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## **Working Selves, Working Gendered Contexts [Review of the Book Negotiating Gendered Identities at Work: Place, Space and Time]**

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# Organization

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**Book Reviews: Working Selves, Working Gendered Contexts: Negotiating Gender Identities at Work: Place, Space and Time by Susan Halford and Pauline Leonard.**  
New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. 193 pp. £45.00. ISBN 1403941122

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## Book Reviews



### Working Selves, Working Gendered Contexts

*Negotiating Gender Identities at Work: Place, Space and Time* by Susan Halford and Pauline Leonard. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. 193 pp. £45.00. ISBN 1403941122.

*Negotiating Gender Identities at Work* is a well-organized, soundly argued, and empirically grounded study of the situatedness of gender relations. Halford and Leonard aim to reconcile gaps between the discursive and the material by investigating the negotiations of working selves in the context of gendered (raced and classed) organizations. The authors structure their analysis around the features of places, spaces, and times. Their theoretical intervention is a forceful argument for the importance of social context, both in its centrality to the (re)production of gendered working selves (and organizations) and in terms of the material resources offered for identity (re)production. Halford and Leonard's argument is supported by an empirical study of doctors and nurses working at two hospitals in Britain's National Health Service (NHS).

Theoretically, the 'who I am' of the working subject is the result of incipient and actual negotiation. In chapter two Halford and Leonard describe the gendered positioning of doctors and nurses in the NHS through professional, organizational, and managerial discourses. While the authors locate doctors and nurses within these discourses, Halford and Leonard still acknowledge agency as individuals negotiate their working identities in relation to/with these broad contexts. This agency is in turn tempered by workers' access to certain discursive and material resources.

As the authors argue, gender is an integral and consistent part of this negotiation process, set in a context of persistent economic and social inequalities that face working women. Halford and Leonard capture this sensuous negotiation of being and becoming 'a doctor' or 'a nurse' through contextual resources embedded in gendered temporal and spatial



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frameworks. Thus, the places, spaces, and times of gendered organizational reality are created by doctors and nurses but are also *drawn upon* to produce their working selves.

The empirical study uses a comparative methodology described in chapter three. In conducting case studies of two different hospitals (called 'Lakeside' and 'Seaside'), the researchers sought to know the diverse situations as well as the individual persons. The authors interviewed select informants and gathered observations through their *engagement* in the places, spaces, and schedules of each hospital. Interviews of both doctors and nurses were combined with observation to offer detailed accounts of subjects' identity performances and practices.

The analyses show how Lakeside and Seaside hospitals yield distinct gendered contexts—differing workplaces, workspaces, and times—within which doctors and nurses negotiate working identities. For example, in chapter four Halford and Leonard show how the gendering of workplace, being a 'masculine' or 'feminine' place, enable and constrain medical and nursing selves, requiring careful negotiation by women. In addition, workspaces, understood as multiple gendered fields, affected men and women's ability to 'be-long' in a variety of organizational spaces (chapter five). At the same time that certain spaces underscored male professional privilege and power (in terms of greater access to and mobility through spaces), space functioned as a resistive resource which challenged male control (such as could be seen with doctor's outsider status within the nurses' spaces/wards).

Time was examined in a two-fold way: professional/organizational constructions of time and nurses and doctors' lifetimes (chapters six and seven). Here the authors investigated the interplay between how professions and organizations demanded and/or constrained time, such as tendencies toward total identities, the intensification of work, and contradictions between professional time schedules and organizational demands, and how these multiple times allowed creative productions of identities. In addition, the examination of lifetimes offered insight into how men and women constructed working identities, with men tending to construct more coherent life stories toward a professional goal, whereas women tended to reflect more fragmentation in hopes, ambitions, and identities.

In sum, Halford and Leonard provide an in-depth and provocative investigation of the ongoing process of negotiating identities in the multi-dimensional and dynamic contexts of gendered organizational life.

A few additions to the discussion could add beneficial nuances. First, given the emphasis on gendered interactions at work, I was surprised and disappointed to see a total lack of consultation of organizational communication scholarship. Because the book asserts the importance of 'getting particular' (i.e. context) and the negotiation of identity (through discourse and interaction), reference to the now-substantial communication scholarship on gender and identity at work would have been appropriate and useful. Second, more care in theorizing and conceptualizing gender



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itself would have enhanced this text. Especially, I sense an oscillation between postmodern conceptualizations of gender coupled somewhat awkwardly with more modernist categories. In a point related to but going beyond this issue, I worry that the authors constructed a heterosexual field of desire around their treatment of gender, and when opportunities emerged to push our theoretical understandings of gender into queerer directions (as several times they did), the authors left such gendered possibilities and embodiments unnecessarily opaque. Overall, however, I strongly recommend Halford and Leonard's *Negotiating Gendered Identities at Work* as an important application and extension to the empirical and theoretical arenas of feminist organizational scholarship.

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### Outside Organization Theory

*Repositioning Organization Theory: Impossibilities and Strategies*, Steffen Böhm. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, £55.00 (hbk), ISBN 9781403943637.

Organization theory is no longer—if it ever was—a matter of knowledge, perspective, paradigm or discourse. These are all figments of a past that is endangered today. Today organization is a matter of ontology, a matter of putting into place a particular way of being in the world, a way of life, a mode of existence, an organization of the social. Organization theory cannot therefore be reduced to the figures of knowledge, perspective, paradigm or discourse. Organization theory is a matter of a social world being-organized.

At this ontological level, organization theory has been motivated by three founding movements. The first is that of *positioning*, which involves putting into place a particular hegemonic project that seeks to locate and to close—that is, to *position*—organization. This involves the hegemonization of organization around one quilting point to the exclusion of others. In recent history this point has been management, to the extent that organization has been subsumed under the rubric of management.

Against the positioning project, and despite or perhaps because of its attempts to claim hegemony, a second project of *depositioning* emerges. This involves insistence on the instability of efforts of positioning, and hence emphasizes the contingency of the social and of organization. The project of depositioning is at work in process theories of organization and in the various postmodern theories of organization that have sought to establish the fragmentary and transitory nature of organization.

But the depositioning project falls short of its promise. It fails because it lacks an account of the political, which is the centrepiece of the third