge the simplistic and yet central idea that women 'own' themselves in the same way as men. We also need to raise questions about the politics of inclusion too. This means interrogating the conditions and terms under which gender, women and feminism get included in the field. Thus, debates on gender and feminism may be 'allowed in' in 'small doses' but in ways that do not interrogate, unsettle or disturb (Witz and Marshall, 2004). Questions also need to be raised about the differences between women as we will discuss briefly later.

Absences

There are still whole areas of the 'social' (and the cultural) that are largely ignored by the field. As with much organizational theory, much less attention has been

given to issues of class and race and the ‘social’ and cultural processes of classing and racializing. This raises important questions about how we can understand practices and theories of management learning as classed and racialized. How do racialization and class affect what we take knowledge and learning to be? How do management learning practices and theories produce versions of ‘whiteness’? For example, very little attention has been given to the significance given to diversity training post MacPherson in many public sector organizations, and what versions of ethnicity and concepts of racism these processes reproduce (see for example, Bhavnani, 2001; Swan, 2007). In particular, we need to reflect on the inter-sectionailities between race, gender and class: the ways in which, as Amy Wharton highlights, ‘these categories—acting together—shape how people experience the world’ (2005: 5). One example of the interplay between race, class and gender is Elaine Swan’s (2006) discussion of the focus on emotions in what she calls therapeutic cultures in management learning. Her critique suggests that an ‘increasing emotionalization’ in the workplace reproduces emotional capital within management development linked to white middle-class femininity. This emotional capital is reproduced in versions of learning and development such as coaching but only valued when enacted by certain types of white men.

More recent feminist theory has identified the widening gap between middle-class and working-class women (McDowell, 2006). Thus, as Linda McDowell (2006) argues, women in the higher status professional managerial class can access forms of management learning and HRD to provide themselves with more cultural and social capital. For these kinds of women, the home is no longer the only place of achievement: the workplace has become a space for self-development and self-fulfilment. These women employ other women to do their domestic labour—most often black and white working-class women. These latter women are said to constitute the ‘new servant class’. The practices of management learning typically targeted at the middle class differ quite considerably from the practices of staff training aimed at the new servant class. What version of the ‘social’ allows these types of social conditions and social and cultural privilege?

In sum then, social theory on race and class raises a number of issues that could be debated within management learning. These questions might include: How do management learning practices perform ‘class’? What types of cultural and social capital do they reproduce? What kinds of resources does management learning practice provide and for whom? What kinds of social relation do they set up and reproduce? What are the conditions in which black and ethnic minority men and women, or working-class men and women can access these capitals? In essence, how do management learning practices act as types of class and race practices?

Feminist Challenges and Futures

This article has raised a number of questions and debates in relation to management learning. In particular, it has focused on the category of the ‘social’ to show how social learning theory has neglected gender, race and class. The mini case-study on the ‘social’ operates in this article to show how abstract categories and management learning practices are not gender, class or race neutral. Instead, they tend to be ‘more easily energized by typically masculine [and white and middle class] forms of identity and action’ (Witz and Marshall, 2004: 33). The article

has sought to unsettle this neutrality in order to expand the ‘social’ to bring in other marginalized social dimensions central to management learning as a field and set of practices.

A group of us recently got together to discuss some of these issues. The group, representing four UK HEIs, gathered in early 2008 to launch the Academy for Women, Diversity and Leadership situated within Lancaster University Management School. One of the purposes behind this article—and our recent gatherings—has been a sense that we need a ‘call to arms’. In particular, as feminists, we have felt exasperated and exhausted by the lack of real engagement with issues of gender, race and class in much organizational and management learning theory. Feminist work is sometimes included in tokenistic ways. Gender is often only visible in limited ways. But the central tenets of thinking—what gets authorized, defined and who is seen to count in management learning and wider organizational theory—are rarely allowed to be challenged by feminist or critical race theory. Some of this is due to feminist and critical race theorists being seen as ‘particular’, not able to speak about the universal, and therefore a specialist minority interest. It is also due to the fact that it is often imagined that we live in a post-feminist world in which, if women do not have it all, we certainly have gone too far! Our own views are that there is still much inequality, disadvantage and oppression that is neglected in much organizational theory. All in all, we want to reinvigorate a repoliticization of the field in relation to issues of class, race and gender. The ground has not shifted enough. Of course, what counts as politics and what counts as class, race and gender are up for debate. New methodologies will help us animate this debate. As researchers, however, we propose that part of ‘our moral imperative’ (Hughes, 2008) is to give these issues serious and sustained attention.

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