

Contemporary Feminist Thought in the Social Sciences
Aaron Kreider
Term Paper
12/14/98

A Gendered Organizational Analysis of the Student Environmental Action Coalition (SEAC)

Recent work by Acker (1990, 1992) and others who have followed her lead, has carved out a new field known as gendered organizational theory and applied it to a range of organizations that were previously assumed to be gender-neutral. This paper will look for evidence that Acker's theory can not only be applied to extremely sex-segregated or more traditional hierarchical organizations, as she and others have done where one might expect to find evidence of male-gendering more easily, but also to an explicitly feminist organization: the Student Environmental Action Coalition (SEAC). This will both extend her theory and point out a series of complexities that arise as the feminist organization (SEAC) recognizes and resists the process of male gendering.

While SEAC was founded as an environmental organization, it defines the environment broadly so as to include fighting racism, homophobia, class inequality, and sexism. So SEAC works against mainstream external social influences and tries to be gendered feminine.

This paper will discuss Acker's theory and note the limitations of it and other's applications of it. Despite these limitations, I will use her gendered processes to analyze SEAC. I will first examine evidence of gender disparity in leadership compared to the membership, then look at both SEAC's explicit and implicit ideology and lastly take a brief look at interactions within the organization.

This paper will use the definitions that SEAC itself implicitly uses for gender and sex. Gender is a (defacto) binary system of contrasting stereotypical masculine and feminine values that are socially constructed, whereas sex is, except for very rare exceptions, biologically determined. Masculine values include strength, rationality, human dominance of nature, aggressiveness, and leadership whereas feminine values include being emotional, flexible, connected to nature, peaceful, and humble. As a feminist organization, SEAC is working to equalize the power between genders and value the feminine.

As a matter of simplification, when this paper uses terms like 'gender segregation', 'male dominance', or 'gender inequality' and 'SEAC' in the same sentence the inequality should be understood as relative to an

organization whose leadership would have an identical gender breakdown as its membership, rather than compared to mainstream organizations whose inequality is much worse. SEAC might have a majority of women in leadership and still have 'gender inequality' relative to its membership base and the standard to which SEAC would hold itself.

Gendered Organization Theory

In her two articles, Acker (1990 & 1992) sets out a theory of gendered organizations which builds off recent feminist work in an area previously untouched by feminist scholarship. The theory starts with the fairly obvious observation that men control most organizations by dominating their top positions (1990, 139). Acker recognized that this male dominance, while obvious to modern feminists, had been traditionally ignored by sociologists who theorized organizations as being gender-neutral and asexual (1990, 140). She hypothesizes that feminists may have been reluctant to make inroads into organizational theory because they were embarrassed or confused by the failure of the collectivist alternative organizations that had generally evolved into more traditional hierarchies over time (1990, 141).

Countering traditional assumptions that gender should be absent from organizational analysis, Acker asserts the importance of organizations in the reproduction of the distinction between 'paid and unpaid work', reproduction of 'income and status inequality', transmission of gender stereotypes, and their effect on individual action and behavior (1990, 141). In addition feminists should be interested in creating and maintaining feminist organizations, and this requires a theory of organizations (1990, 141). Acker privileges the position of feminist theoreticians over that of male ones, arguing that women are better able to analyze the gendering of organizations due to the gender oppression they face (1992, 249).

Acker explains the intent of herself and others in critiquing traditional theory:

The authors of these critiques are responding to and helping to create the conditions for a fundamental reworking of organizational theories to account for the persistence of male advantage in male organizations and to lay a base for new critical and gendered theories of organizations that can better answer questions about how we humans come to organize our activities as we do in contemporary societies (1992, 248).

Acker calls for a new perspective that would analyze how "...advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through and in terms of a distinction

between male and female, masculine and feminine” (1992, 146). She then lists four ‘gendered processes’ which theoreticians can study to examine how organizations are gendered. The first involves “production of gender divisions”, including “the gender patterning of jobs, wages and hierarchies, power and subordination” (1992, 252), and the practices surrounding the reproduction and resistance of it. Second is “...the creation of symbols, images, and forms of consciousness that explicate, justify, and, more rarely, oppose gender divisions” (1992, 253). These include “language, ideology, popular and high culture, dress, the press, television” (1990, 146). Even if the production is not obvious like in the case of an advertising agency, most organizations reproduce gender by defining success in terms of male values (1992, 253), since for most corporations being “lean, mean, aggressive, goal oriented, efficient, and competitive” is more important than being “empathetic, supportive, kind, and caring” (1992, 253). The third includes “interactions between individuals . . . that enact dominance and subordination and create alliances and exclusion” (1992, 253). Sexuality plays an important role in interaction (1992, 253) as do subtle mannerisms that normally go undetected. The fourth process is an internalization of the effects of gendered organizations by the individual that can change their behavior (1992, 253). In the case of an organization that is more feminist and less male-biased than society in general (like SEAC), rather than Acker’s fear of the organization internalizing values of male dominance into its members, it will challenge its members values. Since the fourth process is hardest to prove, this paper will focus on showing evidence for the first three.

Acker’s primary example of a gendered process is how job evaluations are not gender-neutral, but rather serve to reproduce inequality. Firstly she notes that job evaluation is the responsibility of management which in most cases is male-dominated (1990, 148). She opposes their separation of the ‘job’ that is designed to logically fit a hierarchy and ignores the outside obligations of the person who might fulfill it, from that of the worker who ‘fills’ it and has a gender (1990, 148). She charges that the so-called gender-neutral job is most suitable for men whose wives stay at home taking care of the children and the men themselves (1990, 149).

The concept of ‘a job’ is thus implicitly a gendered concept, even though organizational logic presents it as gender neutral. ‘A job’ already contains the gender-based division of labor and the separation between public and private sphere. The concept of ‘a job’ assumes a particular gendered organization of domestic life and social production (Acker 1990, 149).

She opposes the liberal idea of a sexless person who is meant to fill the job, “The abstract, bodiless worker, who occupies the abstract, gender-neutral job has no sexuality, no emotions, and does not procreate,” (1990, 151)

since this person has traditionally been male (1990, 150). She blames bureaucratic structures and their extensive rules or texts for being responsible for the false gender neutralization of organizations (1992, 256).

Not only are jobs gendered, but systems of job evaluation are biased against women since they reinforce pre-existing inequalities by privileging traditionally male skills and male dominated positions over those of women (1990, 149-150). For instance a task that a (male) boss does is skilled, but if that task is done by a (female) secretary then it might become unskilled (1990, 149). When managers 'rationalize' the job evaluation system, they did/do it so as to justify pre-existing inequalities that came from a past history of organizational and societal sex stratification (1990, 150).

Acker argues that gendered male organizations, by separating private work (like housework) from public work, promote private profit over the public good (1992, 258). In the short term she favors a reformist strategy, supporting efforts like comparable worth activism (1992, 259), while in the long run she supports a socialist utopia that would end the public/private distinction and value all work more equally (1990, 155). She summarizes her goal and that of others:

Feminist research and theorizing, by continuing to puzzle out how gender provides the subtext for arrangements of subordination, can make some contributions to a future in which collective action to do what needs doing – producing goods, caring for people, disposing of the garbage – is organized so that dominance, control, and subordination, particularly the subordination of women, are eradicated, or at least minimized, in our organizational life (1990, 155).

Several people have applied Acker's theory and gendered processes to different organizations, though they chose relatively 'easy' cases in which one would expect her theory to apply due to historical and current sex segregation in the jobs of these organizations. Manville (1997) examined an Australian Anglican parish and found it to be sex segregated. For instance 62% of the members were women, but only 40% of administrators. And of the women administrators, nine of the twelve (75%) worked outside the home (whereas only 43% of women in general did) and thus were more 'masculine'. Small groups, used to build fellowship and community among church members, were primarily unisex. The weekly tasks that kept the parish running were also sex segregated. And not only did women prepare the food, flowers, do the laundry, and teach Sunday school, but they also internalized the segregation and wanted to do these tasks. Compared to the parish, SEAC's leadership

is less disproportionately male and members are more prone to resist rather than internalize the gendered organizational (or societal) logic.

Britton (1997) studied the role of guards in men's and women's prisons. She found that the training of prison guards was not gender neutral, but designed for the conditions guards would expect in male prisons thus discriminating against women who tend to work in women's prisons. For instance it never addressed the issue of the women guards being in an all-male environment. Also the training over-emphasized the possibility and dangers of violence on the job and thus succeeded in scaring off women (and more feminine men) who otherwise would have been guards. She found that jobs were sex segregated both on the prison level (women guards in women's prisons, men in men's) and at the task level within the prison, with men being assigned tasks with a greater chance of violence. Her results are not surprising considering the nature of the setting.

In her study of five restaurants, Hall (1993) analyzed the difference between male and female servers. She noted the importance of emotional work ('smiling'), acting subordinate to the customer ('deferring'), and role of sexuality in customer – server interaction ('flirting'). She found that women were more vulnerable than men to objectification and exploitation since they could not rely upon their gender for status.

Churches, restaurants, and prisons have all historically been very sex-segregated and non-feminist organizations. Therefore they were more prone to follow gendered organizational practices than SEAC which is integrated and feminist. Thus there is clearly room for further work in this field to see if Acker's theory can be extended beyond the examples listed above.

In my analysis of SEAC I will use Acker's theoretical perspective, but first would like to note several problems with it. The most critical problem is that it appears that no one has used her perspective to analyze a feminist organization, though I believe she would argue that her theory applies to all organizations. She places gender at the center of her schema, as I will do. Unfortunately this casts issues of race, class, and sexuality to the side. By contrast, Mattheai (1995) argues that the movement for lesbian and gay liberation is critical since it is "an attack on the core of the sexual division of labor – the assignment of individuals to men's or women's work, on the basis of their sex – as well as on its main corollaries, gender identity as given by sex, and marriage as the union of complimentary genders". As such one should expect Acker to include the role of compulsory heterosexuality (and its resistance) in her theory, though she does not. Since SEAC has a relatively strong pro-

gay rights stance (and a Queer Caucus), its role in the struggle against heterosexism, both as a tool of sexism and an evil of its own accord, is a critical organizational element. Focusing on gender narrows the scope of this investigation, but also blunts its applicability by theorizing a false equality of all women. Unfortunately this may be an unavoidable necessity, since, for instance, analyzing race in SEAC would be a major endeavor. Acker's focus on the 'job' and methods of job evaluation is not that useful for my analysis of SEAC, which has many undefined or poorly defined positions.

Mats and Billing (1997) complicate Acker's theory with their example of a Swedish advertising agency which in some aspects follows untraditional feminine values and whose workers claim to work in a liberated environment, but it also shows signs of being gendered male (sex segregation, objectification of women). Like the advertising agency, SEAC shows a tension between being gendered male in some aspects and female in others.

Background on SEAC

SEAC was formed in 1988 by a group of students from UNC Chapel-Hill who put an advertisement in Greenpeace magazine about starting a national student environmental organization and received two hundred replies. Students organized a series of very successful conferences (national and regional), the largest of which drew 7600 students to University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 1991. Since then SEAC has become the largest grassroots progressive student organization in the United States, with approximately a thousand groups, had as many as a dozen concurrent staff members, published a national magazine, organized campaigns, held trainings, and held many conferences. In 1995 SEAC experienced an internal crisis, lost all of its funding, its entire staff, and closed the national office. Since then SEAC has partially recovered – though the national office is a shell of what it once was.

Methodology

I first became involved with SEAC in the fall of 1996 when I got an email about a regional environmental conference in PA from some organization that I had never heard of (SEAC) and drove ten hours from Indiana to attend. The conference was very impressive. I attended the following spring conference and

spent that summer in Philadelphia volunteering, restructuring SEAC's national database since it was in bad shape. The next fall I tried to find out what was happening in my region (Indiana, Illinois, and Michigan), ended up becoming regional coordinator since no one else was doing it, and have since represented the region at two National Council (NC) meetings (January and August 1998). During these past years I have learned a lot and become good friends with many members of SEAC. I currently serve on the National Council, coordinate my region (rather ineffectively), co-chair the database team, and am a member of Notre Dame Students for Environmental Action. My experiences are very helpful in showing examples of Acker's second and third gendered processes operating within SEAC.

Beyond my own experience, I was able to use the national database to collect statistics on gender and check for evidence of Acker's first gendered process. The SEAC national database provides information on who has attended some of our conferences, national council meetings, who gets *Threshold* (SEAC's magazine), and a little information on local group leadership. Since it does not provide information on gender, I made educated guesses for what a person's gender was based on their first name or marked it as unknown. While there are obviously shortfalls to guessing gender (some names could be either gender), this was the only way to determine gender ratios in SEAC. And if there is a bias, it should be present everywhere and cancel out when comparing leaders and membership. One obvious bias is that gender neutral names will disproportionately belong to people of color, notably recent immigrants. Overall the people whose gender I could not determine could be either disproportionately male, disproportionately female, or be unbiased. While the determination of gender of people in the SEAC national database is problematic, a greater problem is whether the data itself is representative of SEAC (notably in the case of the membership). Regardless the data should still be accurate enough to provide meaningful results.

Acker's First Gendered Process: Production of Divisions

The gendered organizational theory expectation for a supposedly gender-neutral organization would be that it would still show signs of gender imbalance in its hierarchy. While this may be relatively easy to prove for a gender-neutral organization, if it is possible to do likewise for an avidly feminist organization then the gendered organization theory becomes much stronger. This section will argue that there is good evidence that men are

found disproportionately in top positions at SEAC, whereas women are disproportionately at the bottom.

Whereas SEAC may be feminist in many aspects, and relative to most organizations the sex segregation in its hierarchy is very small, this difference is still important since it shows the effects of external sexism and internal failure to completely eliminate it.

Table 1. Measures of SEAC's Membership and Chi-Square Comparison to General Higher Education Population (54.6% women)						
	Women	(percent)	Men	(percent)		Significance
<i>Threshold</i> Subscribers	963	59.48%	656	40.52%		0.000
Local Members	1222	58.58%	864	41.42%		0.000
National Conference Fall 1995	432	57.83%	315	42.17%		0.076
Regional Conference Composite	260	55.91%	205	44.09%		0.569
Notes: italics mean the women are disproportionately represented.						

To do a comparison between the gender balance in SEAC's leadership and its grassroots membership, one needs to derive practical and accurate measurements of both. This is complicated by the fact that SEAC does not have any one leadership, but rather at least three sets of leadership including national, regional, and local leaders. Neither does SEAC have a clear list of members. On the one hand there are very few people who actually belong to the organization (i.e. have paid dues or received a dues waiver), but there are many who are affiliated through their local group or who feel active from being involved in SEAC's conferences. Probably the most accurate portrayal of the membership is the list of people who receive SEAC's national magazine, *Threshold*, since this is the broadest of all the measures. SEAC sends *Threshold*, for free, to anyone (though predominantly students) who is interested in the environment and provides SEAC with their address. By contrast the 'local members' information comes in clumps, since some groups have all of their members in the database, but most just have the main leaders. Statistics from conferences are also very likely to be biased towards the local group's leadership who is much more likely to attend. Probably the list of *Threshold* subscribers is also biased towards local leadership, since outreach is more likely to contact the most active members (who will be leaders). So there is good reason to believe that all of the possible measurements for SEAC's membership are biased because they tend to include a greater portion of the actual leadership than of the actual membership, and because the leadership is more male than the grassroots. By contrast, measures of leadership are not expected to show substantial bias and thus my argument of sex segregation is stronger than it appears. I will use *Threshold*

Subscribers' and 'Local Members' to represent SEAC's membership, where in fact I would hypothesize that SEAC's membership is somewhere over 60% women.

Ewall's (1996) literature review shows that eighteen out of twenty-two studies have found that women are more concerned with environmental issues than men. This is in agreement with both ecofeminist theory that links the oppression of the environment with that of women, and the social constructionists who argue that women are just expressing beliefs that were socially produced. Ewall's own findings show highly significant results that women are more concerned about both the local and general environment (with significances of 0.000). His work and literature review would lead one to predict that this gendered interest in the environment would lead to a greater membership of women than men than the general population in environmental organizations, including SEAC, as people would act to defend their expressed interests.

Women do appear to be disproportionately involved in SEAC. According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census 54.6% of college and university students were women (avg. 1990-1995, U.S. Bureau of the Census, 158). In comparison, the measurements I use for SEAC's membership show it to be 59.5% or 58.6% women. Using chi-square tests I found SEAC's membership to be biased towards women with a very high significance (0.000) (see Table 1). While a bias of four or five percent is not that large, a more accurate measurement of SEAC's membership would show a more substantial gender gap.

Recruitment Method	Women		Men		Measures of Membership	
	(count)	(percent)	(count)	(percent)		
Webform	374	64.48%	206	35.52%	<i>0.015</i>	<i>0.004</i>
General	195	52.14%	179	47.86%	0.004	0.011

Notes: italics mean the women are disproportionately represented.

People become SEAC members through a process of outreach and recruitment. Contrary to the evidence that men use computers more than women, the webform on SEAC's webpage was found to disproportionately be used by women (see Table 2). This form allows people to enter information for themselves and their group. The data are then added to the national database and they start receiving copies of *Threshold* and other mailings from SEAC. Perhaps it is not the webform that is so biased, but it is my measures for SEAC's

membership that fail to show all the women who are involved and that they are more than sixty percent. It is very interesting to note that SEAC's general method of recruiting is much more male-biased than the webform.

Table 3. SEAC's National Leadership: A Chi-Square Comparison to the Membership							
	Women	(percent)	Men	(percent)		Measures of Membership	
						59.52%	58.58%
NC & STI Composite	74	47.74%	81	52.26%		0.003	0.006

The data from National Council (NC) meetings were combined with that from Summer Training Institutes (STI) since both of them are attended by SEAC leaders and are national organizational events of major importance. NC meetings are held twice a year and determine SEAC's policies and priorities. STIs are held annually to train people to become leaders, or better leaders. Overall the composite shows a very significant result of male bias at the national level and thus is representative of Acker's first gendered process. The index of sex segregation (or percent of women who would have to switch jobs for gender equality) for the general work force was 57 in 1992 (King 1992 ctd. in Reskin 1993), down slightly from 67.6 in 1970. By contrast SEAC's index is likely much below 10 at the national level of leadership and others as well (depending on the ratio of members to leadership).

Table 4. SEAC's Regional Leadership: A Chi-Square Comparison to the Membership							
	Women	(percent)	Men	(percent)		Measures of Membership	
						<i>59.52%</i>	<i>58.58%</i>
Regional Coordinators	5	38.46%	8	61.54%		0.134	0.141
State Coordinators	12	60.00%	8	40.00%		<i>0.923</i>	<i>0.897</i>
Other Contacts	5	35.71%	9	64.29%		0.07	0.082
Composite	22	46.81%	25	53.19%		0.076	0.101

Notes: italics mean the women are disproportionately represented.

The difference between the gender balance of regional coordinators and state coordinators was interesting (see Table 4). It fits the theory that women interested in leadership positions will lower their expectations and take a smaller role (since regions generally include three states), though it is not too significant. The contact information was all taken from the SEAC webpage and is thus a little inaccurate since the webpage is often out of date. Both the regional coordinators and the overall contacts show signs of being biased with significance (though at the 90% confidence level). The 'other contacts' variable is significant, but too loose a

category to interpret. Overall one should be skeptical of these results since the sample is so small, though because they fit the general pattern of the national and local ones they are plausible.

					Measures of Membership	
	Men	(percent)	Women	(percent)	59.52%	58.58%
Presidents / Coordinators / Leaders	27	45.76%	32	54.24%	0.031	0.046
All Officers (except advisors)	84	50.00%	84	50.00%	0.012	0.024

The data in Table 5 show that group officers are disproportionately male. Both variables show strong levels of significance and lend more weight to the hypothesis that SEAC has a relative gender gap in its leadership. The gender gap is relatively consistent across leadership level, with the percent of women at the three levels ranging from 46.8% to 50%. Consequently no conclusion can be made as to whether one level of leadership is more segregated than another.

Thus far the data that I have presented have shown that SEAC has a gender disparity in its leadership, however the situation is much more complex than that. In contrast to the data above, SEAC's primarily elected leadership, the National Council Chair (NCC), Working Committee Chair (WCC), and Standing Committee Chair (SCC), are all women. These women were elected by the National Council that was approximately 50/50 men and women, and conscious of the need to have women in positions of leadership.

The NCC is SEAC's spokesperson or defacto leader, involved in discussions and networking with other national student (and other) activist organizations as well as being responsible for SEAC's primary decision-making body: the National Council. The WCC is responsible for managing SEAC's numerous committees who are meant to be doing the bulk of the work within SEAC since the organization has only one paid staff person. The SCC is responsible for chairing the Standing Committee that makes decisions that cannot wait until the biannual National Council meeting (including endorsements, mailing list sales, hiring decisions, emergency budget cuts and expenditures). In theory the NCC and WCC positions are paid, though currently SEAC is in debt and only the NCC is paid at a slim percentage of the usual rate. The lack of pay requires that people in these positions have outside means of financial support such as family or a part-time job. Due to a combination of no salary and general difficulties within SEAC (that center around getting people to volunteer time when they are overloaded with work) these positions are less powerful then they are supposed to be.

Whereas the NCC, SCC, and WCC are theoretically meant to be powerful positions, the currently most powerful person is, as he admitted at the last NC meeting, SEAC's only staff member. On paper he is the Development Director and meant to fundraise the money that SEAC needs to rebuild by hiring more staff so that it can implement its programs. In practice he not only writes grants and does other fund raising activity, but manages the national office (handling inquiries, working on materials development, and supervising interns), tables for SEAC at conferences, works on *Threshold*, and speaks at schools – overall working up to 60 hours a week. The Development Director is the only person who is paid enough by SEAC to live. Since he can devote all his time to doing SEAC work and is always at the national office, he is at the center of everything that goes on nationally in SEAC. Whereas he is not supposed to have that much power, he does due to his knowledge and position.

However there is a difference between having power and exerting it. The other major functional roles in SEAC, besides running the national office, are managing the database and editing *Threshold*. The database contains SEAC's mailing list and a wealth of information that is fundamental to the organization's existence. *Threshold* is the most regular form of communication between SEAC and its members, a critical tool for the dissemination of information and ideology. The database managers and *Threshold* editor are all men who volunteered to do work that no one else wanted to undertake. If functional roles are done in accordance with the wishes of the SEAC power structure (i.e. the National Council) then to some extent they are just 'busy work'. But they can also be used to influence SEAC and increase a person's power. Even though people in these functional positions have kept themselves accountable to the general wishes of SEAC, there is potential for a male bias emerging since they are un-elected and receive less scrutiny as a result.

There is some evidence in SEAC that leadership positions have varying levels of accountability to varying constituencies and that this affects the gender balance in the leadership. Positions like NCC, WCC, and SCC are more accountable because they are elected, whereas the Development Director, *Threshold* Editor, and database managers are not. The greater the accountability of the position and the more feminist their relevant constituency, the less likely the top positions will be filled predominantly by men. For if a group is conscious of the tendency for men to dominate positions of leadership, both the men and women in the group will act to counter this tendency through an informal affirmative action policy encouraging women to be selected. Some

regions, states, and local groups also have accountable leaders, but their membership is generally less feminist than the people active with SEAC nationally and thus the lower levels are more susceptible to male dominance in leadership. SEAC National also has several formal affirmative action policies that apply, with varying levels of enforceability, at the national level to women, people of color, and queer students. Most NC members and all STI attendees are unaccountable to the regions they are supposed to represent. For the most part they are self-selected, and as shown by my results men are more likely to do so than women.

Despite SEAC's feminism and practices that try to counter the male bias in its leadership, it still persists. This is because SEAC is unable to isolate itself from society and is affected by the patriarchal context within which it operates. Most organizations feature much larger gender segregation compared to that found in SEAC. Socially constructed definitions of gender push men to be leaders and women to be followers. Since men and women in SEAC are influenced by these external factors, they will be respectively more and less likely to step-in to positions of leadership. External influences are the ultimate cause of gender segregation in SEAC. Most positions in SEAC are filled by individuals volunteering to take responsibility for a program, group, or a segment of the organization. If men are conditioned to feel more confident in volunteering than women, then a likely result is that men will (relatively) dominate leadership despite SEAC's feminist inspired attempts to reduce this effect as much as possible.

Gender inequality in SEAC's leadership became less accountable in 1996 when SEAC had an internal crisis and came close to folding. Leadership was less accountable since the focus became whether SEAC would survive, more than on promoting diversity in positions of authority. All of my data come from the post-crisis period during which SEAC is still rebuilding and there is a definite lack of people willing to fill positions of responsibility. For instance the current NCC was elected at a NC meeting where everyone (about twenty people) was nominated, but only two people accepted. It is likely that as positions of authority become more accountable as the organization expands and democratizes that there will be more women who seek and achieve positions of leadership.

I became involved with SEAC when the organization was very much in the rebuilding process and greatly needed volunteers to help it. I first attended two regional SEAC conferences and was so impressed by the organization that I volunteered and spent the summer of 1997 restructuring SEAC's national database with

another member. The database was in disarray and had not been updated for at least a year, so rebuilding it was critical to SEAC's recovery. Since I was involved with the database, I became interested in and knowledgeable about what groups and members were active in SEAC all across the U.S. That summer I attended the SEAC Summer Training Institute and became regional coordinator for Indiana, Illinois, and Michigan after learning that there was no coordinator and that the regional network was in disarray. Since then I have attended two NC meetings to represent my region. In sum, I was able to become very involved in SEAC, at close to the highest levels, without ever getting elected or being accountable to the membership. I believe this is the general case, as most regions are not organized well enough to hold elections, and SEAC lacked for volunteer support ever since the 1996 crisis.

I believe that class is key to my becoming so involved, but gender played an indirect and less obvious role. I became a SEAC 'leader' because I was able to volunteer a lot of time without pay, and fund my own travel and registration costs. However class should not be a factor in the observed gender disparity in leadership since men and women are likely to be equally supported by their parents. Thus what matters most is whether the individual man or woman is willing to take the step and volunteer for leadership. This decision is influenced by general society that encourages men to be leaders and women to be followers. More obviously than the subtle external influence of social conditioning, I was able to assist SEAC by creating a complex relational database because I studied computer science, a field that was roughly 80% male. Also my original contact with SEAC was over the Internet (and thus gendered male), and only occurred because I was subscribed to a large number of email lists.

Acker's Second Gendered Process: Explicit and Implicit Ideology

Acker's next gendered process involves "...the creation of symbols, images, and forms of consciousness that explicate, justify, and, more rarely, oppose gender divisions" (1992, 253). These include "language, ideology . . . [and] dress" (1990, 146). SEAC is one of those rare cases where in most cases this gendered process is used to oppose gender divisions in specific and sexism in general.

SEAC is a student run and student led national network of progressive organizations and individuals whose aim is to uproot environmental injustices through action and education. We define the environment to include the physical, economical, political and cultural conditions in which we live. By challenging the power structure that threatens these environmental

conditions, SEAC works to create progressive social change on both the local and global levels (SEAC's Mission Statement).

SEAC's ideology moves beyond the traditionally used narrow view of the environment (saving trees and animals), to a wider environmental justice perspective that is explicitly feminist. With its expanded perspective SEAC, in its thirteen 'organizing principles', opposes sexism, racism, heterosexism, class inequality, and imperialism as well as environmental degradation. But while SEAC's official ideology is feminist, the grassroots membership is much more moderate than the leadership. Many members are not feminists, though SEAC pushes them in that direction through consciousness raising. In her study of a grassroots environmental organization fighting pollution in southeast Kentucky, Cable (1992) found that the working class women in it, though they were critical of the women's movement, were pushed into positions of leadership through their organizational involvement and thus empowered. With SEAC the effect should be greater since SEAC clearly intends to empower women. As an organization, SEAC goes through a constant process of students leaving, new members joining and being educated and radicalized. Overall SEAC's official feminism shapes its conferences, publications, programs, and members.

One of the key proponents of feminist ideology in SEAC is the Wimmin's Caucus. Wimmin's caucuses have been held since early in SEAC's history and, along with the other two caucuses (for people of color and queer students), are now scheduled in advance for conferences, NC meetings, and Summer Training Institutes. Caucuses discuss oppression both within SEAC, at the event during which the caucus is occurring, in society in general, and in members' own campus organizations. An alternative group meets during the caucus, consisting of all non-caucus members. This ensures that the regular agenda is suspended and forces the traditionally oppressive group to examine how they can work to end oppression. At the last National Council Men's Alternative Group (Aug. 1998), members discussed items as wide-ranging as ecofeminism, body image, male/male relationships, calling people on their sexism, male/female relationships, men dominating leadership, incidents at the meeting, and how to improve gender dynamics in meetings. Roth (1998) studied the Women's Caucus of a 'feminist friendly organization: ACTUP/LA. Like in SEAC, the ACTUP/LA women were empowered by creating a space of their own. However their increased power came at the expense of compartmentalization of women's issues to the caucus as there was no alternative group for men, and women

were only 10% of the membership. The ACTUP/LA Women's Caucus benefited from meeting regularly, whereas almost all SEAC caucuses are held at a national or regional level and thus very sporadically. Through SEAC's Wimmin's Caucus and alternative group structure, feminism is regularly discussed and members' consciousness raised.

Particularly at the national level, gender neutral language dominates discussion. If someone uses male or sexist language this is not only noticed but generally 'called' (verbally mentioned to the group), resulting in an acknowledgement by the 'offender' that a 'mistake' was made. If the use was blatant and intended then someone would probably exert her right to call a caucus, interrupting the regular business, to discuss the remark and issues of sexism. The use of 'wimmin' over 'women', in the name of the caucus, is a small example of trying to show that wimmin are more than just variants of men, but important in their own regard.

SEAC's implicit ideology that is implied by its structure and activities is overwhelmingly feminist and opposite to the 'lean, mean' structure of so many organizations, though it is not entirely immune from external pressures. The most obvious place where SEAC is gendered male is with its staff and its concept of 'job'. It would be very difficult to raise a family and work for SEAC, since the pay is low (\$18,000 – though not as low as some non-profits) and the hours are long. While workers may only be required to work forty hours a week, because there is a vast scarcity of paid positions in SEAC relative to the number of activists who want them, the people hired are the most dedicated and willing to put in over-time. Often the people who are hired were doing SEAC activism before they were paid for it and are very committed to both the organization and the cause. SEAC's current Development Director (who does 'everything') is an example of how there is almost an endless amount of work that needs to be done and how over-worked staff can get. Like many non-profits that are barely financially solvent, SEAC relies on the commitment of its workers to gain a maximum work effort at a minimal expense. The paradox is that, unlike most corporations who do this to maximize their profit and reproduce patriarchy, SEAC does it so as to further its feminist agenda with the complicit support of its workers who have internalized its values. Thus SEAC's concept of 'job' is very similar to that Acker uses, as SEAC demands an almost total commitment to itself and the abandonment of all non-organizational related activities.

A less obvious way in which SEAC is gendered male is that it is in competition with other social movement organizations. It is very typical for profit-oriented corporations to be very aggressive against their

competition, but one would expect social movement organizations that shared the same goal to cooperate. However SEAC sees Free The Planet (FTP), another student environmental organization, as being an enemy. Many members of SEAC would like FTP to cease existing. FTP started off as the name for a national conference that was jointly organized by the PIRGs (Public Interest Research Groups) and SEAC in the spring of 1995 to work against the newly elected Republicans “Contract with America”. SEAC members argue that this conference succeeded because SEAC helped build it. After the conference the PIRGs established a clearinghouse called FTP and eventually a full-fledge organization with regions, campus chapters, and summer trainings just like SEAC. In the summer of 1995 SEAC had an internal crisis and FTP profited from it to spread the rumor that SEAC was dead and some of SEAC’s previous funders switched to FTP. In a more recent example, SEAC failed to endorse a ‘Campus Democracy Convention’ whose intent was to launch a national student progressive organization, since this organization would compete with SEAC for members and possibly funding. So SEAC is in a competition rather than cooperation with FTP, and at varying levels with other student environmental and activist organizations for members and foundation funding.

Overwhelmingly SEAC’s internal practices follow feminine values. In many aspects SEAC emphasizes means at the cost of reduced efficiency. This contrasts with the stereotypical male firm that would push for production and profit, in the process disregarding its employees. SEAC is a combination of community and organization. Members and leaders are not only working for common objectives, but are for the most part on very friendly terms. Emotion is expressed rather than hidden. For instance at SEAC conferences and NC meetings people hug each other a lot. As an organization run primarily by volunteers, it cannot afford to neglect its workers. Meeting facilitators try to include everyone who wishes to participate by watching individuals’ vibes, calling on silent people, using 'go arounds' so everyone has a chance to speak, having everyone sit in a circle, watching gender balance, and using a modified form of consensus voting. Individuals have substantial power to redirect the proceedings and divert the group from being as efficient as it could, if they need an explanation of something, if they feel things are not working well, or if they just want to call a break, sing a song or play a short game. In particular, according to SEAC’s rules members of oppressed groups (women, people of color, and queer students) can call a caucus at *any* time which forces the regular proceedings to halt (though many people might feel too uncomfortable to do this). The caucus, and its alternative group consisting of

everyone not in the caucus, can continue to meet for as long as it wants. Caucuses, especially people of color ones, often disrupt a pre-planned agenda and can take six hours of discussion to resolve (and undoubtedly have taken longer in the past). Time is not always an issue, and some SEAC NC meetings have lasted twenty-seven hours without a major break. Thus by emphasizing the importance of the individual over organizational production, SEAC's organizational logical functions so as to gender it female.

Reflective of their own and the organization's ideology, SEAC's members clash with traditional gender stereotypes in appearance and action. Men are more feminine, more emotional, less dominating, often having long hair and occasionally cross-dressing by wearing a long skirt. Women are caught between valuing the feminine and being more masculine, but as a stereotype have shorter hair and stronger personalities. This is another way in which SEAC resists traditional assumptions about gender.

Acker's Third Gendered Process: Interactions that 'that enact dominance and subordination'

Acker's third gendered process is "interactions between individuals . . . that enact dominance and subordination and create alliances and exclusion" (1992, 253). While SEAC is not immune to patterns of dominance and subordination, it intentionally creates safe spaces that try to be free from domination. Caucuses are made relatively 'safe' by the physical separation from the relevant oppressor group that allows for a free flowing discussion that can lead to action against oppression. Another instance of a safe-space is 'womynspace', a page for and by women published regularly in *Threshold*, and there is also an email list for SEAC wimmin. At NC meetings, the Wimmin's Caucus and Men's Alternative Groups often discuss how men and women interact within the meeting, citing examples of women who have been ignored when speaking or when wanting to speak. Much less attention is paid to interaction outside the framework of the meeting, but overall SEAC makes an effort to address this issue.

Conclusion

The two most critical limitations to this paper are the lack of data necessary to show gender stratification in SEAC, and a lack of participant-observer information from members and leaders of SEAC other than myself. The data that I used were not complete. It excluded some individuals who attended NC meetings, and did a

inadequate job of representing local leaders. There may be a gender bias in the individuals who are not listed. As SEAC develops, its membership and leadership data will become both quantitatively and qualitatively better.

A difficulty that is inherent to the method of data collection, is the problematic nature of guessing someone's gender based on his or her first name. The accuracy of this technique could be verified by doing a survey, and possibly increased by using a name book that would give the most common gender for a certain name.

It might be argued that I should have controlled for other factors that might be correlated with gender but themselves be the original causes of the gender disparity in SEAC's leadership. For instance it is possible (though not too plausible) that men in SEAC have more experience in activism and for that reason they are more likely to be leaders than women. However I have not been able to think of any such explanatory variable of significance. The most likely one would be class, which plays a critical role in whether an individual can afford to volunteer their resources without pay. However it is not clear that this would increase the number of women or men in leadership, since one's class would be strongly influenced by one's parents and thus not gender specific. One could also presume that race plays a role in whether one becomes a leader, however here again the effects on how that would affect the gender make-up are not clear. A survey would be able to include other possible determinants of leadership, however some of the results would lose significance due to the lower sample size.

Finally this research project would also benefit from interviewing SEAC leaders and members to verify the existence of gendered processes (both the sex segregation hypothesis and other of Acker's processes). Also SEAC's written materials, including *Threshold*, brochures, and organizing guides, could be analyzed.

This paper breaks new ground by applying Acker's gendered organization theory to a feminist organization. It shows some of the complexities inherent to a feminist social movement organization that is both affected by external patriarchal influences and working to resist them. Roth (1998) is correct when she calls for an increased focus on 'the internal gender dynamics of challenger groups', since they are still far from the equality they strive to achieve both in gender and in terms of class, race, and sexual orientation. Though less predominant than in non-feminist organizations, SEAC does show statistically significant evidence of Acker's first gendered process, that of sex segregation. Also there are some ways in which SEAC fits the 'mean, lean'

male firm model, notably in its competition against rival organizations such as Free The Planet and its exploitation of its workers.

Despite its difficulties, SEAC's predominant tendency is to be gendered feminine. There is a general understanding in the membership of the need to work for the liberation of all traditionally oppressed groups. SEAC's explicit ideology is feminist. Members oppose patriarchy and aim for gender equality in leadership. The existence and activities of the Wimmin's Caucus and Men's Alternative Group ensure the inclusion of gender issues at the regional and national level of the organization, and promote a process of conscious raising of the membership. In its informal ideology SEAC places great value on the emotions of individuals, often sacrificing the group's efficiency to be a kinder gentler (more feminine) organization. For the most part, SEAC's internal organizational practices do coincide with its explicit feminist ideology, and thus despite several shortcomings, I would extend Acker's theory by arguing that SEAC is gendered feminine.

Bibliography

- Acker, Joan. "Gendering Organization Theory." Pp. 248-260 in A. J. Mills and P. Tancred (eds.) *Gendering Organizational Analysis*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1992.
- Acker, Joan. "Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations." *Gender & Society*, 4(2), 1990: 139-158.
- Alvesson, Mats and Yvonne Due Billing. *Understanding Gender and Organizations*. Thousands Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997.
- Britton, Dana M. "Gendered Organizational Logic: Policy and Practice in Men's and Women's Prisons." *Gender and Society*, 11(6), 1997: 798 - 820.
- Cable, Sherry. "Women's social movement involvement: The role of structural availability in recruitment and participation processes." *Sociological Quarterly*, 33 (1), 1992: 35-50.
- Ewall, Mike. Unpublished essay. "Are females more likely than males to be concerned about human health and the environment?" 1995.
- Hall, Elaine J. "Smiling, Deferring, and Flirting: Doing Gender by Giving 'Good Service'." *Work and Occupations*, 20(4), 1993: 452-471.
- Manville, Julie. "The gendered organization of an Australian Anglican parish." *Sociology of Religion*, 58(1), 1997: 25-38.
- Matthaei, Julie. "The Sexual Division of Labor, Sexuality, and Lesbian/Gay Liberation: Towards a Marxist-Feminist Analysis of Sexuality in U.S. Capitalism." *Review of Radical Political Economics*, 27(2), 1995: 1-37.
- Reskin, Barbara. "Sex Segregation in the Workplace." *Annual Review of Sociology*, 1993: 241-270.
- Roth, Benita. "Feminist Boundaries in the Feminist-Friendly Organization: The Women's Caucus of ACT UP/LA." *Gender & Society*, 12 (2), 1998: 129-145.
- U.S. Bureau of the Census. "Statistical Abstract of the United States" : 1997 (117th edition.) Washington, DC.

Primary Sources

- <http://www.seac.org>. SEAC's webpage. 1998.
- seac51.mdb. The national SEAC computer database. 1998.
- SEAC National Council Meeting Notes. August, 1998.