



Remembering Joan Acker through friendship, sociological thought and activism

1 | INTRODUCTION

Few special issues are as important as this one, as we celebrate the work, life and legacy of Professor Joan Acker: sociologist, academic, activist, friend, inspirer, teacher, community-maker. Few scholars have made such an impact on the development of the field of gender and organization. A feminist sociologist, Joan Acker will remain a foundational thinker for decades to come. For many of us, Joan Acker's work has taken us on a journey of intellectual discovery and has been the starting point that explains insightfully and dynamically many of the issues we struggle with when trying to grasp the complexity of gender and organizations.

The news of Professor Joan Acker's death came on 22 June 2016 just before the Gender, Work and Organization conference, held in Keele. Deborah received an email from Pat Yancey Martin whilst working late on the conference and although some people in the community knew Joan had been unwell, we were taken by surprise that she had passed away. And, whilst Joan's body has left us, her spirit, and intellectual and scholarly impact will never fade. Deborah recalls that when Joan had first become involved in the *Gender, Work and Organization* journal at its inception, her support had been key to the development and trajectory of it. Joan's paper 'The Future of "Gender and Organizations": Connections and Boundaries' published in 1998 has sparked considerable debate contributing to the breaking of boundaries and establishing new connections.

Over the period of her involvement with the journal, Joan remained an active and engaged editorial board member and her commitment to our community had been unwavering. A significant highlight of all the conferences was Joan's legendary debate with fellow scholar Sylvia Walby at the 2014 Gender, Work and Organization conference and is discussed by Judith Pringle later in this issue. Throughout the years, Joan remained unfailingly supportive and encouraging of the journal, providing insightful commentary and discussion. In her being and in her scholarship, Joan reminded us that gender mattered. Gender mattered just as much as when she had been a social worker many years earlier, when she had felt the experience of disconnection and an increasing distance in her working life. In her 2005 address as Distinguished Feminist Lecturer of the *Sociologists for Women in Society* she remarked:

After working for 13 years as a social worker, with a couple of years at home to take care of three children, social work seemed to be a dead and deadening end for me. I saw that, as a woman, I could advance very little in the field, while men I knew in graduate school were moving rapidly to administrative and policy making positions.

Joan Acker turned her experiences into her writing, teaching many of us to speak up and write to be heard. Her work has been the foundation upon which a great deal of theorizing of the relationship between gender and organizations has been built. Joan not only broke with the tradition that theorized organizations as gender neutral but also proposed a conceptual framework to theorize it. In that respect, the important point of departure in the assessment of Joan's work is the acknowledgement that she reformulated the discussion about gender and organization and developed the discussion into a field of enquiry. Many conceptualize her work to address gender inequality as evolving

through three stages, gendered dynamics and processes in organizations, namely comparable worth through the 1980s, gendered organizations in the 1990s and inequality regimes from the 2000s until her death.

Joan Acker's scholarship, vision and activism will remain central to future scholarly discussion, perhaps more so than ever amidst the current complex socio-political and economic global landscape where human rights are being eroded and persistent inequalities increase. As we go to print, Joan Acker's citations stand at 21,857 on Google Scholar (12 November 2019) and demonstrate the engagement and impact of ground-breaking transdisciplinary work that transcends generations of scholars. Joan will continue to remind us that research on gender was, and continues to be, marginalized, overlooked, downplayed and denigrated by academic institutions, including journals. It is this marginalization that makes journals focusing on gender matter not only for developing the field of gender studies and building its significance as legitimate enquiry, but for also communicating that our working lives have the capacity to change us and future generations. Gender scholars turned to Joan's work to legitimize the work of so many others as she offered ways to think empirically and methodologically about intersectional diversity (see Benschop, 2019, for a review of her work).

In reminding us that gender matters, both as an object of study and as the lived experience of being organized, Joan's focus lay in explicating 'the local, ongoing, practical activities of organising work that, at the same time, reproduce complex inequalities' (Acker, 2006, p.442). Her insights into 'inequality regimes' and their consequences drew together a focus on inequalities in organizational processes and in wider society, and how an analytic space could be created within which class, gender, age and race and disability could be theorized.

People who knew Joan in the community always recall the person she was as well as the sociologist theorist we read and listened to. Deborah recalls a vignette of everyday life in which Joan was an unwitting, although hugely gracious, participant. At a conference of the *American Sociological Association*, Joan was the stream plenary speaker. The venue was a large meeting room on an upper floor of a corporate American hotel group which was also host to what appeared to be a number of other smaller, non-academic meetings simultaneously, largely populated by besuited 'businessmen'. Uniformed hotel attendants patrolled each floor to guide guests, conference delegates and participants from other activities to their destination. Waiting for the meeting room to be vacated, Deborah saw the lift doors open and Joan emerge, only to be met by a young male hotel staff member who stepped forward holding his arms wide and trying to herd Joan back into the lift. As a senior, slightly built woman, and clearly not wearing a man's business suit, Joan did not 'fit' the young man's expectation of who belonged there. The doors closed and then reopened; Joan emerged once more, smiled and then strode past him exchanging pleasantries as she did so. At once, at that moment, age, sex and class as axes of difference combined to position Joan as 'out of place': if only the young man could have read her work.

Joan Acker will be sorely missed. She was and always will be a giant in the pages of this journal, and in gender, diversity, feminist scholarship more broadly. Our community has been gifted Joan Acker's intellect and generosity, and we have a service to ensure that her work is read acknowledging the time and place in which it was written. The ways in which future generations will take her work into new fields, subject areas and projects is exciting. To pluck aspects of Joan's work out of context would be to depoliticize the ideas that were shaped by her life, including her experience of gender inequality. Times change but Joan Acker's work is as relevant today as when the early pieces were published. Her work continues to matter because it was about others and not herself. She was democratic and generous until the end. Joan Acker was an immense figure that was greatly respected in life and death.

Since Joan Acker's death the *Gender, Work and Organization* community, alongside many other communities to whom she contributed greatly, have told stories recalling their relationships, encounters and experiences with Joan. What was remarkable about Joan Acker was the ways in which she connected with scholars across generations. We feel enormous privilege to have known Joan personally and through her work and were deeply saddened by her passing. Yet, this special issue which closes our 25th year as a journal, is a celebration of Professor Joan Acker. You will read friends and colleagues as they reflect upon her work and share stories of time spent with Joan. These contributions bring to light not only how Acker understood the impact of gender in social, economic and organizational life, but the layers in her thinking, and how it has influenced the field. Contributions to this issue are diverse and

combine stories and memories of friendship, reflexive accounts of the impact of Acker's work on contributors' own scholarship and papers engaging with the ways Acker's thought enables us to think differently about gender inequalities in organizations.

2 | REMEMBERING JOAN ACKER: FRIEND, SOCIOLOGIST, FEMINIST AND INFLUENCER

The first section of the special issue houses reflections from Joan Acker's friends. The words make us tremble, connect and ask ourselves how our work is shaped by the writings of these foundational thinkers, activists, change-makers in gender, work and organization. **Barbara Czarniawska** opens the issue with 'Joan My Friend', which reflects on Joan's qualities as a dear friend, supporter and companion, as well as a close and trusted colleague. That Joan was active in her scholarship, doing fieldwork well into her eighties, points to her remarkable energy, and Barbara also fondly recalls the care Joan took of her after hip surgery. A friendship borne of loving care as well as rigorous academic debate signals the texture of their long personal relationship, and of special interest is a photograph taken during this time, in 2012. Continuing, **Patricia Yancey Martin** remembers Joan in 'Celebrating Joan Acker: Sociologist, Fearless Feminist, Friend', presenting Joan Acker's obituary published in *Footnotes* (2016) which talks about Joan Acker's entry into sociology, her activist work and her passions. After this moving piece, a series of talks and presentations are provided which all give insight into Joan as an academic and person. Acker's 'Sociology and Me' talk from 2005 is presented from when she was awarded the *Sociologists for Women Society's* Distinguished Feminist Lecture-ship and an Addendum by Patricia Yancey Martin is also included. Afterwards, Patricia's talk from a panel: 'From "Intellectual Sexism" to "Inequality Regimes"' at the *American Sociological Association* meeting in 2011, which was dedicated to Joan Acker's work, can be read. Patricia Yancey Martin ends with the questions that were posed to Joan that day and which she hopes will further inspire students of gender, work and organizations. In the same vein, **Lotte Baily** and **Joyce Fletcher** present a dialogue that they had: 'Reflections on Joan Acker's Influence on Us and on her Legacy: A Dialogue'. In this exchange, the influence of Joan's work on theirs, and the ways it continued to shape their writings on gender and power is fondly remembered. We are struck by the ways in which these early writings entered the field, and the ways in which writings are employed for the pursuit of not only individual projects and the field at large. Baily and Fletcher consider how Joan's work changed the way they understand inequalities related to gender. The need for close critique of the reification of the gendered norms of effectiveness and leadership is called for. The relationship and respect between these intellectual giants can be felt through the text, each word acting as an embodied reminder of the importance of women's friendships, and the ways in which relationships are important for intellectual work and building community.

In the next piece, **Marta Calás** and **Linda Smircich** offer 'A Heart Felt Remembrance: Some of the Ways we Knew Joan Acker. Marta Calás and Linda Smircich show us how the personal is political, the connections between scholars and the ways in which Joan taught them through her writing, talking and being. Through remembering Joan and her work, Marta and Linda remember the tenets of Joan's early writings on women's exclusion and subordination in society and are timely reminders of the significance of feminist contributions to sociology and gender, work and organization. Moving to Aotearoa, **Judith Pringle's** 'Tribute to Joan Acker (1924–2016): Views from "the South"' shares her experiences of Joan and her work. Judith recalls the enormous significance of Joan Acker on the gender community and recalls how at a research workshop she was attending, she conducted an unscientific poll of 'significant authors and scholarship' and Joan Acker polled the highest, amongst scholars of diverse ages, stages and ethnicities. Reflecting on Joan Acker's scholarship, Judith recounts the persistence of the 'abstract bodiless worker' (Acker, 1990, p. 151) which prevents gender equality. Again, Judith recalls listening to the debate with Silvia Walby as a highlight, connecting with Joan on their small statures, writes about the importance of Acker's inequality regimes in multiple research contexts for research in Auckland and discusses the centrality of class for pursuing social change. In recalling the importance of Joan's

attention to intersectional differences for organizational analysis and change, Judith cites Acker to also issue a caution of unsettling privilege.

In the next tribute, **David Knights** writes 'In Remembrance of Professor Joan Acker: A Legendary Figure in the Field of Gender, Work and Organization'. David Knights discusses the importance of discourses and practices of masculinity to the understanding of social inequality and the interdependency between gender inequality and class and race. Knights notes that in reflecting on the role of men in organizations, as well as particular forms of masculinity, Acker's work contributes to an understanding of legitimate masculinities in organization. He concludes by reflecting on the minimal success of both academic and practitioner projects aimed at addressing equality in organizations, which in many ways is explained by the same theoretical insights put forward by Acker. Ultimately, he recognizes Acker's optimism that change is possible due to 'the increasing "visibility of inequality"'. In 'For Joan: Some Letters with Reverence, an Honorary Doctorate and a Dialogical Tribute', by **Jeff Hearn** with **Teresa Elkin Postila**, **Annika Eriksson**, **Karin Lund-Frank**, **Kicki Mällbin**, **My Persson**, **Stefania Prandi**, **Lina Rahm** and **Jörgen Skågeby**, the writing is divided into three parts. In the first part, a series of 'letters' sent to Joan by students at Linköping University, Sweden, as part of a presentation for International Women's Day 2012, are reproduced. The second part consists of an edited proposal written by Jeff for Joan to be awarded an honorary doctorate in 2011 at Hanken School of Economics, in Helsinki. The third and final section Hearn adds a personal tribute and reflection. One of the most striking similarities in the student letters reproduced here is their recognition of the clarity in Joan's writing that inspired her students and readers, and for her capacity to communicate that change is possible.

To close this section, **Susan Sayce** also remembers Joan's generosity when working with her on a special issue of *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion* which celebrated her work. She details how consideration of Joan's gender substructure framework and how it evolved over time and Joan's engagement with contributors to the special issue showed her appreciation of the way her theoretical concepts such as gender subtext had been taken up. Joan also expressed a hope that continued use would be made of the theoretical tools she developed and that such use would include a stronger intersectional focus. In this regard, she saw her concept of inequality regimes providing a good foundation for this. For all of these authors, Joan Acker's work changed the way they see the world, provided them with the theoretical tools to explain why social inequality based on gender, class and race persists while also leaving behind a body of empirical work which provides guidance on how interventions can be developed to reduce inequity while always being mindful of the changing form that inequality can take.

3 | REFLECTING JOAN ACKER: FOUNDATIONAL THINKER AND CHANGE-MAKER

The next set of papers review Joan Acker's work by exploring its relevance and impact to the field. We start with **Stella Nkomo** and **Jenny Rodriguez**'s paper 'Joan Acker's Influence on Management and Organization Studies: Review, Analysis and Directions for the Future'. This paper traces Joan Acker's influence on management and organization studies and examines how recent research has employed Acker's concepts and theories. A systematic review of journal articles citing Acker's scholarship from 2000 to 2017 was conducted. Importantly, for *Gender, Work and Organization*, Stella and Jenny are interested in exploring the 'transformative capacity of Acker's ideas' for the field. They also outline trajectories for future research. As we might expect, their review concludes that Acker's theory of gendered organizations, and the concepts of inequality regimes and ideal worker were most used by researchers in management and organization studies. Stella and Jenny end their article boldly calling for researchers 'to make more revolutionary use of Acker's ideas' as we analyse the power structures of organizations and the ways in which gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, able-bodiedness, oppression and inequality collide, but as Stella and Jenny show us as researchers we need to fully consider the socio-political contexts in which inequality continues transnationally and the ways in which patriarchy and coloniality persist.

Our next paper is by **Geraldine Healy, Ahu Tatli, Gulce Ipek, Mustafa Ozturk, Cathrine Seierstad and Tessa Wright**. 'In the Steps of Joan Acker: A Journey in Researching Inequality Regimes and Intersectional Inequalities' explores the concepts of inequality regimes and intersectionality. The authors revisit their intersectional research at the Centre for Research in Equality and Diversity (CRED) at Queen Mary University of London. In 2007, Joan Acker delivered the first CRED annual lecture: 'Organising in Search of Diversity and Equality: Whose Ends, What Means?' By exploring their research studies and papers on inequality regimes and intersectionality, the authors offer an appraisal of the adoption of Joan Acker's sociology. The authors recognize that Acker's research on gender and organizations shaped much of their research, yet the paper also focuses on inequality regimes and intersectionality. Importantly, the paper stresses the value of inequality regimes for advancing intersectionality.

Following on, **Marieke Van den Brink and Yvonne Benschop's** contribution 'The Godmother of Gendered Organizations' rightly suggests how Joan Acker can be considered the godmother of gendered organizations. Marieke and Yvonne offer reflections on the impact that Joan Acker's writing has had on their thinking and careers as gender scholars in management and organization studies in Europe. In a personal account they offer beautiful moments of shared times with Joan, before moving on to consider gendered processes regarding structure, culture, interaction and identity and inequality regimes on the intersections of gender, class and race. Marieke and Yvonne reflect on the ways in which Joan Acker's work has influenced their research, teaching and consultancy reminding us of the importance of Joan's work for bringing about organizational change.

The next contribution 'Joan Acker and the Shift from Patriarchy to Gender' by **Tristan Bridges and James Messerschmidt** highlights how the shift from patriarchy (which had a strong theoretical presence in the 1970s and 1980s) to gender changed the landscape of gender research. While Acker's idea of gendered organization and gendered dynamics may now seem mainstream, its radicality means that they and all gender scholars can never ignore the way in which gender inequality is perpetuated systemically and on an ongoing basis. A renewed engagement with Acker's radicality in contemporary times has been called for by Nkomo and Rodriguez, and yet perhaps part of this radicality requires close interrogation of the ways in which patriarchy mutates globally and sustains not only gender inequality but emerging patterns of gendered violence. **Jill Rubery** as founding editor of *Gender, Work and Organization* then considers 'Joan Acker and *Doing Comparable Worth*' to explore the persistence of inequality in relation to gender pay equity by writing about the depth of influence Acker's (1989) book *Doing Comparable Worth* had on her own thinking about this issue. Jill considers the way this text has been a constant source of inspiration and challenge to her when reflecting on how the pursuit of gender pay equity can exacerbate class and gender conflict. In re-reading *Doing Comparable Worth* she notes how Acker anticipated arguments Jill and a colleague made in a 2015 article on the limited progress made in narrowing the gender pay gap and is reminded of her foresight in recognizing the strong possibility of the recurrence of new forms of gender inequalities when the goal of equity appears to be within reach.

Our next paper is 'Work in the Shadow of Finance: Rethinking Joan Acker's Materialist Feminist Sociology' by **Lisa Adkins** who makes Acker's seminal article 'Hierarchies, Jobs and Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organization' (hereafter 'hierarchies') the focus of her paper. In revisiting what she refers to as 'the jewel in the crown of her extensive oeuvre', Adkins makes visible the position of Acker in the intellectual history of theorizations of work within a post-Fordist regime of accumulation as well as the way in which 'hierarchies' provided the foundations for contemporary feminist research and theorizing of organizations. Beginning with a recounting of how Acker sought to make visible the gendered substructure of organizations which had up to then been treated as neutral, Adkins emphasizes the importance of 'hierarchies' in recognizing how the mundanity of organizations — job descriptions, job advertisements, job classifications — assumes a male worker. For Adkins 'hierarchies' was extremely timely as it emerged during the substantial expansion of service sector work facilitating women's entrance into the labour force in large numbers based on the mobilization of the skills and capacities of femininity. Adkins considers the relevance of Acker's analysis to understanding the precarity which is increasingly characteristic of contemporary work. This is not only associated with organizational changes but linked to the neoliberal promotion of competitiveness and the demand that populations in general take up work. Importantly, this is a decidedly different economic context to that

which prevailed when Acker wrote 'hierarchies' requiring women to be both productive and reproductive workers. For Adkins, the increasing importance of indebtedness to facilitate survival in this new landscape means that it is now the structure of finance rather than the structure of work organizations which requires feminist analysis and that Acker has provided us with an understanding of how to engage in this form of inquiry.

In 'Gendered Images of International Research Collaboration', **Kathrin Zippel** draws on Acker's theory of gendered organizations to explore the power relations and concealed inequalities that are reproduced in international research collaborations through everyday practices and the stratification of science and academia at a global level. Using the empirical example of the international research collaborations of STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) faculty working in the United States, she explores the way in which the genderedness of these relationships results in differential academic rewards. For Zippel, Acker's theory of gendered organization proved invaluable in making visible the way in which gender is inherent to academic institutions with collaboration practices being characterized by '... subtle mechanisms, images and expectations ...' that lead to the exclusion of women and others who are conventionally perceived as outside the norm of academia. Drawing on three of the five processes Acker specified as part of the notion of gendered organization – the gendered division of labour, gendered images, everyday gendered interactions – Zippel depicts three different images of international research collaboration: international collaboration characterized by 'patronizing help' research alliance which is characterized by instrumental exploitation and 'partner' which avoids exploitation and altruism but rather is formed on the basis of friendship with the aim of achieving mutual benefit. In building on Acker's work, Zippel has been able to identify two concepts that make visible the gendered inequalities which are at the centre of the organization of global science – glass fences which act as gender obstacles which limit women's engagement in research relationships and what she calls the '.edu bonus' that adheres to American science recreating structural inequality at a global level with negative consequences for non-American academics. For Zippel, Acker has provided us with the theoretical resources to reveal such inequalities and with such revelation we can work towards 'levelling the playing field' of science and reducing their impact.

Our final contribution to this issue is **Myra Marx Fereee** and **Johanna Quinn**'s 'Schools as Workplaces: Intersectional Regimes of Inequality'. Recognizing that US school jobs are 'segmented by gender and race', Fereee and Quinn bring Joan Acker's 1990 'Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies' article together with her 2006 'Inequality Regimes' to explore the intersectional effects of gender, race and class. Developing Acker's attention to race and class, the authors analyse the 'race work' inherent in schools. The context for this exploration is the organizational interactions among teachers and paraprofessionals in one large, urban and unionized school district in the United States. Analysing skill, care and respect as 'three dimensions of interaction embedded in the occupational demands and specific job requirements of teachers and paraprofessionals' the ways in which regimes are produced in interactions, and the tensions between largely White teachers and the women of colour who are the paraprofessionals are illustrated. This article is important in surfacing the 'invisible racialized work of supporting the moral worth of students and staff' and illustrates how Joan Acker's work can be employed.

4 | CONCLUDING

The brilliance of Joan Acker's scholarship has made an enormous and long-standing impact on feminist sociology and feminist organization studies. Her work shifted the theoretical conversation from patriarchy to gender; transformed the way in which gender is understood from a focus on innate differences between men and women to a conceptualization which sees gender embedded in organizational systems and practices; and built on an early intersectional sensitivity to connections between class and gender to encompass, through the concept of inequality regimes, the inseparability of the intersecting inequalities of race, gender and class. Joan's work inevitably wielded personal influence on the academic labours of individual scholars. Those of us working in sociology, gender studies and gender, work and organization are indebted to Joan Acker for developing awareness of the recognition of the subordination of women and the complexity of the power relations that work through different bodies. Acker transgressed the

constraints of her time in several ways, always recognizing and undoing the power and privilege afforded her and working to advance theory and effect practice constantly.

No longer can we assume that we are making progress organizationally, at the expense of reading the ways in which gendered-based inequality is intersectional and it is often violent. Acker's work reminds organizational scholars that organizations do not exist in a vacuum, that organizations and their members have responsibility for asking of themselves how they reinforce gender inequality and subordination. Academics are required to ask the big questions, challenging those who take the mainstream for granted. And, Joan herself taught us to transgress the positions assigned to us. We will continue to return to Acker's life and work to keep asking of ourselves: who and what are we overlooking? And, what questions need to be asked to make visible continued inequalities both in society at large and in academe? Joan Acker's work will remain relevant, accessible and intellectually challenging for feminist scholars working to achieve equality.

As we end this issue, we thank Joan's friends and colleagues for remembering her and her contributions to *Gender, Work and Organization*, and for opening up new directions to engage with her scholarship. It seems fitting to end this issue by returning to Joan Acker's (1973) first published paper 'Women and Social Stratification: A Case of Intellectual Sexism' which acknowledged the ways in which women were 'absent' or 'subordinated' in sociology. Joan Acker's career started by using feminism as a radical intervention in sociology. This radical orientation has provided legitimacy for generations of feminists to effect practical and academic change both within and outside the university. Relationships and connections with other women writers seep through the pages of her work and the words of her friends and colleagues writing in this issue – the relationships between writers form an intellectual bond that lasts through written words.

As we cross into 2020 the fight for gender equality is still very real. Challenging social injustices has never been more important for us. Feminism is central to the challenge. Joan Acker's words maintain huge relevance for our work in universities today, providing a call for action for both our scholarship and activism going forward.

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