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Practising Gender at Work: Further Thoughts on Reflexivity

Patricia Yancey Martin*

In an effort to make visible the subtle and seldom acknowledged aspects of gendering dynamics, Martin focuses on *unreflexive practices* that both communicate and constitute gender in paid work settings. She reviews the distinction between *practices* that are culturally available to 'do gender' and the literal *practising* of gender that is constituted through interaction. While acknowledging that agency is involved in any practicing of gender, she considers how intentionality and agency intersect, arguing that people in powerful positions routinely practise gender without being *reflexive* about it. Defining practising as emergent, directional, temporal, rapid, immediate and indeterminate, Martin shows how these qualities affect men as well as women in unexpected and often harmful ways. She concludes with a call for innovative ways to 'catch gender in practice' and for attention to reflexivity's role in the ongoing constitution of gender at work.

Keywords: gendering practices, practising gender, reflexivity, agency, intentionality, work, organizations

Since the publication of West and Zimmerman's (1987) 'Doing gender' article, many articles and books about gender as actions that people do, not only who/what they are or the positions they occupy, have fostered insights about how gender is accomplished through interaction. Their article gave rise to a flood of theoretical and empirical work from which I and many others have learned (Messerschmidt, 2000). Yet more is needed to understand the shape, fluidity and dynamism of gender in practice (Martin, 2001), particularly gender as practised at the group level (Martin, 1997; Messner, 2000, 2002; Quinn, 2002; Thorne, 1993). Appreciation of the emergent qualities of gendering practices in collective contexts — groups and organizations — is required to understand how gender is implicated at work. This article contributes to that effort.

Address for correspondence: *Department of Sociology 2270, 526 Bellamy Building, Florida State University, Tallahassee FL 32306-2270, USA, e-mail: pmartin@fsu.edu

For many reasons, organization scholars reject claims that gender is irrelevant at work or that workers have no gender (Acker and Van Houten, 1974), that jobs are dis-embodied, gender-free 'empty slots' (Acker, 1990, 1998) and that people 'leave gender at the door' when entering the workplace (Gutek and Cohen, 1987). Even if people could leave gender at the door, gender would still be present because it was already there. Gendered rationales were used in the formative days of bureaucratic organization to justify women's exclusion and men's superior qualifications and the legacy of those developments remains (Martin and Knopoff, 1997). Asserting gender's irrelevance to workplace structures and operations presumes a kind of gender institution that simply does not exist (Acker, 1992; Lorber, 1994; Martin, 2004).

Recently, I described a conception of gender as a twin dynamic, suggesting its utility for understanding why and how gender is routinely practiced at work (Martin, 2003; see also Rantalaiho *et al.*, 1997). The conception distinguishes gendering practices from the practising of gender and claims that the second part, the practising dynamic, is particularly difficult to study as well as being consequential in its effects. This article extends that discussion by addressing the interactional dynamics associated with gender relative to reflexivity/non-reflexivity, as I explain shortly (Gherardi, 1994, 1995; McGinley, 2004; Martin, 2003; Reskin, 2003; Ridgeway and Correll, 2004; Schwalbe *et al.*, 2000).

Several considerations prompt attention to the practising of gender at work. One is that the dynamics associated with gender routinely make workers, particularly women workers, feel incompetent, exhausted and/or devalued (Martin, 2001). That is, they are harmful (Cockburn, 1988; Cohn, 1985; Collinson and Collinson, 1996; Collinson and Hearn, 1994; Pierce, 2002, 2003). By making gender dynamics more visible, clues about how to name, challenge and eliminate them can be gleaned. Another reason is that an improved understanding of non-reflexivity can reveal how and why well-intentioned, 'good people' practise gender in ways that do harm. The unintentional/non-reflexive practising of gender is more prevalent at work than intentional practising is, I suggest. Blatant sexism and gender bias are viewed as illicit in workplaces (and elsewhere) but sexism and bias in their subtle forms, constituted through non-reflexive practising, are rarely recognized or condemned. As a rule, only members who experience them at the 'raw end of power' even know they exist. Women more than men, but also people with less human capital and members of other disadvantaged groups — race/ethnic minority, older, gay or lesbian and foreign workers — are most familiar with their dynamics and effects.

A third justification for examining gender dynamics concerns their impact on the work organization. Maier and Messerschmidt (1998) contend, for example, that the Challenger spaceship disaster occurred due to practices associated with competitive masculinity. Key male decision-makers gave the OK to launch, in full knowledge that the shuttle's O-rings were unreliable in

cold weather. Their concern to avoid losing face with another group of men produced the death of six astronauts and an elementary school teacher. When men's competitiveness with each other takes precedence over sound reason and good judgement, organizations lose even if a few individuals win (Barrett, 1996; Jackall, 1988). In the Challenger case, people paid with their lives. As Collinson and Hearn (1994) note, men who practise competitive masculinities harm other men as well as women. Additionally, organizations that tolerate such practices harm their members and lower organizational effectiveness (Fletcher, 1999; Marshall, 1995).

A fourth reason concerns theories of the workplace.¹ If theories-in-use deny the presence and impact of gender dynamics at work, flawed conceptions of how organizations work are promulgated (Calás and Smircich, 1991, 1992a, 1992b, 1996, 1997; Martin and Knopoff, 1997). Theories that take status distinctions and dynamics into account need to be developed and employed (Bruni *et al.*, 2005). This article contributes to that end.

Finally, this article extends the 'doing gender' notion of gender dynamics.² By differentiating the content of gendering practices — what one says or does — from its actual sayings and doings — literal practising — we can learn new things about gender and how it works in action and interaction. Attending to the interface of practices and practising is thus useful for exploring why organizations tolerate and how they perpetuate gender inequities.

The conception that I favour challenges the 'doing gender' claim that gender is mostly done intentionally. Of course, people do practise gender intentionally. But they practise it unintentionally also and it is the latter process that intrigues me (Martin, 2003). Awareness and intention concern reflexivity. Most people are reflexive about gender at particular times. In the morning, for example, they/we don clothing, shoes and hairstyles to represent ourselves as gendered beings — man or woman, girl or boy. In consciously representing themselves/ourselves in this way, they/we are reflexive about gender. Once done, however, they/we largely ignore the messages our bodily appearance sends.

In work settings, practising gender with others without being reflexive about it is usual, not atypical (Martin, 2003). This claim rests on the premise that individual doings of gender are distinct from collective mobilization(s) of gender (Martin, 2001). A concerted — or joint — practising of masculinities by men at work harms women more than do individual doing(s) of gender, according to my research. Although masculinity dynamics — the collective mobilizations of particular masculinities — among men, as observed by women, are directed largely toward other men, they nevertheless harm women by making them feel excluded, different or exhausted, among other negative effects (Martin, 2001).

The article is organized as follows. Firstly, I describe gender as a twin dynamic of practices and practising. Next, I discuss agency, awareness, intention and reflexivity relative to this dynamic and provide fieldwork examples

to illustrate key themes. In closing, I comment on power and other issues that affect scholarship about the practising of gender at work and offer suggestions about how to improve research. Those who study gender in its 'saying and doing' forms will appreciate the challenges this agenda poses.

A twin dynamic — gendering practices and practising gender

People practise gender in all work settings, including boardrooms, insurance offices, fast-food restaurants, law firms, restaurants, banks, construction sites, churches and factories (Bird and Sokolofski, 2005; Collinson *et al.*, 1990; Fletcher, 1999; Fobes, 2004; Katzenstein, 1998; Kenney, 1996; Kerfoot and Knights, 1993; Pierce, 1995). Differentiating the practices made available by the gender order of one's society (Connell, 1987; Risman, 1998) from the literal practising of gender allows us to see the more fluid side of this phenomenon (Martin, 2003). Gender is at once a set of (potential) actions and a system that is in action (Connell, 1987). Gendering practices that are institutionalized are well known, widely used and practised similarly, time after time.³ Yet, specific incidences of practising even institutionalized practices are never exactly the same (Connell, 1987; Giddens, 1984; Martin, 2004).

For instance, the practice of referring to women who are in no sense 'girls' relative to age as 'girls' is widely known and used. A man who refers to women at work as 'girls' enacts a practice made available to him by the institutionalized system of gender relations. He knows about the practice; he uses it 'correctly', relative to (some) norms of the gender order. Yet in using it, he may communicate a message he does not intend. (On the other hand, he may intend it.) The social and cultural context in which the term is used will affect the way women interpret and react to it. For instance, they may accept it when a male friend calls them 'girls' at a dinner party but resent it if he does so at work. They may especially dislike it if their boss, man or woman, uses the term. The meanings people attach to gender are contextually dependent. Contexts influence workers' intellectual and emotional responses to gendering practice; thus context as well as content must be addressed if gender's resilience and influence at work is to be unmasked (Ferree, 2003; Ridgeway and Correll, 2004).

Gendering practices, the less active side of the dynamic, are the repertoire of actions or behaviour — speech, bodily, and interpretive — that society makes available to its members for doing gender.⁴ They are the 'what to do/can be done/is done' relative to a particular gender status and identity. Gendering practices include widely known and accepted forms of dress, demeanour, language, expressions, actions and interests that are culturally available to and normatively or stereotypically associated with one or the other gender (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Some practices are viewed as appropriate only for boys or men, some only for girls or women (although many are acceptable for both). West and Zimmerman (1987) assert that

people actively display forms of dress, demeanour and interests that are appropriate to their gender status, implying a conscious intention to conform to the imperatives of the gender institution. Many gendering practices are engaged in consciously, with an intention to accomplish certain ends, but many are also practised with only liminal awareness, as I discuss shortly.

Practising gender refers to the 'literal saying or doing of gender' in real time and space (Martin, 2003). While practices are the familiar, persisting and (relatively) predictable content of gender, practising it is emergent, episodic, variable and often unpredictable. Practising constitutes gender in social life, assuring the gender institution's continuation (Connell, 1987; Lorber, 1994; Martin, 2004; Swidler, 2001; Schrock *et al.*, 2005). If everyone stopped practising gender, it would cease to exist — at work and elsewhere (Lorber, 2005). This point underscores the centrality of practising to gender's perpetuation in workplaces and other arenas of social life (Connell, 1987; Giddens, 1984). An analytic separation of practices — words, deeds and interpretations as nouns — from practising — saying, doing and interpreting as verbs/actions — is thus useful for exploring how people practise gender at work, non-intentionally and intentionally.

Practising: what is it?

Sociologists and social theorists of all stripes are paying renewed attention to practise in an effort to better represent society in theory and constitution/construction (Connell, 2003; Schatzki, 2001; Swidler, 2001). I applaud this development. To advance understanding, I review key qualities of this concept, which I consider to be directionality, temporality, rapidity, immediacy, indeterminacy and emergence (cf. Barnes, 2001; Schatzki 2001). Although each feature would benefit from extended commentary, space constraints allow only a few points about each.⁵

Practising is both directional and temporal. It goes one way; it 'unfolds in time' (Bourdieu, [1980] 1990, p. 81). Practising is done in real time and space and, after being done, it cannot be undone. According to Howard and Hollander (1997), people can try to make 'interactional repairs' after doing something they wish they had not done, but they cannot literally take back what they did. Recognition of this condition prompts comments like, 'Did I do that?' or 'I don't know why I said that'. Gender is often reflected upon if at all, only after being practised in just this way.

Other qualities of practising are its rapidity and immediacy. Practising happens fast, in the blink of an eye (Bourdieu, [1980] 1990; Martin, 2003). When a man says, 'pretty dress' to a woman, she may respond with a smile or frown, a 'thank you,' 'colourful tie' or whatever. She is unlikely to reflect on his comment before responding. Yet his comment impels a response that will be shaped by the setting, her relationship with him — formal or informal — and how she interprets his intent — friendly, hostile, sincere, smart-alecky

or flirtatious. The immediacy of interaction means that the woman's response is unlikely to be premised in thoughtful reflection (Bourdieu, [1980] 1990).

Practising is emergent and thus is incapable of being anticipated exactly, although anticipation is required for it to occur. Practising 'happens', thus requiring one to 'move forward' in the face of uncertainty about what to do or how to do it; it requires making guesses and taking chances. Bourdieu ([1980] 1990) views practice in action — that is, practising — as a compromise between a past experience and an imagined future. He says its character can be appreciated by thinking about basketball. Good players toss the ball to the place they anticipate a team-mate will be, not where the team-mate currently is. Ferree (2003) prefers an analogy of dodgeball or catch, where taking account of others' locations and actions is required for successful interaction to occur.⁶ One anticipates, imagines, co-ordinates and acts, not necessarily in that order. Gender is practised in this way, sometimes after reflection, often without reflection.

To appreciate the practising of gender at work requires acceptance of the premise that people actively practise gender in varying ways.⁷ To do so, they exercise agency.

Agency

Agency is foundational to an understanding of how gender is dynamically constituted at work. Although scholars attribute many meanings to it (Ahearn, 2001), I define agency as the capacity to be in or to take action — for example, by doing (or refusing to do), saying and interpreting.⁸ People exercise agency at work by complying with prevailing norms and by resisting them. Giddens (1981) discusses agency as having a 'transformative capacity', which is the ability to act in ways that are unexpected and that create resistance and transformation as well as compliance and reproduction. In work settings, people come and go; shake hands; frown and smile; congratulate and fight; 'suck up' and dominate; goof off; do work; gossip; compliment and insult; co-operate and compete; assist and impede. They do not simply think about such things; they do them.⁹ The capacity to do things is neither a passive nor a slavish response to organizational dictates and the agency of individuals, singularly and in concert, is foundational to an understanding of gender as practice and in practice.

Organizational members exhibit agency relative to gender at work (Bird and Sokolofski, 2005; Dellinger, 2004; Fletcher, 1999; Leidner, 1993; Pierce, 1995). Thorne (1993) describes an elementary-school teacher who used gender to organize children in ways that separated them and fostered inter-gender competition. She made girls stand in one line and boys in another and encouraged them to view each other as opponents. Another teacher in the same school arranged boys and girls together during lessons and in lines, thus mitigating the tendency to stereotype and treat each other as an 'out-

group.' Each teacher may have had no intention to practise gender when instituting her policies, but she nevertheless did so. Her agency allowed her to constitute gender as she saw fit. This condition characterizes work organizations.

This claim is not news. Indeed, the awareness of the significance of gender-related dynamics has prompted numerous scholars ([Collinson and Collinson, 1996](#); [Dellinger and Williams, 2002](#); [Kerfoot and Knights, 1993, 1998](#)) to study gender in practice at work. Identifying the conditions under which people practise gender, the means by which they practise it and the effects of practising it requires one to accept the principle that gender is actively constituted — 'done' ([West and Zimmerman, 1987](#)), 'strategically asserted' ([Kondo, 1990](#)) and 'mobilized' ([Martin, 2001](#)). Entire organizations practise gender when creating policy ([Cockburn, 1988](#); [Cohn, 1985](#); [Martin, 1997, 2005](#)), just as individual workers do, both formally and informally, when they arrange meetings, evaluate subordinates, assign tasks and devise plans ([Martin, 1996](#)).¹⁰ Informal uses by organizational members are the focal concern of this article.

Reflexivity

Gender is extensively practised at work and much of this dynamic is unreflexive. Unreflexive practising is thus consequential. To develop this point, I review reflexivity, intention and awareness relative to practising of gender at work.¹¹

To be reflexive about gender is to have a particular awareness that stems from cogitating, studying or thinking carefully ([Martin, 2003, p. 356](#)). Reflexivity requires individuals to consider carefully or meditate on their actions and their likely effects prior to behaving.¹² To be reflexive about gender entails the thoughtful consideration of one's options and following through with actions that one intends to produce. 'To intend means to have in mind a purpose or goal, to plan, to signify' ([Martin, 2003, p. 355](#); see [Czarniawska \[1998\]](#) on intending versus positioning). To practise gender reflexively requires awareness and intention relative to a particular purpose. Is gender practised in this way at work? Rarely, in my experience.

People routinely practise gender without being reflexive about it and without consciously intending to do so. They know they are doing something but often they are less than fully aware of the gender in their actions ([McGinley, 2004](#); [Reskin, 2000](#)). In such circumstances they are liminally aware ([Gherardi and Poggio, 2001](#); [Martin, 2001, 2003](#); [Reskin, 2003](#) and below). This statement requires accepting the premise that what one intends — or thinks one is doing or saying — may differ from what one actually does or says and that the effects of one's actions may differ from those one intended. Actors with no intention of practising gender who are interpreted by their interactional partners as practising gender are, in their partners' eyes,

practising gender (Martin, 2003). Interpretation is thus part and parcel of gendering relations.

This premise can account for the divergent meanings people attach to experiences and episodes involving gender at work. If a person believes — perceives, interprets — that gender is at play in an encounter, for that person, it is. Similarly, if members of a collectivity — for example, a work group — perceive that gender is ‘at play,’ for them it is. People routinely make interpretations about gender as they engage in verbal and bodily actions and interactions, as the material reported below shows (cf. Dorsey, 1994).

Like many other social dynamics, the practising of gender is informed by tacit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is associated with liminal consciousness; knowledge that is ‘below the level of full consciousness’. Tacit knowledge is incapable of being verbally expressed (Barnes, 2001; Gherardi and Poggio, 2001; Polanyi, 1966; Strati, 1999). One can do many things that one cannot account for verbally. An example of tacit knowledge relative to gender is seen in men who know how to ‘act like men’ but cannot verbally explain what they do or how they do it. If I asked a man, ‘What do you do to “act like a man?”’ he is unlikely to be able to say. Yet he ‘knows’ and he does it (or not). His knowledge of the postures, gestures and practices associated with ‘acting like a man’ (or woman) is below the level of full consciousness; it is liminal. He can do them; he cannot verbally express them. A practical effect of this situation is that he routinely and more or less constantly does things associated with ‘acting like a man’ without reflecting upon them. When women perceive a man as ‘acting like a man’ at work, they experience his behaviour as gendered, irrespective of what he intends (Martin, 2001, 2003).

Reflexivity, non-reflexivity and practising gender at work

I now report stories from my fieldwork to explore how reflexivity and non-reflexivity instantiate the practising of gender at work. Ridgeway and Correll (2000) say men regularly employ stereotypes to discount women’s competence at work (cf. Cuddy *et al.*, 2004). A superior who accepts negative stereotypes of women, for example, the claim that women are less talented than men, is apt to ‘construct’ biased evaluations of women, even without intending to do so (McGinley, 2004; Martin, 1996; Reskin, 2000).¹³ Understanding how non-reflexivity works in practice can reveal how stereotypes are mobilized in interpersonal relations and interaction episodes. The first episode shows Bob being reflexive about (an aspect of) gender relative to men but not women.

I’m always ready! New to a financial services company, upon being introduced at his first sales meeting, Bob surprised everyone when he ‘pulled a pair of bikini undies [from his coat pocket] and tossed them on the table and said, ‘I’m always ready’ [quote from Paula, see below]. The men in the

meeting, except for Jeff, laughed uproariously. Paula, the only woman, did not laugh and, accompanied by Jeff ('a good guy and [a person who] doesn't like this stuff'), she left the room. Paula complained about the incident 'far and wide.' Besides complaining in person, she wrote a letter to her boss and copied it to Ron, the CEO and chief stockholder of the company. Soon afterwards, Ron and her boss called Paula in to 'accuse' her 'of not being a team player' [her words]. They 'ganged up on her' by saying she could 'ruin a guy's reputation' if she kept complaining. One man at the meeting later said Bob had thrown a pair of men's briefs, not women's panties, on the table. In the event, Ron ultimately denied Bob a few promised perks but allowed him to keep his large salary and plush office. The incident so upset Paula that she quit the company within six months to set up her own flourishing financial services firm.

Was Bob reflexive about gender before acting? Yes and no. In preparation for the meeting, he had thought about — meditated on, carefully considered — aspects of his behaviour. He brought women's underwear with him; he tossed it at just the right moment. He practised a form of masculinity that frames men as bonding with, and one-upping, each other around sexual exploits that objectify women (Collinson, 1988, 1992). Bob performed a form of heterosexual, macho masculinity that told other men, 'I'm a hit with the ladies and a macho guy with a great sense of humour!'

Bob had reflected on how his actions would affect men, but not women. His failure to 'think about women' suggests that women are unimportant in his world of work (Martin, 1996, 2001; cf. Weiss, 1990). Men, not women, were his intended audience. Bob took the masculinist character of the financial services world for granted (Lewis, 1990 McLean and Elkind, 2004) and performed — practised — a kind of masculinity that he thought would win him favour with his high status, affluent heterosexual male associates. That he and these same associates were surprised by Paula's reaction suggests the accuracy of this interpretation.

Neither Bob nor his associates could fathom Paula's reactions. While they may have been liminally aware that women would not like Bob's behaviour, they had not 'taken the role of the other' enough to anticipate its impact. They failed to see the harm in it; they wanted Paula just to 'let boys be boys.' Three high-status women in the company were, when I interviewed there, having health problems associated with high levels of stress in the company. One had taken six month's leave to regain her health and another was having surgery for colitis. Stress, prompted by the organization's masculinist culture, made the women anxious, upset and resentful; a situation that is not that unusual in the corporate world (Fletcher, 1999; Jackall, 1988; McIlwee and Robinson, 1992).

Men rescuing women. A subtler form of masculinity was practised by Maria's boss who 'rescued' her when she told him about a problem she was having. Maria, a computer specialist, found out 'through the grapevine' that he had

'solved' the problem for her, which she did not want because it hurt her status in the organization.

I would talk to my boss about a problem, just to think it through. Then I would hear through the grapevine that my problem had been solved. What was happening? I found out my boss was taking my problem to his boss and they were solving it for me. I did not like this. This was not what I had asked my boss to do. I felt he meant well . . . he was trying to help me out by taking care of the problem. But this was not what I meant or wanted to happen. I wanted to have his ear and thoughts in working through the problem myself. So I told my boss, 'Don't do this to me. When I come to you to discuss something, that's [all] I want. Don't solve the problem for me, OK?' If he solves my problems, this will make me look like I can't solve my own problems. (Systems analyst, age 35, Latina)

Her boss's actions reflected a stereotype that 'women in trouble' need rescuing. Without reflecting on its potential effects, he practised a kind of paternalistic masculinity intended to be helpful. I have observed many instances of this practice in corporations. Although well-intentioned, the behaviour fosters the very stereotype upon which it is premised: women need men's help; they need to be rescued. In the event, Maria's disapproval of her boss's behaviour prompted him to become reflexive about his relations with and practices toward women. He stopped 'rescuing', he said, 'It's something I learned not to do with my [sic] females'.

White guys just make statements. A third account from a Japanese-American man shows how the practices of white American men affected him. Tomaisa, a research engineer, said the 'white guys' who ate together at lunch only made statements and gave opinions but they never asked him anything. His experience prompted him to stop eating with them.

I look at the white guys eating lunch together and feel I'm left out on [sic] important informal information. I feel left out, like something is going on that excludes me. Seeing them together makes me feel like an outsider. . . . I went to lunch with the white guys for a while but I gave up.

[*Why was that?*]

Well, white guys just make statements!

[*What does that mean?*]

I would ask a question and one of them would answer. But he never asked me a question back. Then he just made more statements.

Tomaisa expected the 'white guys' to ask him questions so he could offer his opinion and experiences. When they failed to do so, he felt patronized. A dynamic in which white men compete with each other for air-time or to show

superiority — or to avoid subordination — prompted him to abandon his goal of eating with them. Tomaisa became reflexive about his own gendering practices and those of US men. The ‘white guys’ who practised competitive masculinity simply incorporated Tomaisa into their world and were, no doubt, only liminally aware of the masculinity they were practising. They did not know that Tomaisa experienced them as self-centred and rude. This example shows how norms and values associated with workers’ national culture(s) affect gendering practices at work. It also shows white men collectively mobilizing a form of masculinity that makes others feel devalued (see Martin, 2001).

I don't think that's a gender issue. Another account shows a high-status male asserting that women and people of colour misunderstand power in organizations when they say bad things happen because they are women or members of a minority group. Jeb, 52 years-old and a director of a large telecommunications company, said women often think they are discounted in meetings because they are women, whereas the real reason is power, not gender. He includes people of colour in this explanation, as the following quote shows.

Oh, I don't think that's a gender issue. I think it happens all the time. One of the things I found very early in my career when I saw those things happen. . . . I had a minority come in and say, 'This is happening to me and it's happening because I am black.' I would run out and check it. I usually found it wasn't happening because he was black. It was happening because the manager was incompetent and screwing everyone up. The blacks were the only race who defined it as their blackness. Everyone else just said, 'the manager's a jerk'. And I see a lot of this happening in this gender issue. I think my ideas have probably been stolen as often as any . . . and I attribute it to very poor listening skills of other people around me. Uh . . . I attribute it to some of the political things that go on, too. I never attribute it to my maleness. I sometimes attribute it to my lack of ability to communicate the way I should. . . . So I think part of the issue . . . is that people see things and relate 'em to their own position or their own status in the organization and believe that that's the reason they're happening. And they may be happening through a whole different set of human behaviours that don't have anything to do with their position. . . . The difference is, I have the expectation when I make a statement that people will do that [appropriate or steal it]. I have the expectation, if I put an idea out there, that somebody will take hold of it and they can twist it around and say it in a way that makes them look better. And I think they will do that. It's a power thing really, not about gender. It happens to me all the time. That's kind of the way the world's put together . . . so there's nothing wrong with that to me. And I think what you've told me is, if I was a female sitting in the room, I would think, 'That happened to me because I was a female'. . . . I don't fall for that.

After reflecting on his own experiences and the experiences of women and people of colour, Jeb concluded that contributions are stolen at work by people with more power and, in his view, power reflects organizational position. Official position accords status and power; gender and race/ethnicity do not. In failing to acknowledge that white men have power due simply to being white and being men, Jeb fails to acknowledge how gender and race intersect with official position to shape interaction at work. He fails to consider the possibility that his status as a man — a white man — may confer on him the ability to ‘steal’ ideas and ‘take credit’ that women (of any race and also men of colour) will not, in the usual case, enjoy.

White men oppose black men with power. An African-American administrator of a large hospital said white men intentionally hinder him. He came to this conclusion based on what people told him about what white men say when he is ‘not in the room’, he said.

They [white men] undercut me every chance they get.

[*Why is that?*]

I just know.

[*Do they do it to your face?*]

No.

[*So, how do you know they do it?*]

I know; I hear about it. My friends tell me what they say. The entire conversation is different if I’m in the room. But if I’m not there, they say . . . awful things.

[*About you?*]

Well, not usually . . . [about me] but about things I care about . . . know about . . . [and] value.

White men practised a form of masculinity that undercut him and devalued the healthcare needs of minority women and children, he believed. When I asked why they did this, he was unsure, but thought it might concern his ‘mentor’ who had helped him obtain his position. He was a ‘powerful Jewish man’ whom some of the hospital board members resented. Although unsure of their motives, the administrator interpreted white men on the board as opposing ‘a black man with power’ and this belief, true or false, influenced his perceptions and actions. While he was reflexive about the kind of masculinity that white men practised, he was not reflexive about women’s experiences in the hospital. When I asked about women, he repeatedly said, ‘I don’t know anything about that’. The one exception was his reaction to a story about vice-president Tom, who asked vice-president Betsy to answer the telephone, which she did (see Martin, 2003). He criticized Betsy for

answering the phone, saying: 'Why did she do that? . . . It's her problem if she answered the phone.' He did not criticize Tom for asking Betsy to answer it.

We rated women one-to-10. Another incident comes from a manager who said he and his associates in a predominantly male work-setting used to call out a number from one to 10 when a woman walked into the cafeteria at lunch. They no longer do this, he said, because the corporation forbids it, saying it 'insults women.' When I asked if he agreed that it insults women, he said he'd never thought about it. He did not say he agreed it did. At the time we talked, he was working around women as well as men, so I asked about the difference: what was it like to work around only men, compared to now? He hesitated before answering, 'Well, it was loud!' [men talk louder]. My question presumed a level of reflexivity that he lacked, not only in his former work setting with mostly men but in his current one with both women and men. He had simply 'never thought about it'.

I had an insight. Tom, the vice-president who asked vice-president Betsy to answer a telephone, 'had an insight' (his phrase) about gender during a two-year gender group that he founded after upsetting Betsy (Martin, 2003). His insight concerned the effects of a 'personal policy' about not eating alone with a woman work associate at dinner. He would have lunch with such an associate but not dinner, he said, because she might tempt him sexually or harm his reputation if others saw them and drew the 'wrong' conclusion. His insight consisted of realizing that his policy possibly 'discriminated against women' by preventing him from getting to know women as well as men. Due to knowing women less well, he may have failed to promote women or give them comparable opportunities, he now believed.

Until participating in the gender group, Tom had been reflexive about his policy's effects for himself. He never intended to harm women but he now realized that his policy might 'discriminate'. After having this insight, he was more reflexive about the effects of his dining policy and thereafter acted with greater awareness of its possible effects on women. Yet he did not change the policy itself. He still refused to eat dinner alone with a woman work associate. He now knowingly practised a kind of masculinity that framed women as sexual liabilities.¹⁴ His reflexive consideration on gender inequity failed to prompt Tom to abandon a policy that he now viewed as discriminatory.

Do you see all the girls? A final incident comes from an automobile plant with an assembly line that produced 999 cars a day. The assembly-line workers were 60–70 per cent white and mostly male, although women, white and non-white, worked there too. All worked in pairs, one on each side of the moving assembly line.¹⁵ When the partially assembled car reached them, a pair had 45 seconds to complete its task. Many teams completed the work

in less time and proceeded to smoke cigarettes, read the newspaper or visit with each other socially while waiting for the next car. They could not leave the area, though, because another car reached them shortly. For this reason, rest breaks were factory-wide so the line could shut down.¹⁶

A 67-year old white man, retired but working part-time, accompanied me on one visit. As I was leaving the building, he asked if I had noticed 'all the girls [sic] on the line'. [*I said, 'Yes, I had.'*] He said, 'Well, you know why they do it, don't you?' [*I said I didn't.*] He said, 'Well, they [the women] make \$22.00 an hour . . . 14 [dollars] plus eight in benefits. Compare that to a secretary ['s earnings].' When I followed up with, 'So, have the women been here long?', he said, 'Yes.' [*Since when?*] 'Over five years.' (This was 1993). 'And you know *why*, don't you?' [*No.*] 'The government made us . . . we didn't have women; so the government told us we had to take them . . . and the coloured [race/ethnic minority workers] too. So, things really have changed.'

This organization's employment practices relative to gender changed due to external pressure. A corporation that had formerly denied assembly-line jobs to women started accepting them. It became reflexive about a policy that formerly denied jobs to women because they were women and adopted one that allowed women to have assembly-line jobs. This change resembles the telecom company that forbade rating women in the cafeteria.¹⁷ In both cases, greater reflexivity about practices that harmed women sprang from external pressures, not from the realization by insiders of how biased or unfair they were. Pressure from government is an important lever for change in organizational policies about gender ([Reskin and Roos, 1990](#)).

Power

Several of the foregoing accounts reflect substantial differences in power. Steven [Lukes \(2005\)](#) says that organization *per se* creates power and I agree. The formal hierarchical authority structure of bureaucracies endows some positions with more power than others and work tasks and relations are organized accordingly. Gender is, furthermore, highly conflated with it. Most people with substantial structural power are men. Even organizations with more women than men employees are usually controlled by men. In general, men at work have more power, control more resources and exercise more influence than do women.

I emphasize these points to remind readers that gender is practised at work in a context of power where men hold most of the most powerful positions and most women are subordinate to men in the formal authority structure and relative to gender. This condition fosters events like those noted above; a salesman tossing women's underwear on to a table without thinking about its effect on women, lunchroom guys rating women without considering it an insult, men stealing others' ideas and taking credit for them.

Gender is thus practised within a power context that often amplifies its toxic aspects for women (Fletcher, 1999; Martin, 2001; Prokos and Padavic, 2005). When men call women 'girls', they infantilize them and call into question women's competence and authority. While the practice may seem trivial, it can be destructive, regardless of what its initiator intends.

Men also work in power contexts and some organizational cultures pressure them to compete, exploit and dominate. Men's identities are more fused with their employment than women's are; thus men may be more susceptible to such influences, even when they personally disapprove of them (Gerson, 1993; Weiss, 1990). Enron's valorization of high profits and rising stock prices led many men (and some women) to commit fraud, create fake companies and lie to people, including Wall Street (although apparently many major banks knew what they were doing and went along with them [McLean and Elkind, 2004]). No doubt many 'good men' succumbed to the values celebrated by this imploding company. Deception and fraud eventually brought them down, causing Enron employees to lose their pensions and costing California's citizens billions of dollars in spurious power-shortage charges. While most Enron employees had no idea that illegal activities were going on, the values and practices touted by top executives and the lavish rewards associated with complying with them were well known to players close to the top. When accountant Sherron Watkins went public with Enron's illegal activities, she was named by *Time* magazine as one of the 'persons of the year' in 2002 for whistle-blowing (Watkins and Swartz, 2003).¹⁸ Perhaps her 'insider' status as a senior officer allowed her to see what was occurring, while her 'outsider' status as a woman marginalized her and insulated her from the temptation to participate (Collins, 1998). Was she practising a form of femininity in reporting Enron's fraudulent accounting practices to the government? Did her exclusion 'as a girl' from the inner circle of 'boys' who played games of fraud and deception provide a structural stimulant to her whistle-blowing activity? Perhaps.

Discussion and conclusions

When I began studying organizational dynamics, I soon realized the challenge of collecting the 'sayings and doings' of gender in a form that researchers can use. The practising of gender is fluid and collective (Thorne, 1993), interpersonal and interactional (Messner, 2000; Risman, 1998, 2004), individual and collective (Martin, 2001). It is also rich, complex, and difficult to record. Even if one made video tape-recordings, much about gendering processes and relationships would be missed.¹⁹ As a result, gender dynamics routinely elude researchers' efforts to capture them (Fletcher, 1999). As I have noted (Martin, 2003), reducing dynamic events to words, which is standard practice among organizational scholars, can take the heart and heat out of

action by reducing multi-faceted dynamics to one-dimensional, static forms. It is my hope that readers of this article will find new and better ways to catch in action the practising of gender at work.

One way to make the practising of gender more visible and available to scholars is to collect more stories like those reported here.²⁰ Letting people describe their work experiences — requests made to them to answer the phone, calling out ratings, making policies, tossing underwear on tables — can provide some access, although a far from perfect one, to gender dynamics that are otherwise hidden from view (Gherardi and Poggio, 2001). Appreciating the significance of practising gender urges us to seek more effective strategies and methods.²¹ Experimentation with new ways to conceptualize, observe and record dynamics will foster new insights about what is 'being said and done' relative to gender at work and, I hope, avoid reducing gender to data that are bereft of validity, meaning and significance (Martin and Collinson, 2002).

I particularly urge attention to gender that is non-reflexively practised by collectivities (that is, mobilized by groups; see Martin, 2001). The interactional and situational contexts in which people interpret each other as practising gender need to be studied. Knowing how and around what issues and in what settings men and women practise gender collectively is a high priority goal. Both the lunchroom scenes reported earlier show white men engaging in concerted action to produce a form of masculinity that harmed people (Smith, 1987). The white men with whom Tomaisa hoped to eat lunch co-operated to enact a kind of masculinity that made him feel devalued and the men who rated women in the cafeteria collaborated to frame women as sexual objects. Such collective mobilizations are both disheartening and harmful to those affected by them (Martin, 2001). We need to know more about how such practices are created and sustained and also how they are resisted and challenged. Towards this end, Cunliffe (2003) urges organizational scholars to embrace constructionist reflexivity.

All practices are in a sense micro, even in large arenas — so that, for example, a CEO or someone else must act for a corporation (or government bureau), else it does not act. Individual agency is required for collective entities to be constituted, no matter how big the collectivities are. Likewise, the salesman who tosses women's underwear on a conference table performs a gendering act, bringing masculinity into the workplace and causing it to become part of organizational relations and experience. Bob's actions affected himself and Paula, but they also affected Ron and others, fostering consternation, anger, distress and even resignation. Gender is practised in just this way. The gender institution makes gendering practices available for practising, and practising them keeps the institution going. More theoretical and empirical exploration of this dynamic in workplaces is needed.

Judith Lorber says 'believing is seeing' relative to gender (1993). Societal members interpret even contradictory evidence in accordance with

prevailing stereotypes and norms when they believe that men or women have particular characteristics. One step toward improving work contexts is to make gender stereotypes and their associated practices more visible and to challenge their inaccuracy. Visibility does not guarantee they will be dismantled — to wit, Tom's retention of his dinner policy after realizing it hurt women — but it is nevertheless a positive step (Lorber, 2005). By exposing its harmful effects and imagining how gender can be practised differently, gender scholars can foster a more equitable society. Given the extensive attention gender scholars have paid to dynamics for almost two decades, we are uniquely situated to take the lead in this regard (Martin and Collinson, 2002).

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Notes

1. Although I focus on the workplace, gender is also practised non-reflexively in most social contexts — families, churches, political parties, labour unions, football teams — and often with unintended and/or harmful effects.
2. See Burawoy (1998) for an explanation of the notion of extending social theory.
3. An institutionalized practice is defined as one that is widely known and enacted over an extensive period of time across expansive geographical and social space (Giddens, 1984; Martin, 2004).
4. The content of what some scholars call roles, norms and ideals relative to gender can be viewed as gendering practices when they involve action — that is, when they are actively done, said, or interpreted.
5. This section relies heavily on an earlier article on practising gender at work (Martin, 2003).
6. Messerschmidt (2005) notes that some sports are far more reflexive than others; for example, golf is highly reflexive compared to swimming, which is less so.
7. I build on others' conceptions of gendering dynamics, which include such useful terms as doing gender, gendering, performing, making 'strategic assertions', narrating, mobilizing and maneuvering (Butler, 1990; Chase, 1995; Kondo, 1990; Martin, 2001; Schippers, 2002, 2005; West and Zimmerman, 1987).
8. Defining agency this way allows me to frame people who engage in similar actions as similarly agentic (Martin, 2003, p. 355). A definition of 'agency as efficacy' suggests that individuals who produce more of whatever they intend to produce have more agency, thereby confounding agency with the efficacy of agency.

9. Even thinking about gender, for example, in the process of interpreting what people are saying or doing relative to gender, is agentic.
10. Laws or regulations that forbid women from working after they marry or serving in some positions in the military are policy uses of gender by organizations.
11. Both individuals and organizations vary on reflexivity about gender and readers should not assume that reflexivity always fosters positive results. Some individuals and organizations embrace practices fostering gender bias, even when they are aware of the inequity their actions produce. Predictions from three decades ago that women's increased 'numbers' would 'take care of' gender bias in corporations failed to pan out (Kanter, 1977). Similarly, any expectation that greater reflexivity about gender will inevitably improve things is dubious. Still, reflexivity may be a necessary step toward positive change.
12. Howard and Holland (1997) define reflexivity differently in relation to symbolic interaction theory. For yet another conception, see Lash (1994).
13. Elliott and Smith (2004, p. 384) report that 'white women appear to fare worse, not better, under white-male superiors as they gain work experience, the opposite of what we might expect', suggesting that white men may view more experienced white women as threats rather than valuable 'human resources' deserving promotion and recognition.
14. Knowing that Tom retained this policy after realizing it might be harmful is sobering. Some feminists claim that 'seeing' what is normally invisible or hidden is a first step toward dismantling the harmful aspects of gender (Scott, 1999). The truth of this claim depends upon the circumstances under which gender is made visible and to whom and the anticipated consequences of change. Tom had the power to drop his policy but retained it. Awareness does not always foster change. If powerful men perceive benefits from a policy, they may retain it despite knowing it is harmful.
15. Of the line workers, about 60 per cent were white men, about 20 per cent were women, most of whom were white, and about 20 per cent were men from minority ethnic groups.
16. Women were paired with women, men with men. I did not see a single mixed-gender team, despite the fact that gender was irrelevant to the tasks because hydraulic lifts and other ergonomic innovations made women as capable as men of managing heavy transmissions, engines, front windows and car seats. Segregation along gender and race/ethnic dimensions was extensive, despite it being irrelevant to the work.
17. This company had a rule forbidding employees to smoke cigarettes not only in company buildings but even inside their cars when parked in the company car park.
18. For material on Watkins, see Solomon, 2004.
19. Organizations, especially large ones, resist allowing outsiders to witness their behaviour in meetings, interviewing job applicants and even in informal conversations. They are most willing to let them observe 'specialized training' programmes, as did Hochschild (1983), Leidner (1993), and Kondo (1990). They exclude outsiders for fear of lawsuits, bad press and a desire to protect 'secrets' from competitors, the public and anyone who might harm them. Catching work dynamics for research purposes is difficult, however, even if the organization lets scholars inside to see and hear firsthand.

20. Both the 'natural' and social sciences use stories similar to those I analyse to advance their agendas and their best 'stories' become theories (Tilly, 2002). Gendered organization scholars need more stories about the practising of gender at work. Regardless of whether a particular story is true, it offers clues about members' perceptions and beliefs. Geertz (1988) says 'the burden of authorship cannot be evaded' and Latour and Woolgar (1979) that 'all facts are fabricated.' Members' stories about gender at work offer access to organizational dynamics that are otherwise denied.
21. David Collinson and I have urged gendered organization scholars to strike out both theoretically and methodologically (Martin and Collinson, 2002) rather than to wait passively for organization specialists or gender specialists to pay attention to and build upon our work.

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