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Feminist research changing organizations and societies: Taking stock and looking to the future

Abstract

Feminist research has produced important insights into the causes and forms of, and impediments to overcoming, gender-based discrimination in the workplace and society. Yet the impact of such work is rarely acknowledged or evaluated in the various research assessment exercises on which neoliberal universities increasingly rely to appraise the quality of their outputs. This article considers the social impact of research by tracing paradigmatic shifts in theoretical writings by feminist scholars and activists, namely Judith Butler and Silvia Federici, that influence policies, organizational practices and debates on gender. This impact, it is suggested, occurs despite evidence of insufficient or stalled progress in addressing old and new inequalities in organizations and society, which cannot and should not be ignored or underplayed. It is argued that courageous and novel theorization is required to create new imaginaries, as well as engagement in the political process through academic activism to better understand and transform the world in which we live.

Keywords: research impact, feminist theory, performativity, social reproduction, inequality, power, activism

Introduction

Gender in organizations is an ever-present though somewhat marginalized topic (Fotaki & Harding, 2017), often raised in the context of persisting inequalities in labour markets. While feminist research has produced important insights into the causes and forms of, and impediments to overcoming, gender-based discrimination in the workplace and society, such work is rarely acknowledged or evaluated in the various research assessment exercises on which neoliberal universities increasingly rely to appraise the quality of their outputs. This article aims to address this gap by tracing the influence of theoretical writings by feminist scholars and activists on policies, organizational practices and debates on gender. In so doing, it accounts for feminism's radical potential and commitment to engaged scholarship, which have emerged out of a desire to better understand and transform the world in which we live.

Feminist scholarship rarely appears in mainstream journals, classrooms and conferences, and even proponents of gender equality in academia do not fully utilize the feminist project's potential to bring about social change (McRobbie, 2009). For instance, the transformational impact of feminist philosophy and activist practice on changing gender relations in organizations and societies (Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Ely & Padavic, 2007; Calás, Smircich, & Holvino, 2014; Phillips, Pullen, & Rhodes, 2014; Vachhani & Pullen, 2019) is routinely ignored or undermined. However, a gender-based inequality approach, originating in feminist philosophy with an emphasis on sexual and social relations between women and men, and with a focus on power and control, may be useful for managing change in public-sector organizations during a period of major social, political and economic transition (Itzin & Newman, 1995). Feminism also holds promise for thorough organizational reform (Thomas & Davies, 2005), yet it is rarely seen as an emancipatory project, but more as an issue concerning women.

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3 Thus, gender research in management and organizations focusing on issues of
4 discrimination, often tends to reiterate the problems it seeks to counteract by disconnecting
5 them from political action. Drawing on various psychological, sociological and cultural
6 theories, research focusing on women in management (Kanter, 1977; Gatrell, Cooper, &
7 Kossek, 2010), and their position in the workplace more generally (for a review, see
8 Broadbridge & Simpson, 2011), highlights the many forms of discrimination that women
9 continue to experience. Inequalities evident in the political participation process reflect and
10 further reify gender stratification throughout society (Norris & Lovenduski, 1995; Martin,
11 2004). Researchers also stress how covert and overt commodification and commercialization
12 of sex (Brewis & Linstead, 2000; Hearn & Parkin, 2001) enable women's objectification in
13 society (Szymanski, Moffitt, & Carr, 2011).

14
15 Yet beyond discrimination, gender is important in many other ways, adding value and
16 creating business and profits, for example through reproductive labour and care work, which
17 women commonly perform for free (Federici, 2012; Fraser, 2016). Disregarding this prevents
18 a full appreciation of the paradigmatic shifts that such understanding has brought to rethinking
19 the role of women's unpaid labour in capitalist development. Equally, the novel understanding
20 of sexual identity as a performative accomplishment achieved by individuals through
21 engagement with dominant discourses (Butler, 1990) has fundamentally altered how we talk
22 and think about issues surrounding sex-based discrimination. As Nancy Fraser (2019) puts it:

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Feminism has done a great deal to create new language and, in that sense, to change
culture, to change people's understanding of what they are entitled to and don't have to
put up with. So, it's broadened the sphere of political discourse and what is potentially a
question for democratic decision-making and not the private decision for the family or the
firm.

However, the overarching motivation of this article is not to offer a positive and
celebratory perspective on gender scholarship's achievements in publicizing iniquities, but

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3 rather to show how key feminist ideas have influenced gender scholarship in management and
4 organizations, and to outline their potential to address persistent inequalities in organizations
5 and society. Despite evidence of insufficient or stalled progress in addressing old and new
6 inequalities in organizations and society that cannot and should not be ignored or underplayed,
7 the impact of feminist ideas is profound.
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15 Drawing on the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC, 2019) distinction
16 between instrumental, conceptual and capacity-building impact, this article highlights how
17 theoretical developments have led to changes in the role and meaning of gender in
18 organizations and society. To illustrate the range of impacts emerging from feminist thinking,
19 examples of the most influential scholarship are selectively reviewed. The key inspirations
20 originate in the thinking of post-structuralist feminist philosopher Judith Butler's idea of
21 performativity, as well as Marxist feminists' interventions against unpaid reproductive labour
22 in capitalist work and social relations, as articulated by Silvia Federici. The work of these two
23 scholars is chosen because it has been highly influential both for envisioning new conceptual
24 developments and for bringing tangible, material changes to people's lives. This highlights the
25 close relationship between the power of ideas and activist practice arising from academic
26 research. For reasons of space, the work of other relevant thinkers writing about social
27 reproduction and recognition, such as Nancy Fraser (2001) whose work relates closely to the
28 arguments offered here, is not considered.
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47 A related goal is to problematize the concept of research impact in terms of its implications
48 for the unfinished project of social change (McRobbie, 2009), as embedded in feminist
49 theorization and activism. This article questions the gendered nature of knowledge production
50 in academia and its consequences for impact generation, which continue to be ridden with
51 intersectional biases, privileging certain types of scholarship while disciplining and silencing
52 scholars who do not fit the mould (predominantly ethnic minority females; see Savigny, 2019).
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3 It also argues for the need for sustained academic engagement with different forms of research
4 activism (Vachhani & Pullen, 2019; Fotaki & Daskalaki, 2020) to produce real-world impacts.
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8 The next section briefly contextualizes debates over what counts as impact in academic
9 work, and why it matters, before outlining gendered implications of the knowledge production
10 process for the definition and generation of impact. This is followed by a brief discussion of
11 the importance of theoretical developments in science, foregrounding selected ideas of Butler
12 and Federici, and offering examples of their influence on policy, organizations and society.
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14 The article concludes by calling for academics to speak out against injustices, stressing the
15 importance of activist research practice and the role of researchers as activists.
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25 **The impact of research and why it matters: the example of the UK's Research**

26 **Exercise Framework**

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29 The issue of societal impact is high on universities' agendas and, along with research and
30 teaching, has become part of their "triple mission" (Van den Akker, Spaapen, & Maes, 2017).
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32 Policymakers and public research funders increasingly require academics to explain how they
33 influence society in measurable ways. International and supranational public agencies,
34 including the United Nations and the European Union (e.g. the UN's Millennium Development
35 Goals, and the EU's Lisbon 2010 and EU2020 Strategies), often require researchers to meet
36 milestones and goals and justify how their academic work contributes to achieving them.
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38 Demonstrating social or societal impact has come to the fore in higher education and research
39 policy, owing to dramatic changes relating to globalization, intensified global competition and
40 related socioeconomic developments (Van den Akker et al., 2017). Partly responding to and
41 partly driving these changes, universities are shifting to becoming competitive market entities
42 that supposedly allow as many students as possible to benefit from their offerings, a trend that
43 is dominant in the UK (Willets, 2017). The ever-increasing focus on "impact" fits with and
44 reinforces the logic of education being crucial to graduates' future and the country's continued
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3 success in the knowledge economy. Unsurprisingly, the most elaborate framework for
4 evaluating universities' social outcomes is the UK's "research impact assessment" exercise,
5 which this article considers in depth, now accounting for 25 per cent of the 2021 Research
6 Excellence Framework agenda (REF, 2019). Other countries have similar assessment
7 frameworks (e.g. Australia – see Rhodes, Wright & Pullen, 2018 and other countries Bornman,
8 2017). The UK's REF exercise is broadly taken as a positive interpretation of the role of
9 academia in public life (REF, 2019), but it has implications for the state's budget allocations
10 to universities. In addition to improving productivity, commercial opportunities and
11 environmental protection, the positive role of academia extends to its impacts on (i) public
12 policy, law and services, (ii) practitioners and delivery of professional services, enhanced
13 performance or ethical practice, (iii) understanding, learning and participation, (iv) social
14 welfare, and (v) creativity, culture and society (REF, 2019, pp. 94–110). Accordingly:

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32 impacts can be manifested in a wide variety of ways including, but **not** limited to: the many
33 types of beneficiary (individuals, organisations, communities, industry, regions and other
34 entities); impacts on products, processes, behaviours, policies, practices and
35 understanding; and avoidance of harm or the waste of resources in the widest sense. Impact
36 of any type may be local, regional, national or international, in any part of the world (REF,
37 2019, p. 48, bold in original).

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42 All these definitions stipulate a set of measurements, tools and indicators deemed most
43 appropriate for assessing social impact. Although the REF, and the newly introduced Teaching
44 Exercise Framework (TEF), occupy a hegemonic position in the British higher education
45 sector, such developments reflect shifts and trends around the world (Rhodes et al., 2018). The
46 scientific community is aware of this increased interest in "measurement", as shown in debates
47 over the procedures, mechanisms and philosophies behind a flurry of activities aiming to
48 document and define impact. Many critique this approach as deriving from a positivistic
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3 assumption that impact only counts if it can be quantifiably measured, regardless of the quality
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5 of the research underpinning it (Collini, 2017).
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8 The value of research, it is argued here, lies not in its immediate utilitarian outcomes, but
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10 in its power to create new vistas and possibilities to solve insoluble problems. For instance, the
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12 tight historical links between science and philosophy, and philosophy's important and
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14 productive influence on science are overlooked in the impact exercise (Laplane et al., 2019).
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16 Yet this interaction has produced major breakthroughs in understanding, for example by
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18 offering conceptual clarifications to promote stem cell therapy, contributing to the critique of
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20 scientific assumptions of immunogenicity. Furthermore, by influencing cognitive science, it
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22 has helped initiate research programmes and has contributed to paradigm shifts (Laplane et al.,
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24 2019). Conceptual clarifications and paradigm shifts not only improve the precision and utility
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26 of scientific terms, but also lead to novel experimental investigations that question dominant
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28 frameworks and enable them to be reimagined.
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33 However, defining the quality and "usefulness" of research is problematic when the basic
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35 model of education, and university education in particular, "is that of a product which has to
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37 be marketed to individual consumers (students) and is naturally to be assessed in terms of
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39 consumer satisfaction" (Williams, 2017). This also has implications for how research impact
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41 is evaluated: does it contribute, either positively or negatively, to desired social change and to
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43 creating public value (Bozeman, 2007), or is evaluation merely a tool to ensure competitiveness
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45 and innovation through economic individualism? In other words, are assessment exercises
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47 disciplining devices designed to enforce ideological conformity with the neoliberal premises
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49 that universities have unquestioningly espoused, or do they serve as benchmarks of excellence?
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51 The shift toward the market marks a radical departure from the belief that publicly funded
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53 education can be used as a tool for positive social transformation. Giving consumers freedom
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55 of choice and shifting responsibility to individuals in public services, including education,
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3 health and social care, are prominent on the agendas of policymakers for all mainstream parties
4 across the political spectrum in many countries (Fotaki, 2011a; Naidoo, Shankar, & Veer,
5 2011). This trend is exemplified in UK Coalition government minister, David Willett's explicit
6 justification for shifting the cost of providing public education onto students/consumers and
7 relying on market discipline to keep them satisfied. Implausibly, it is promoted on the spurious
8 ground of improving access to higher education and widening the participation of prospective
9 students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Willets, 2017). While this specific indicator is not
10 considered in the evaluation, reliance on consumerism and the market in higher education has,
11 on the whole, led to the proliferation of various other assessments that compare the educational
12 outputs of academic institutions. The subsequent Conservative government in the UK, for
13 instance, took this logic further in its Higher Education and Research Bill. In 2017, student
14 satisfaction was embedded into the "Teaching Excellence Framework" and forms part of the
15 next assessment exercise. National evaluation systems have become established which require
16 science to account for funding (Bornman, 2017).

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Such projects must be located within the broader neoliberal framework that relies on the market orthodoxy, and austerity cuts to public spending on higher education following the global financial crisis, which are increasingly justified by turning to anti-intellectualism.¹ Thus, many such policies are guided by "the half-baked utilitarianism and economism" that "left and right alike seem to have nodded through" (Williams, 2017), rather than being informed by evidence. Ironically, an approach that aims to pin down research impact rests on ideological assumptions, not on the cutting-edge, peer-reviewed research that it ostensibly measures. Worryingly, it appears to rely on the largely defunct theory that individuals are innately selfish

¹ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this point.

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3 and engage in opportunistic behaviour (Williamson, 1975) if left uncontrolled. Agency theory
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5 and transaction cost economics, which eminent management scholar, Sumantra Ghoshal
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7 decries as inappropriate and irrelevant to framing research and guiding teaching in the business
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9 school context, are now fully aligned with “radical individualism and Friedman’s liberalism”
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12 (Ghoshal, 2005, p. 84) in the higher education policies of the UK and other governments.
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15 Such instrumental approaches transplanted directly from business economics ignore the
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17 fact that many academics choose research careers precisely because they want to contribute to
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19 the real world – to offer their knowledge and expertise in order to make a difference.
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21 Researchers across the humanities and social sciences are committed to engaging the public
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23 with their work for many reasons: to inspire, to educate, to inform and to involve (Burchell,
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25 2015). As individuals, academics find meaning in their everyday work by influencing the lives
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27 of others for the better (Fotaki, 2019). This is evidenced in high-quality academic blogs such
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29 as *The Conversation* and *LSE Policy & Politics*. Individual academics write informative and
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31 highly influential and widely read blogs commenting on important issues that impact on
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33 people’s lives (e.g. Chris Grey’s blog on Brexit <http://chrisgreymbrexitblog.blogspot.com>), and
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35 engage in public speaking (Fotaki, 2017).
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41 In the field of management and the organization of work, these debates on impact are
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43 echoed by voices from within and beyond academia, asking whether academic research is at
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45 all relevant to managers, and whether it can help tackle persistent societal challenges (Adler,
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47 Forber, & Willmott, 2007; George et al., 2016; Rhodes et al., 2018). Others identify its harmful
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49 effects on society (Walsh, Weber, & Margolis, 2003). For instance, in the wake of corporate
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51 scandals in the early 2000s, the poverty of theories (Ghoshal, 2005) that propagated short-
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53 termism and paid attention to “the bottom line” in business schools was seen as a root cause of
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55 unethical practices by self-serving executives (Brown & Treviño, 2006), many of whom were
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57 graduates of prestigious academic institutions. There has been a shift in management education
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3 away from holistic considerations of the social and political consequences of business activity
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5 (Starkey & Tiratsoo, 2007; Khurana, 2010), reflected in the removal of management
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7 education's social purpose. Some commentators take aim at the industrialization of academic
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9 education and research (Mingers & Willmott, 2013), leading to the dumbing down and erosion
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11 of the ethos of critical scholarship (Butler & Spoelstra, 2014). Finally, with reference to climate
12
13 change research, Rhodes et al. (2018) argue that the impact exercise serves a policing function
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15 which, despite its own rhetoric, seeks to ensure that academic work maintains the neoliberal
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17 status quo by actually having no real political impact.
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21 The criticism summarized above does not aim to deflect scrutiny of or accountability for
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23 the value of academic work in and for society. It questions how this value is defined and
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25 measured, what counts as value, and who defines it. For example, cultural and attitudinal
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27 change is widely interpreted to mean that cultural impact and public engagement require
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29 measurement. However, a further problem is that such evaluations of impact are carried out
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31 despite well-established evidence of gender and race blindness in such assessment exercises
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33 (Savigny, 2019). The issue of research impact, discussed in this article in the context of the
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35 UK's REF, illustrates how various limitations of scope and temporality that drive such
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37 exercises may lead to the undermining and exclusion of feminist scholarship.
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42 Historically, women's knowledge and their contribution to knowledge have been excised
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44 from the record, underreported or undermined. This legacy continues in their
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46 underrepresentation in senior positions in academia (European Commission, 2018; Fotaki,
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48 2011b, 2013; Kantola, 2008; Baylin, 2003), and more recently in the high levels of hostility
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50 they experience when engaging in public debates (Olson & LaPoe, 2017), especially when
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52 commenting on feminism (Vera-Gray, 2017) or controversial, politically resonant issues such
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54 as Brexit. Women are frequently subjected to various forms of "symbolic violence" and
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56 "cultural sexism" when they engage in the public domain (Lovenduski, 2005; Coffé &
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3 Bolzendahl, 2010), even when participating in research impact activities in the media (Savigny,
4
5 2019). Questioning dominant paradigms is an explicit part of an academic researcher's job;
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7 publicizing potentially impactful research is another such task that universities increasingly
8
9 expect. However, "when the Impact agenda is experienced in a neoliberal individualized
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11 setting, we miss a fundamental question that needs asking: what is the cumulative cultural
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13 effect of women's knowledge being silenced?" (Savigny, 2019, p. 13). Silencing women's
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15 views on impact implicitly defines what counts as impact. Feminist scholarship suggests that
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17 these two issues are mutually co-constituted. Yet there is relatively limited acknowledgment
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19 of feminism's overall contribution to knowledge, which also differs from that of other social
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21 science research as it is deeply embedded in a political struggle (Segal, 2017).
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26 Societal impact may take many years to become apparent, and often influences individual
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28 behaviour and informs social policy in very diffuse ways (Rymer, 2011). Measuring impact
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30 prematurely may therefore result in policies that emphasize research yielding only short-term
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32 benefits, while ignoring potential long-term impacts. The ESRC's three broad categories of
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34 impact – instrumental, conceptual and capacity building – aim to capture potential research
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36 outcomes and wider influences. Accordingly, the ESRC (2019) stipulates that research impact
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38 may be instrumental ("influencing the development of policy, practice or service provision,
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40 shaping legislation, altering behaviour"), conceptual ("contributing to the understanding of
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42 policy issues, reframing debates") or capacity building ("through technical and personal skill
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44 development").
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49 In the next section, I use this typology to briefly review the causes of relatively limited
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51 acknowledgment of feminist research's impact on policies, organizations and individual lives.
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53 Achieving greater impact, I argue, is impossible without the shifts in understanding and
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55 expansion of our ability to think about alternatives that good-quality social (theoretical)
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57 research often provides, and without structural changes to the political process. Next, I consider
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3 the impact of gender scholarship and the importance of theoretical research for thinking
4 differently and imagining solutions to the “wicked” and apparently insoluble issues of
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6 persisting inequalities and injustices in organizations and society.
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10 11 **Gender research and impact** 12

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14 In many countries, legislation outlaws gender-based discrimination at work. Yet despite
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16 decades in the headlines, in both advanced and developing economies, gender equality is yet
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18 to be achieved in most organizations. Research on gender offers valuable insights into the
19
20 causes of persisting inequalities and the relative lack of progress in addressing them. One
21
22 important strand of this research tends to see gender as an attribute possessed by individuals,
23
24 and examines it in relation to impediments to women’s career progression. These include the
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26 glass ceiling (Powell & Butterfield, 1994), women’s underrepresentation in positions of power
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28 (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Elliott & Stead, 2018) and overrepresentation
29
30 in precarious leadership roles, termed the “gender cliff” (Ryan & Haslam, 2007), and the
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32 gender pay gap (Goldin, 1990; Catalyst, 2018). Another strand, influenced by social
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34 constructivist and poststructuralist theory, considers inequalities in the context of gendering as
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36 a distinct social process created and reproduced by organizations themselves (West &
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38 Zimmerman, 1987; Mills & Tancred, 1992; Gherardi, 1995; Kantola, 2008; Calás et al., 2014),
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40 rather than focusing on how women’s personal traits affect these outcomes. Both social
41
42 constructionism and post-structuralism reject the view of a gender binary between notions of
43
44 “women” and “men”, or “feminine” and “masculine” roles. Rather, they focus on the gendering
45
46 process in organizations as an outcome of power relations with material effects. Yet there are
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48 important differences between these two approaches. Constructionism conceives gender
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50 primarily as a social institution and practice accomplished through interactions and relations
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52 (West & Fenstermaker, 1995; Gherardi & Poggio, 2001), while in poststructuralist theory,
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54 organization is never stable as it comprises actively performed discourses that shape
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3 organizational structures and policies (Calás & Smircich, 1996). In addition, feminist
4 researchers of organizations who take inspiration from Judith Butler's ideas (e.g. Tyler &
5 Cohen, 2010; Fotaki & Harding, 2017) consider organizations as the material effects of the
6 performativity of dominant discourses.
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12 However, despite these critical approaches to studying gender in organizations, much
13 scholarship in this area is still concerned with how women might adapt to fit into workplaces
14 as they exist now, rather than addressing the causes of inequality. Such research attributes
15 significant differences between men and women to traditional sex-role stereotypes, implying
16 that women are disadvantaged because the stereotypes suggest that they "don't fit". Examples
17 of women "not fitting" include issues relating to different leadership styles (e.g. Eagly &
18 Johnson, 1990), social networks (Ibarra, 1993), sexual harassment, and work/family issues (for
19 a discussion, see Calás et al., 2014). Commonly-used organizational strategies to counteract
20 discrimination include structural changes involving quotas and mentoring, and more recently
21 training against gender bias (Bohnet, 2016), although these initiatives are fraught with practical
22 and political difficulties. Researchers also highlight the importance of systemic policies rather
23 than voluntary organizational initiatives, and the superiority of arrangements that make
24 responsibility for diversity explicit, rather than general training against bias or mentoring
25 (Kaley, Dobbin, & Kelly, 2006). However, they ignore the contribution of feminist movements
26 and political activism within and outside academia.
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47 Overall, gender research is often a product of the political and social climate in which
48 researchers operate. Accordingly, various explanations are offered for why women do not get
49 the same opportunities for career progression and pay as men. These emanate from mainstream
50 perspectives originating primarily in management and organizational studies in the US
51 academy, which tend not to question existing norms and power structures. In contrast, many
52 feminist scholars seek not only to generate more knowledge, but also, and centrally, to question
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3 and transform existing modes, frameworks and institutions of knowledge production (Pereira,
4 2012). As I have argued in my own research (Fotaki, 2011b, 2013), objectification of women,
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6 which is common in organizations, including academic institutions, arises from an
7
8 unacknowledged belief in the male norm as superior and the exclusion of female perspectives.
9
10 Power relations are central to gender research that borrows from social constructionist and
11
12 poststructuralist theories (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Acker, 1990; Kelemen & Rumens, 2008;
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14 Calás et al., 2014), which have been extensively deployed to analyze inequality and social
15
16 change. The importance of research to address this imbalance cannot be emphasized enough.
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18 Taking full account of power structures behind the causes of inequalities in work organizations
19
20 is a first step toward offering effective ways to counteract them. Feminist theory draws many
21
22 of its inspirations from feminist political practice (for examples, see Segal, 2017; Firestone &
23
24 Koedt, 1970), but this cross-influence is not accounted for. Generally speaking, feminist
25
26 scholarship enjoys the dubious accolade of “dismissive recognition” (Pereira, 2012), “whereby
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28 its epistemic status is both asserted and denied” (p. 296) within and outside academia. Local
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30 conditions influencing research agendas and “legitimizing a selective engagement with
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32 feminist work” (Pereira, 2012, p. 283) may exert similar pressures for impact generation.
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40 This partial and reluctant recognition obscures feminism’s contribution still further when
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42 the research impact on policy development and on changing organizational behaviours occurs
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44 over long periods, and can thus only be influenced indirectly and through cumulative work.
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46 The societal impact of research is often postulated rather than demonstrated; thus recognition
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48 of the diffuse influence of feminist work is circumscribed. One such example is the now
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50 widespread acceptance of a need for institutional and structural approaches, rather than
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52 individualizing problems and solutions by holding responsible those affected by the inequality,
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54 known as the “changing women” approach (Wynn, 2019; MacKenzie, Wynn, & Correll, 2019).
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56 This indirect impact can also be seen in explicit requirements for gender impact in research
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3 funding applications, measurements of gender equality in rankings of academic institutions,
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5 and various schemes to promote equal opportunities for female academics in universities (e.g.
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7 Athena Swan), although these are yet to achieve their goals. Feminist theoretical research that
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9 reshapes our thinking on issues of gender demonstrates the value of path-breaking research as
10
11 an enterprise in and of itself, because of the knowledge generated, even if advances in
12
13 understanding cannot be applied immediately. The next two sections discuss the impact of
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15 theoretical feminist research and how it is closely intertwined with political activism. This is
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17 followed by a call for engaged scholarship and for rethinking research impact.
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23 **In praise of theory and activism for truly impactful research**

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25 Theories have the power to provide meaning and significance to what we observe and
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27 experience, helping to validate or refine existing theory or construct new theory. According to
28
29 Kuhn (1962), new theories are invented as a result of the failure of existing theory to solve the
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31 problems defined by the theory itself, causing a crisis in the relevant scientific community. He
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33 refers to this “noncumulative developmental episode in which an older paradigm is replaced in
34
35 whole or in part by an incompatible new one” (p. 92) as a scientific revolution. When
36
37 paradigms change, the world itself changes with them. In a sense, following a revolution,
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39 scientists must respond to a different world, because “the normal-scientific tradition that
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41 emerges from a scientific revolution is not only incompatible but often actually
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43 incommensurable with that which has gone before” (p. 103).
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49 In this context, Judith Butler’s theoretical innovations, and especially her well-known
50
51 articulation of gender performativity, represent a revolutionary paradigmatic shift, and attest
52
53 to the many generative uses and political value of her work. She raises important questions for
54
55 feminist and queer theorists across disciplines, and particularly for scholars interested in
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57 relationships between systems of knowledge/power, subjectivity and identity, gender,
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59 sexuality, and corporeality in the context of power and resistance. Indeed, it is almost
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1
2
3 impossible to engage with feminist or queer theory today without engaging with Butler's ideas
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5 (Morgenroth & Ryan, 2018). However, the engagement and uptake of her work by many other
6
7 feminists demonstrates the level of cumulative endeavour involved in producing impact.
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10 In working through texts by major twentieth-century theoreticians such as Sigmund Freud,
11
12 Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, Butler
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14 rigorously interrogates the necessity for fixed, immutable gender identities (Kotz, 1992).
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16 Specifically, she explores through a discourse of identity how the nexus between sex, gender,
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18 sexual practice and sexual desire becomes intelligible (Butler, 1990, 1993), forming a reified
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20 whole: the heterosexual matrix. The heterosexual matrix is the ultimate effect of gender
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22 performativity, but is simultaneously threatened by subversive forces and “‘knows’ its own
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24 possibility of becoming undone” (Butler, 1990, p. 23).
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28 Butler's conceptual developments have been very influential in the social sciences and
29
30 humanities. Her scientific revolution has “affected and effectively shaped” (Blumenfeld &
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32 Sönsler Breen, 2001; Fotaki & Harding, 2017) many disciplines, including archaeology,
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34 literature and law, and has had a profound impact on repositioning feminist and queer studies.
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36 The ideas first articulated in *Gender Trouble* (1990) fit with current conceptualizations of
37
38 gender in experimental social psychology (Morgenroth & Ryan, 2018). They have also had a
39
40 tangible impact on policy, legislation and popular imagination. In an interview with Sara
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42 Ahmed (2016, p. 483), Butler acknowledges her surprise and satisfaction about this:
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48 As for the reception, I have been pleased to see the way *Gender Trouble* has been taken
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50 up by performance studies, by legal scholars concerned with the politics of categories, by
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52 political and cultural theorists who are interested in the embodiment of resistance. I am
53
54 especially moved by the political and legal efforts that make use of the text to
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56 depathologize queer and trans lives, or to affirm alternative parenting arrangements or new
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58 forms of kinship. Some work on citizenship as well relies on a performative understanding
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60 of laying claim to basic entitlements and political status.

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3 The impact of Butler's work on policy and organizations (the "instrumental" impact
4 according to the ESRC's definition) can be ascertained through its influence on policy, legal
5 and social developments on LGBTQ+ rights. Her definitions of gender, sex and sexuality as
6 cultural and social constructions that subjects manifest through the repetition of performative
7 acts in time have provided a foundation to counteract various forms of discrimination, such as
8 homophobia and transphobia, and against any other subjectivities excluded from the
9 heterosexual discourse (Piantato, 2016).

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Butler's poststructuralist writings also offer a novel lens through which to read the
ontology of organizations. Her thinking on gender heteronormativity reveals a deep
engagement with questions of how our relations with other people are caught up in our
identifications with hegemonic social norms, and how different forms of representation persist
in society as stark and often painful exercises of power (Kenny, 2010, 2012). The notion of
gender as a performative act that produces constative sex (Butler, 1993) has inspired many
theoretical and empirical investigations by scholars studying gender in management and work
organizations (e.g. Bowring, 2000; Borgerson, 2005; Tyler & Cohen, 2010; Riach, Rumens, &
Tyler, 2014; Rumens, De Souza, & Brewis, 2018). However, performativity describes a set of
processes producing ontological effects that work to bring certain kinds of realities into being
and lead to certain kinds of socially binding consequences (Butler, 2010, p. 147), beyond issues
of gender. This has been productively deployed in research on organizational performativity
(Cabantous et al., 2016; Gond et al., 2016).

Butler's theory provides a foundation for capacity building for the activist practice in
which she has engaged since her teens. However, this differs from the notion of capacity
building proposed by the ESRC as it focuses on empowering individuals to engage in active
citizenship through various forms of activism and collective action. Overall, her work has
become synonymous with a new wave of feminist theory that questions rigid dichotomies of

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3 gender and challenges the core assumptions of identity politics, including the very notions of
4 sexual identity on which gay-liberationist projects have historically been based. This is one of
5 many examples showing how feminist philosophies both inspire and are informed by political
6 action, stressing the organic links between feminist ideas and praxis. This extends to links
7 between conceptual developments and capacity building, through activism and collective
8 organizing for social change.
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17 Silvia Federici, one of the most important feminist theorists alive today, whose ideas are
18 briefly presented next, provides further inspiration for how path-breaking theoretical work can
19 both give rise to and draw on activist practice. Building on Marx, she has developed pioneering
20 ideas on the role of reproductive work in primitive accumulation and capitalism. In 1972, she
21 participated in founding the Wages for Housework campaign of the International Feminist
22 Collective, which formed chapters in Italy, the UK and the United States to demand wages
23 from their respective federal governments for labour performed by women in the home
24 (Hoffman & Yudacofski, 2018). The aim was to bring this issue to the policy agenda as part of
25 a broad movement and as a strategy to establish the value of women's work. Although the
26 movement was unsuccessful, it raised consciousness of the fact that housework is real work
27 and benefits all employers (Hoffman & Yudacofski, 2018). These ideas are more relevant than
28 ever today, as evidenced in debates on basic income (Weeks, 2011).
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45 The feminist Marxist intervention demonstrated that women's unpaid labour (primarily in
46 the form of domestic labour of care, sex work and procreation) enables capitalist growth by
47 reproducing labour and reducing labour costs. Federici calls such embodied, unpaid work
48 "(re)productive", in contrast to the "productive" work involved in creating commodities. The
49 reproduction of labour power involves a far broader range of activities than the consumption
50 of commodities on which Marx focused, since food must be prepared, clothes washed, and
51 bodies stroked and cared for (Federici, 2009). Such work has historically fallen mainly to
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3 women (and colonial others). Together with other Marxist feminists and historians (e.g. Mies,
4 1986), Federici challenges power relationships between men, women and people of colour by
5 focusing on this unaccounted labour, and on the body as the locus of reproductive work. She
6 thus establishes an inextricable link between anti-capitalism and radical feminist politics by
7 digging deep into the history of capital's centuries-long attack on women and the body
8 (Federici, 2004). Recognition of the importance of reproduction and women's domestic labour
9 for capital accumulation has led to a rethinking of Marx's categories, and a new understanding
10 of the history of capitalist development and the class struggle (Federici, 2009).

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Federici's contribution to understanding work relationships in various forms of capitalist development illustrates the profound conceptual impact of her ideas on theorization of the gendered nature of reproductive labour in various domains and contexts. However, with a few exceptions, this work has not yet been applied to organization studies (Fotaki & Daskalaki, 2020; Daskalaki, Fotaki, & Simosi, forthcoming; Mandalaki & Fotaki, forthcoming). Yet its indirect and wide-reaching impact on other disciplines and on academic activism has been profound, with implications for the recognition of various inequalities in the workplace, including gender pay (Goldin, 1990) and the newly emerging inequalities involved in transnational movements of labour, especially concerned with care networks (Hochschild, 2002; Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2007). Federici's work specifically offers close political and historical readings of local contexts with global calls for change. This radical feminist theorization and its intimate connections with activist practice present a holistic view on achieving impactful research. The next section discusses ways of bridging organizational and social change and research impact through engaged scholarship.

Rethinking impact through engaged scholarship

Thus far, it has been argued that the definition of research impact in academic evaluations is limited in both scope and temporality, and that impact might be approached differently. The

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2
3 work of many researchers, philosophers and activists offers examples not only of engaged
4 scholarship, but also of scholars engaged in activist and political work. The scholarship of
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6 Judith Butler and Silvia Federici has been used to illustrate how this might be achieved.
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10 Overall, theoretical feminist research offers some exemplary cases of the potentially far-
11
12 reaching impact of scholarship in shaping policy and changing organizational practices.
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14 However, in addition to these types of impacts, which fall into the instrumental category of the
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16 ESRC's typology, feminist research also demonstrates the importance of capacity building for
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18 truly emancipatory politics through political activism, which differs from general training
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20 against bias or mentoring. This assertion, it is argued, obliges us to face the issue of engaged
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22 scholarship and our role as academic researchers and teachers. Responding to this challenge
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24 necessitates courageous and novel theorization to produce new imaginaries, as well as
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26 engagement in the political process through academic activism.
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31 One practical implication of this approach is a call for academics' sustained engagement
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33 in activism. Activist practice is about bringing information to the public domain, as women
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35 have done recently in the MeToo campaign. Vachhani and Pullen (2019) suggest that, to
36
37 address the issue of sexism in organizations, the ethico-politics of feminist resistance must
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39 move away from individualizing experiences toward collective resistance and organizing
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41 solidarity, experience and empathy, which may combat ignorance and violence toward women
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43 by building momentum for change. This corresponds with increasing acknowledgement of
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45 women's contributions to activism more broadly (Fotaki & Daskalaki, 2020). Another
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47 approach is to unearth how modes of resistance are influenced by (women) activists' practices,
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49 and to document resistance initiatives that have little prior history of activism. Reedy and King
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51 (2019) also stress the necessity of learning from activism, which is currently relegated to the
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53 periphery of research and excluded from measurable impact activities. For true impact,
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3 academics must bear witness to their research informants' struggles and speak against
4 injustices. Promoting social justice lies at the heart of the feminist project.
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8 These activities must also inform teaching practices. In their criticism of business schools,
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10 Fotaki and Prasad (2015) highlight the need to broaden topics and integrate multidisciplinary
11 perspectives, in order to encourage students to question how they might be implicated in co-
12 producing different types of impact in "distant" geographical and social locales. Equally,
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14 producing different types of impact in "distant" geographical and social locales. Equally,
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16 feminist contributions must be acknowledged and celebrated in curricula. We must reject
17
18 reluctant acceptance of feminism, and its precarious position in academia where various
19
20 discursive shifts are mobilized in debates on gender to delegitimize its relevance (Broadbridge
21
22 & Simpson, 2011). Feminism is often appropriated in the gender discourse to disavow its
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24 transformational power and impact, while falsely claiming that its demands are ostensibly
25
26 recognized and responded to (McRobbie, 2009). It is often collapsed under the more legitimate
27
28 term of gender. Yet, although gender appears to be an ubiquitous topic in the public
29
30 discourse, but remains a deeply polarizing subject, while important issues surrounding
31
32 equality at work remain unresolved. Simultaneously, there has been a powerful backlash
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34 against women's empowerment, in the form of anti-gender and post-feminist discourses
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36 in the media and popular culture (Fotaki & Pullen, 2019). Thus, while the discourse on
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38 diversity has gained popularity in globalizing organizations, this has occurred in the
39
40 context of widespread sexual harassment, persistent inequalities at work and a reversal of
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42 women's hard-won rights.
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49 Fraser (2019) suggests that such developments occur because "the feminism of the 1
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51 percent has associated the project of ending all oppression with elitism" (see also Arruzza,
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53 Bhattacharya, & Fraser, 2019). Yet feminism still provides the most appropriate framework for
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55 discussing a practical politics of change and transformation, while avoiding the problems of
56
57 universalism, essentialism and privilege in organizations (Thomas & Davies, 2005). Both
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3 reproductive labour and gender performativity discussions emerged organically from within
4 this feminist framework. In attending to these tensions, feminism offers a contingent politics
5 of constant vigilance in power relations, helping us to focus on impactful social research issues
6 that contribute to better understanding the world in which we live and making it a better place
7 for everyone.
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14 15 16 **Conclusion**

17
18 Debate on the impact of research in society is not new, and reflects fundamental questions
19 about the purpose of university education. Impact is often diffuse and takes time to emerge.
20 Evaluating and accounting for impact is not a neutral exercise; it depends on pre-existing power
21 structures and accepted knowledge bases. This article has used the example of feminist
22 scholarship to illustrate these issues, and has argued in favour of theoretically innovative
23 scholarship and the inclusion of academic activism as a way to produce tangible social research
24 impact for justice and equality in organizations and society. In demonstrating how feminism
25 makes an impact in academy and beyond it makes us rethink the notion of impact as a political
26 project.
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