Performing Gender at Work
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REVIEW

Elisabeth Kelan is widely known in the UK and Europe as an academic, consultant, and key note speaker in the field of management, specializing in corporate social responsibility and managing diversity and inclusion. Her blended feminist-business case influences appear widely within the knowledge economy through web presences such as Lady Geek. Kelan's voice often appears in print and sound bites in the popular media, sometimes controversially (for example, Kelan has noted the negative discourse of abandonment in her homeland of Germany where working mothers of young children are labelled 'raven mothers' to account for why so few women with young children are in the paid work force). Given her versatility, *Performing Gender at Work* is not an easy read. It has the hallmarks of a text for an academic course, rather than for a wider business audience.

Within this text, Kelan draws on parts of her published body of academic work between 2007 and 2010. Juxtaposing such theorists such as Butler, West and Zimmerman, and Potter and Weatherall, Kelan crafts a research framework that seeks to gain leverage from these diverse perspectives to examine doing gender in Information Technology (IT) settings. Her theorising claims gender (masculinities and femininities) as an iterative process; as flexible, fluid and open to change. While this is similar in tenor to feminist theorists such as Lloyd's (2005) subject-in-process concept, theorising is not

based on historical waves of feminist change, nor does it take account of them, or their effects.

In brief, Kelan's book covers the ways that gendered positions are accessed, negotiated, taken up or rejected within IT work. In a time of neoliberal effects on gender and work, Kelan considers that subjects are constituted through socioeconomic processes of change. Crafting her work in two parts, Kelan explores method and theory, and then relates her research findings. Overall, this research examines workplace practices, biographies of employees, and how gender is conceptualised, as set out in the introductory chapter. Chapter 2 reviews ways social scientists and gender theorists have understood gender work and technology, with gender as performance enriching this field. Chapter 3 explores ways of researching this field by analysing discourses. Chapter 4 looks at the ideal employee in IT, and Chapter 5 examines how IT professionals talk about their life courses in ways that may be considered gendered. Chapter 6 examines gender knowledge in the IT workplaces studied, its limitations, and the need for future research. Kelan's starting point takes up 21st century neoliberal economies as described by Castells, (2004) which considers gender less relevant as a structuring mechanism in society. Kelan relates her 2003 Redtech-Greentech study of Swiss software 'intrapreneurs', those in business who increasingly manage their own time, but do so within a company. Thus, her research is conducted in two elitist IT workplaces, one local, one transnational. The discourses analysed emanate from some, mainly childless, women but predominantly from male software engineers or programmers, who are at the top of the salary scale in IT. Thus, the research is conducted within a narrow band of relatively privileged IT professionals.

Yet, Kelan is cognisant of the affordances and limitations of ethnography, discourse analysis, and post structuralism in her research practice. Her research method enables these IT professionals to identify their subjectivities, made visible through their ideologies which link psychic and societal structures. Explicit in IT professionals' narrated biographies is their individuality to craft a life pathway, a neoliberal goal. Yet, at the core of this fast changing industry lies the apparently immutable construct of the ideal IT worker as a male, market driven, neoliberal subject.

Thus, Kelan's exploration of these interpretative repertoires, shared and repeated commonsense terms for explaining and evaluating actions, events, and other things, reveals an ambiguous and dissonant ideological dilemma within their narratives. Accounts of regretted scarcity, perceived gender discrimination, and perceiving gender as being unimportant co-exist in common knowledge. For example, *Steven* at Greentech is asked whether he thinks it matters if an IT professional is a man or a woman. He replies "Not at all, in an IT related environment, which is dominated by men, it is certainly an advantage. I think a woman has many advantages that she could use if she wanted to". In other words, while the reply seems on the surface to be illogical, it sums up many of the elements that can be exposed through this

kind of research. According to the discourse articulated by *Steven*, the lack of women seems inexplicable as they have the same chances - discrimination is rare, and up to individuals to manage. Thus these discourses and others render gender invisible. Being a woman is constructed as both not important, and yet a potential advantage.

The strength of Kelan's work lies in her ability to get inside employee networks within transnational and prestigious IT organisations and make them transparent. She brings the back end to the front end. While the context is Swiss and European, similar ICT based research could be considered in other neoliberal economies, such as Australia and New Zealand, China, India, and North America; such is the global multicultural spread of the new technologies. The doing of gender in ICT is more than equal numbers.

Emerging and new feminist Qualitative IT (QualIT) researchers will gain from exploring the appendices which detail Kelan's work as a research process. It is rare to find meticulously detailed accounts of research practice, as these are often highly summarised within journals or idealised in qualitative research theory. From formulating research questions and evolving them through the project, to describing how discourses emerge and are theorised, Kelan unpacks access to the field, sample selection, her methods of shadowing and interviewing, and her iterative analysis and theorising. Her pragmatism renders her methodology as practical yet still embedded in her theoretical perspective. It is significant to note that qualitative software such as [NVivo](#) now enable sophisticated analysis of video and audio to capture meaning making. Kelan's work is based on her extensive field notes and the use of more limited coding and analysis technology available at that time.

Kelan's research cannot yet answer how the worlds of IT may be iterated as gender inclusive, which is unsurprising given its source. It does point to the possibility, as with other professions, such as medicine, law, education and business management, that this male domain may be subject to change. It does again demonstrate the difficulties of inclusion and diversity being fully enacted. But given that women are half the world's consumers and half of the global work force, social justice in and through ICT is still illusive, especially for women constrained by poverty in a world configured for male elites.

Kelan provides a significant work for feminist post structuralist researchers to consider when framing future women gender and ICT research. It will be of particular interest to management, technology, diversity and inclusion practitioners who persist with confronting problematic discourses of engendering ICT. Given, as Trauth (2006) notes in her foreword to *Encyclopedia of Gender and IT*, this field is under theorised though widely researched, *Performing Gender at Work* is a valuable addition to academia, and begs to be taken up as a research tool in other neoliberal economies.

REFERENCES

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