

**INSIGHTS AND RESEARCH ON THE  
STUDY OF GENDER AND  
INTERSECTIONALITY IN  
INTERNATIONAL AIRLINE CULTURES**

# **INSIGHTS AND RESEARCH ON THE STUDY OF GENDER AND INTERSECTIONALITY IN INTERNATIONAL AIRLINE CULTURES**

EDITED BY

**ALBERT J. MILLS**



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**SECTION I**  
**INTRODUCTION: THE GENDERING**  
**OF ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE**  
**OVER TIME**

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

*Albert J. Mills*

This book is about gender, intersectionality, history, organizational culture, context, fragmented identity, airlines, and discriminatory practices. It is likely about a lot more but those are the edited highlights. Apart from airlines, the foci are all things that have profound points of reflection for me; reflections that go back to the schoolyards of my youth. I long remember the time when I found myself in a schoolyard fight at school in Scotland. I was a five-year-old who was being pummeled by another boy, cheered on by a burgeoning and excited crowd, shouting as one “kill the English kid.” Moments earlier we had been in a history class where we learned of the great battles that Scotland had fought and won against the invading English. Born in London but brought up by my grandmother in Scotland, I was, nonetheless, seen as English by the boys and girls in the playground. It was a rerun of the struggle against the English, with me as the lone stand-in for England. The fight was one-sided because my heart wasn’t in it: I too favored the Scottish underdog. A year or two later I was back living in England and yet again, following a history class, I found myself in a schoolyard brawl. This time we had been taught about the civilizing impact of England on the unruly Scots. Now, given my recent time in Scotland, I was designated “the Scottish kid” so the local pugilist was egged on to beat me up.

I recall these stories because they had a profound effect on both my interest in and distrust of history. The experiences also played a role in my disdain for certain forms of masculinity built around displays of violence. And they peaked my interest in the role of culture in identity work. I literally did what I could to survive and fit-in anywhere by adopting the relevant manner of speech, gestures, and, up to a point, expected behaviors.

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Naturally, they weren't the only experiences that influenced my worldview. My grandmother, Margaret Beattie, played a crucial role in my formative years. She combined gentleness with strength of character that put her at the center of our large family; someone to look up to and to listen to. Her very being made it hard for me to understand why there was discrimination against women.

My class position was also part of my formative context. My grandparents on both sides of the family came from the industrial working class, and included coal miners, steelworkers, and transportation workers. My Scottish grandmother had worked in the canteen of the Glasgow Corporation tram company, where my grandfather worked as a tram driver. Later my mother, uncles, and aunt all went to work on the Glasgow trams and for some time, having left school at 15 years of age, I worked as a guard in the London Underground railway. Various experiences of low-paid, low-level jobs, bouts of unemployment, and near poverty drew me to Marxism. But it wasn't that simple. It took the 1960s and especially the Cuban Missile Crisis to hone my interest in Marxism. I experienced the 1960s as a swirling morass of feelings, emotions, and search for identity and direction—leading me not only to Marxism but also to feminism. It did not take much to convince me that the struggle for women's rights was one of the most neglected of issues across not only the mainstream of politics but also among leftist social change groups. In fact, it was hard to ignore the fact that in the socialist movement there was still a tendency to put class above all else and to join that theory with a series of practices where women were expected to serve their male colleagues.<sup>1</sup>

All these ideas would still be swirling, largely unresolved, through my thought processes, when I took up my first full-time lecturing position at Bradford College in the English county of Yorkshire. For my sins—and I really feel that is a fair categorization—I was employed to teach Organization Studies—a subject at the time that focused on male leadership of a largely male workforce in large-scale for-profit organizations (Hearn & Parkin, 1983).

One thing that immediately struck me was that in my classes, where there were a considerable number of women, the various texts I was teaching from spoke almost exclusively of male experience. From the examples and images used in my classroom male and female students were exposed to a man's world of organization, power, and control. It was a socially constructed, reinforcing, combination of gendered factors that, in my own small but important way, I was at the center of. I was part of the problem.

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<sup>1</sup>Sadly, it could not be ignored that some within the feminist movement neglected their working class and colonized sisters.

It was thus that I resolved to find a way forward and was aided by four developments. The first was the publication of Gibson Burrell and Gareth Morgan's (1979) *Sociological Paradigms and Organizational Analysis*. This book helped me to build a roadmap for my students that gave them paradigmatic choices: positivism could now be presented as a choice, no more, no less. It was the dominant view within studies of management and organization at the time but it was still arguably only one of many directions we could take in the study of organizing and managing. The problem, however, was that not even one of those choices included feminism, postcolonialism, or even the emergent poststructuralist and postmodernist theories.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, this kind of thinking encouraged the search for alternative paradigms or ways of thinking about organizations and management theory; opening space for feminist, postcolonial, and postmodern theories (Mills & Murgatroyd, 1991). It certainly encouraged me to pull together a number of feminist works that revealed the richness of feminist organizational research in the field of the sociology of work and organization and an emerging field of feminist organizational analysis (Mills & Tancred, 1992).

## Organization, Gender, and Culture

The second development to catch my eye was the emerging interest in organizational culture in business studies. Feminists had long argued that culture is the socially approved pattern of behavior that gives life to and serves to frame gender (Oakley, 1972) so I was optimistic that this development could open up the Organization Theory to the discussion of cultural practices that reproduce and encourage organizational discrimination. It also promised to open up the field to the nonrational and nonquantifiable aspects of organizations and how to study them. That promise was heralded by a special issue of the *Administrative Sciences Quarterly* (ASQ), and in particular in the article by Linda Smircich (1983a), who explored "Concepts of Culture and Organizational Analysis." However, my optimism was misplaced. The overwhelming number of publications produced over the next decade were, with few exceptions,<sup>3</sup> "malestream" (O'Brien, 1981) accounts of how to use the cultures of organizations for greater efficiencies and control. Instead of "a root metaphor" (Smircich, 1983a) the

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<sup>2</sup>There is considerable debate about the differences between poststructuralism and postmodernism (Peltonen, 2016; Prasad, 2005) but for the purposes of this book I see them as aspects of the umbrella notion of postmodernism.

<sup>3</sup>The work of Martin (2002) is among the exceptions.

notion of organizational culture was, more often than not, viewed in the mainstream literature as a thing, a variable, something tangible that could be used, manipulated, etc.

In the early stages of this focus on organizational culture Stewart Clegg (1981) published an article in *ASQ* that examined organization and control as the outcomes of various sets of rules. This struck me at the time as a way to conceptualize culture. Namely, as a configuration of “rules.” This conceptualization was built on Smircich’s (1983a) notion of organizational culture as a root metaphor (i.e., a particular phenomenon that is socially constructed through reference to a specific metaphor).

Clegg (1981, p. 533) viewed organizational control as the outcome of a series of rules, including “extra-organizational rules” where he explicitly opens the door for discussion of the importance of rules in the creation of organizational discrimination. Thus, for me, organizational culture came to be conceptualized as “being primarily composed of a particular configuration of ‘rules’, enactment, and resistance, within which gendered relationships are embedded and manifest” (Mills, 1988a, 1988b, p. 366). I then went on to argue that organizations can be “viewed as key ‘sites’ of rule enactment, mediation and resistance and, as such, significant contributors to the maintenance and development of gendered relationships” (*ibid.*). Organizations were not meant to be seen as the only sites where such relationships cohere but I did feel and continue to do so that they are important sites given their relationship to economic and political power. Finally, I suggested that a fruitful area of study would be to study the gendered character of specific organizational cultures through “analysis of the particular rule aspects ... that compose a certain configuration” (*ibid.*). Little did I know that this would become the basis of a lifetime of research into the gendering of organizational culture over time. To that end, I start this volume with my 1988 *Organizational Studies* article—*Organization, Gender, and Culture*—where I lay out my emerging approach. I am not arguing that this is the best approach to the study of gender and organizations. Rather my hope is that it will allow readers to make sense of the various studies included in this volume and to take into account the role of theory and method in research outcomes.

## **Section I: The Gendering of Organizational Culture over Time**

It was four years after the publication of “Organization, Gender, and Culture” that I undertook my first major empirical study.<sup>4</sup> Aided by a substantial grant from the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research

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<sup>4</sup> Focussing on the gendering of airline culture over time.

Council (SSHRC)<sup>5</sup> I began a long-term study of the gendering of British Airways over time.

Why British Airways? And why over time? By definition cultural rules have been a long time in the making to bring them to the point where particular expectations and behaviors are constantly reproduced with relatively little thought. In short, they are developed over time. This provides the researcher with at least two or three research strategies. One: through extant studies of ongoing behaviors (conducted through interviews, observations, and/or textual analysis) it is possible to identify key sets of expectations and behaviors. These can be important indicators of discrimination as well as clues to how they are produced and reproduced (Wilson, 1997). Two: it can be argued that an understanding of how key expectations and behaviors develop and change over time (conducted through archival research and historical analyses) can help us to identify strategies for addressing workplace discrimination. If we know how they developed, we may know how to prevent them (Morgan, 1988b).<sup>6</sup> Three: some combination of the first two strategies (conducted through combinations of archival and ethnographic research) can allow the researcher to identify the role of history and the past in the construction of extant expectations and behaviors, that is, studies that treat history not simply as something that happened before but that is a combination of past experiences and current sensemaking (see Chapters 4 and 7 below). I very much began with the second approach and gradually moved towards the third position, drawing on the actor-network theory to make sense of how gendered knowledge is produced through current interactions that produce interrelated notions of now and the past.<sup>7</sup>

Following the sage advice of the late feminist historian Rebecca Coulter, I began my empirical study of gendering over time by seeking an organization that had a publically accessible archive. As Rebecca advised, to be able to trace elements of an organization over time you need there to be “traces”—materials that can be examined and analyzed. An archive (in this case I mean a repository of collected materials normally housed in a single building) provides the possibility of being able to examine “traces” (i.e.,

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<sup>5</sup>I moved to Athabasca University in Canada in 1986 and was awarded a General Research Grant (#92-0476) in 1992.

<sup>6</sup>The need for historical study in the field of management and organizational studies has been made much more forcefully in recent years (Booth & Rowlinson, 2006; Kieser, 1994; Zald, 1993) but has not produced much in the way of studies of gendered organizational processes! Exceptions include Phillips and Rippin (2010).

<sup>7</sup>This approach was developed by myself and Gabrielle Durepos through a methodology we call ANTi-History (Durepos & Mills, 2012a, 2012b). Although elements of ANTi-History have been applied to various organizations, including airlines, they have only recently been applied to studies of gender (see Chapter 10).

materials—texts, artifacts, photographs, etc.) collected by a given benefactor, family, company, or government agency for a specific set of events, persons, families, company, or policies.<sup>8</sup> So that was my first task; to find an organization with an accessible archive. Secondly, I searched for an organization that had been in operation for a sufficient period to allow me to trace key events over time and to allow for the possibility of being able to track major changes: here I arbitrarily imposed a minimum time line of at least 50 years of operation.

A third criterion was to find a company with an established national and/or international reputation and standing. My assumption here was that any potential study would likely be of broader interest if the company studied was viewed as socioeconomically important and could plausibly be argued to have had an influence on the socioeconomic life of the communities in which it operated.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, I was drawn to the idea of focusing on an organization that was, in some way or other, associated in the public mind with gendered imagery (e.g., the heroic pilot and the sexy stewardess—see, e.g., Baker & Jones, 1967). This latter interest led me to undertake research on airlines because of the role they play in popular culture (Lovegrove, 2000). An initial library search<sup>10</sup> led me to British Airways because it met all of my criteria,<sup>11</sup> especially in terms of its international reputation and established archive.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>The notion of an archive is contentious. For further debate see Chapter 6 below and Mills and Helms Mills (2017).

<sup>9</sup>Of course, it can be argued that the powerful socioeconomic standing of a given organization could make any study less than generalizable. I would agree, but contend that I was not looking for generalizability but rather plausibility and context.

<sup>10</sup>By a *library* search, I mean a search through physically available records, books, etc. that one finds in a library. I mention this because the development of the internet has grown exponentially since I first started my research and it presents the researcher with new opportunities (e.g., Trans World Airways have posted their in-house newsletters on line) and challenges (United Airlines do not allow access to their archives, either in person or online). It also raises questions of why do certain things get posted and other things do not and what are the implications for the research project.

<sup>11</sup>I want to make it clear that I did not come to study British Airways because it was an exemplar of discriminatory behavior. While the airline was not at the forefront of redressing discriminatory practices they were not particularly egregious when compared to other companies at the time. However, as I was later to discover, the airline's early role as an important communications system of British imperialism does reveal a dark side to the company's activities.

<sup>12</sup>What I didn't realize at the time was that when I first visited British Airways' archive in 1991 it was at an early point in its development and had only recently moved into its first officially designated building (see Collier, Helms Mills, & Mills, 2016).

## Section II: Mapping out Culture and Gendering over Time

Identifying an organization to study was, of course, just the beginning. There were numerous research issues to deal with in the process. The primary issue I faced was how to undertake a study of an organization *over time*. In other words, how to deal with history and the past in developing a plausible account of how discriminatory practices come into being, are developed, maintained, and change over time. This focus helped in the framing of the study. To that end, I decided to look at measurable changes in practices, with an initial focus on the hiring and imaging of female employees (in contrast to male employees). In simple terms, I hoped to discover if or when women were hired by the airline, the types of positions that women came to occupy, and discover some of the main reasoning why they were hired (and not hired) to certain positions. In terms of the imaging of women and men I was searching for the ways that airline managers, supervisors, etc., discussed the hiring and workplace performance of women.

By now, my thinking was at an intersection between Marxism and the poststructuralist theory and it helped to shape what I came to call historical *junctures*. The Marxist theory had shaped my thinking in terms of the importance of historical context in the formation of certain material and ideational practices, and also the notion that history can be seen to work in phases, as dominant ideas give way in part to newer ideas, shaped through relations of production (Marx & Engels, 1940). The Poststructuralist theory, particularly the work of Foucault (1979), was influencing my ideas of how dominant ideas and related practices were discursive and that powerful meta discourses changed over time. These influences lead me to develop the notion of the juncture: a “heuristic ‘for studying organizational change over time’ [that] ‘refers to a concurrence of events in time in which a series of images, impressions and experiences come together, giving the appearance of a coherent whole that influences how an organization is understood’” (Mills, 2010, 1994a, 1994b, 1994c, 1994d, 1994e).<sup>13</sup>

In terms of British Airways, I was looking to find differences in the practices of hiring women over time and then to try to find plausible explanations, not only for how and why the practice occurred but also if and why it changed at another period of time. In fact, I came to identity (viz. socially

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<sup>13</sup>In recent times I have also found an echo in the work of Marc Bloch (1953) and the notion of mentalities in what I have tried to do with junctures.

construct) eight different junctures—going from 1919 to 1924—when less than a handful of women were hired by the airline through to 1991—when the company, already hiring women at fairly senior positions, adopted a government-led initiative—“Opportunity 2000”—to increase the numbers and percentages of women at all levels of corporate life (see Chapter 3).

Chapter 3 of this section represents my initial attempt to map a theoretical framework for studying organizations over time—focusing specifically on cultural rules, junctures, organizational and social discourses, historical context, and Acker’s notion of the gendered substructure. These elements were the outcome of my initial archival research at British Airways and were developed iteratively as I struggled to make sense of a mass of material. However, despite a profound interest in agency it is somewhat moot in this early framework.

Chapter 4 represents a refinement of the initial framework as a result of greater engagement with Foucauldian poststructuralism, Unger’s notion of formative context, and particularly the notion of sensemaking where, thanks to my collaboration with Jean Helms Mills, a focus on agency has become more central to the study of airline practices over time. The chapter represents an important shift towards critical sensemaking (Helms Mills, Thurlow, & Mills, 2010) that has been applied to gender studies of airlines (see Chapter 7) and to diversity studies in general (Helms Mills & Mills, 2009; Hilde, 2017).

Chapter 5 is a reflection on the problems of undertaking the study of organizational culture over time. It begins by examining ways of understanding history (exploring different feminist and poststructural approaches) before moving on to an examination of the problems of doing history (looking at issues of change and progress, gender and history, historical context, and how to evaluate cultural traces). In the process the problem of history is tackled as of primary concern for any study of the past, and here I come down on the side of history as a discourse (drawing on Foucauldian new historicism).<sup>14</sup> The chapter also deals with the vexing issue of tracking a company over time that, at the time of study in 1991, was the outcome of 56 different mergers and acquisitions. I contend that rather than compound the positivist focus on organizations as concrete phenomena (things or places) it is better to focus on the discursive ways

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<sup>14</sup>It can be noted that while I had adopted a poststructuralist stance on the notion of “history” and “the past” I was to give this much deeper thought in the ensuing period ahead (Durepos & Mills, 2012a, 2012b; Mills & Helms Mills, 2013; Mills, Weatherbee, & Durepos, 2014; Suddaby, Foster, & Mills, 2014).

that an organization is produced (and gendered) through the talk, behaviors, and practices of those involved.

Chapter 6 deals more specifically with the challenges of doing archival<sup>15</sup> and case study research, which is discussed through contrasting poststructuralist/postmodernist and positivist approaches.<sup>16</sup> In particular the chapter discusses the influence of theory—either explicit, as in postmodernist theorizing (e.g., Foucault, 1979) or atheoretical, as in factualist history (Rowlinson, 2004)—on the nature of the material studied, how it is analyzed, and the very notion of the archive itself. From a poststructuralist perspective, the chapter argues for a focus on *discourses* of gender that can be located in (or most likely characterize) particular junctures; with a focus on which discourses can be identified, followed by analysis of a particular “gender regime” (Acker, 1990)—how it developed, was maintained, and changed over time. These foci are taken up later in studies of British Airways (Chapter 12) and Pan American Airways (Chapter 16).

### Section III: Researching the Past

This section broadens the focus on the relationship between methods and empirical study, providing four contrasting ways of studying the past and implications for research. It involves papers dealing with Critical Sensemaking, Critical Hermeneutics, Actor-network Theory, and ANTi-History and the relationship of each to the outcomes of study.

Chapter 7 moves from the more structural study of airlines to a focus on the microactivities involved in the development of resistance, specifically through the study of sensemaking in Air Canada’s predecessor Trans-Canada Air Lines. Through the use of Critical Sensemaking the chapter explores the sensemaking of the airline’s first female trainer as she attempts, in 1937, to mesh the needs of female flight attendants with the company’s gendered understandings of women and their potential role in the airline. In particular it shows how the microprocesses were framed by a context of rules, discourse, formative context, and sensemaking. In the process the outcome is mooted resistance, where the flight attendant’s needs are

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<sup>15</sup>The process of reconceptualizing history from an ANTi-History approach has led to a further iteration of different approaches to archival research to include amodernist approaches (see Mills & Helms Mills, 2017).

<sup>16</sup>For further discussion around postpositivist approaches to the case study method see Mills & Durepos (2013); Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe (2009).

partially met within dominant understandings of the gendered character of flight attending.

Chapter 8 introduces critical hermeneutics and how it is used to surface meanings in selected Air Canada documents. The chapter argues that Critical Hermeneutics is a useful way to reveal the role of past and current communications in the production of discriminatory practices—however intended.

Chapter 9 argues for the value of actor-network theory (ANT) as a method for tracing the way that human (e.g., pilot) and nonhuman (e.g., an airplane) actors engage in a series of relationships that come to cohere in a particular form of knowledge (e.g., the belief that women do not make good pilots or airline executives). Focused on Air Canada, the chapter weighs discussion around the potential value of ANT for feminist research, concluding that a critically historical version of ANT can provide a “level of fusion between ANT and feminist thought” (p. 157).

Chapter 10 concludes the section by building on the previous chapter to introduce ANTi-History as an appropriate method for pursuing feminist research. Although it is not applied to studies of airline culture,<sup>17</sup> the chapter lays out key theoretical aspects of applying ANTi-History as a theoretical lens for studying gendering over time. In particular, it focusses on the uses of history and the past as discriminatory discourses and how to counter this by studying the various ways in which “history” is constructed as knowledge of the past.

#### **Section IV: Gendering over Time**

This section showcases various studies of airline cultures over time, including Air Canada (Chapters 15–16), British Airways (Chapters 11–13), Pan American Airways (Chapters 16, 17), and female flight attendants’ organization in the United States (Chapter 18). The eight papers—published between 1996 and 2012—deal with various aspects of gendering, including an overview of the development of the flight attendant as a gendered role (Chapter 11), masculinities at work in two different airlines (Chapters 13, 14, and 15), the role of powerful and completing discourses (Chapters 11 and 16), and the gendered character of organizational logic (Chapter 18).

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<sup>17</sup>More recently Collier, Helms Mills, and Mills (2016) have used this approach to study the development of the British Airways Heritage Collection. Other (nonairline) studies include Myrick, Helms Mills, and Mills’ (2013) study of the Academy of Management’s history.

## **Section V: Towards Intersectionality in Time**

This section moves to studies of the value and problem of drawing on the lens of intersectionality to study organizational discrimination over time. At the very start of my airline studies Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991) was introducing the term intersectionality into legal studies and the critical race theory. Recent years have seen a burgeoning of interest in the concept but it has generated various understandings and methodological approaches (Hearn & Louvrier, 2016; McCall, 2005; Mercer, Paludi, Mills, & Helms Mills, 2016). Simply put (!) it is an approach or lens that argues that in dealing with discrimination we need to take account of the way that different forms of discrimination (e.g., gender, race, age, disability, etc.) can intersect in different individuals, in different ways, and in different contexts. For example, a white woman may benefit from her race in situations where black women are seen as lesser than whites but she might experience discrimination where femininity is seen as lesser than masculinity.

Chapter 19 represents an early case where I grapple with the issue of race and gender in a study of British Airways' depiction of non-whites throughout its operations in the so-called Third World, and in particular Africa. Although not primarily engaged with intersectionality, the chapter provides some clues to the issues raised by focusing on gender alone.

Chapter 20 broadens the scope of the study of intersectionality through focus on intersecting issues of race, nationality, and gender in the operations and imagery of Pan American Airways in the pre-WWII era. Again, although also not specifically engaged with intersectionality, the chapter shows how several intersecting phenomena can coalesce to produce deep-rooted discriminatory contexts.

Chapter 21 moves the debate forward with a more detailed examination of intersectionality. Again study is made of Pan American Airways, this time from the period 1942 to 1989, exploring the importance of historical context in the making of intersectional dominance of one or other feature attributed to people (e.g., their race, gender, nationality, etc.).

Chapter 22 is the first involving a new airline study—this time turning attention to the Australian airline Qantas. As with all my previous airline studies this study of Qantas begins with an analysis of histories of the airline—treating those histories as discursive rather than factual accounts. Thus, in this chapter, the work of two batches of history by founder Sir Hudson Fysh and by John Gunn are analyzed to (a) get a sense of which actors are portrayed as “leading” and thus privileged and which actors are marginalized or ignored in the histories and (b) to gain an early

discursive understanding of actors and events to follow and/or unravel prior to undertaking archival research. In particular the focus is on layers of discrimination and developed through the historic accounts as different categories of people (or personage) are introduced and discussed through the histories.

## **Section VI: Lessons Learned**

Chapter 23, the concluding chapter, summarizes and reflects on the various findings of the research to date.