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Back to the “Closet”: A Critical Essay on the Paradigmatic Framing of Gender Research in Organizational Studies

De Volta para o “Armário”: Ensaio Crítico Sobre o Enquadramento Paradigmático das Pesquisas de Gênero em Estudos Organizacionais

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ABSTRACT

This study set out to discuss gender in organizational studies, particularly from a paradigmatic perspective. We offered reflections on how the field has positioned itself in relation to the paradigms presented in the social sciences, especially as outlined by Burrell and Morgan. To that end, the theoretical essay was guided by the following central question: *Is it possible to speak of a paradigmatic pluralism, or are we facing a new kind of “closet”?* Based on this, we reflected on the extent to which “affiliation” to a single paradigm may hinder the advancement of gender research, and on what other factors have become relevant for analyzing this field. We therefore conclude that adopting a more critical stance in organizational studies — and particularly in those that address gender — is an urgent matter, as it can contribute to the development of the field. Moreover, we observed that although there appear to be advances in how this topic is approached, many challenges still need to be overcome, especially within the academic sphere, where we are “daily” pushed to fit into a research typology or paradigm, which constrains the critical positioning that this and other subjects demand.

Keywords: Gender. Organizational Studies. Research Paradigms. Critique.

RESUMO

Este estudo teve como proposta a discussão de gênero nos estudos organizacionais, sobretudo dentro de uma visão paradigmática. Trazemos reflexões sobre o posicionamento do campo frente aos paradigmas apresentados pelos estudos das ciências sociais, tomados ao que foi apresentado por Burrell e Morgan. Para tanto, o ensaio teórico foi proposto diante do seguinte questionamento norteador: *É possível falar em um pluralismo paradigmático ou estamos diante de um novo conceito de “armário”?* Com isso, refletimos até que ponto a “filiação” a um paradigma pode não favorecer a evolução da pesquisa de gênero e que outros fatores têm sido importantes para a análise desse campo de pesquisa. Assim, concluímos ser uma questão de urgência a adoção de um maior posicionamento crítico para os estudos organizacionais e de maneira particular para as que abordam gênero, sugerindo sua contribuição para o avanço desse campo. Além disso, observamos que embora pareça estarmos avançando ao tratar sobre essa temática, muitos desafios ainda precisam ser superados, sobretudo ao que tange o campo acadêmico, na qual estamos “diariamente” nos encaixando numa tipologia de pesquisa ou em um paradigma, limitantes a uma posição crítica que esses e outros assuntos carecem.

Palavras-chave: Gênero. Estudos Organizacionais. Paradigmas de pesquisa. Crítica.

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1 INTRODUCTION

In the field of organizational studies, research develops in light of paradigms and theoretical frameworks recognized by the scientific community, often represented by the seminal work of Burrell and Morgan, *Sociological Paradigms and Organizational Analysis*, published in 1979. These paradigms guide research and contribute to the construction of a set of theoretical and practical knowledge on the subject. According to Burrell and Morgan (1979), they have fundamental differences that cannot be easily reconciled, since each one establishes its own internal criteria of validation, delineating what is accepted and what is rejected. In this sense, paradigms act as mental maps that guide how we interpret the social world, directly influencing the way we conduct our research.

When considering the four paradigms proposed by Burrell and Morgan (1979), which provide distinct approaches to understanding and studying organizations, Paula (2016) questions the clarity of these differences by indicating that nuances and exceptions in each paradigm do not align perfectly with their standard definitions. In this scenario, researchers often need to move to the margins of each paradigm to account for such exceptions. This complicates the framing of research within a single paradigm and supports the view that combining different perspectives is both possible and valuable (Paula, 2016).

This perspective, which confines each paradigm to a specific quadrant, has been criticized for its limitations. This position is grounded in the thesis of paradigm incommensurability, which suggests that meaningful dialogue between different paradigms is impossible. Consequently, divisions and isolation arise among different perspectives, leading to a tendency to accept more plural approaches to organizational studies rather than a single dominant one, as observed by Caldas (2005), Vergara and Caldas (2005), and Paula (2016).

It is therefore essential to acknowledge that, although the paradigms of Burrell and Morgan (1979) provide a fundamental structure for understanding organizational studies, the multifaceted and dynamic nature of organizations often requires a more integrative approach (Deetz, 1996). Organizations operating in diverse contexts and under varied influences may not fit neatly within a single paradigm (Amboni et al., 2017). This complexity can enrich research and provide a depth that more closely aligns with lived organizational realities. Recognizing this, gender research has demonstrated that discussions and concerns related to gender reflect various developments in the scientific field and play a significant role in understanding social phenomena (Hardies & Khalifa, 2018).

Over the past 30 years, the development of gender research within organizational studies has proven highly promising (Broadbridge & Hearn, 2008; Haynes, 2008, 2017; Dodge, Eikenberry & Coule, 2022), prompting debates about the current stage of development of the scientific field, whether in empirical research or theoretical analyses. In this context, certain emerging and still unresolved issues relate to a lack of critical engagement and positioning, which contributes to a simplistic and generalized debate that sometimes disregards the historical, political, and social context embedded in these questions (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Hearn & Parkin, 1983; Dodge, Eikenberry & Coule, 2022).

Along this path, the international literature on gender in organizational studies has highlighted movements that help situate this essay. Studies such as those by Broadbridge and Hearn (2008) show that even with the expansion of the gender agenda, organizations continue to be sustained by a gender order that privileges certain masculinities and marginalizes other forms of engagement. In the field of accounting and the professions, research by Haynes (2008, 2017) indicates that the body and the sexualization of work remain erased by more functionalist approaches, reducing the critical reach of these analyses. Moreover, the works of Pullen and Knights (2007) and Fotaki (2013) have emphasized that gender must be understood intersectionally and relationally, articulated with other forms of differentiation and power, and that organizational knowledge itself can produce new silences. Taken together, these findings indicate that the field already recognizes tensions and theoretical disputes, and it is precisely at this point that this essay intervenes by questioning whether the current discourse of pluralism accommodates these voices or whether a “new epistemological closet” persists.

This essay was therefore guided by the following question: Is it possible to speak of paradigm pluralism, or are we facing a new concept of a “closet”? Based on this question, the objective was to problematize the idea of paradigm pluralism in gender research within organizational studies, showing that forms of an epistemological “closet” may persist and limit the visibility of feminist, intersectional, and poststructural approaches. The proposed discussion articulates epistemological, ontological, and methodological conceptions of gender, taking as its starting point the critique of the model by Burrell and Morgan (1979) and engaging with the contributions of Guba and Lincoln (2005) and Paula (2016). Furthermore, we present reflections on how current narratives in the field have been constructed and on possible research directions for future development.

Finally, in terms of relevance, this essay contributes in at least two ways. First, it problematizes the still highly “boxed-in” manner in which the Burrell and Morgan matrix has

been applied to gender in organizational studies, showing that the debate continues to be reframed within established paradigmatic quadrants, even after decades of discussions on multiparadigmatism and critical perspectives (Lewis & Grimes, 1999; Calás & Smircich, 1999). Second, it advances by proposing the “return to the closet” as a critical metaphor to illustrate that even under a discourse of pluralism and epistemological openness, certain gender approaches—especially more intersectional, more politicized, or those that challenge organizational order—remain marginalized, a phenomenon already noted in gender studies and critical accounting studies that reveal how feminist and poststructural voices are often diluted or sidelined in the field (see Haynes, 2008; Haynes, 2017; Pullen & Knights, 2007; Fotaki, 2013). Thus, the article not only revisits a classic debate on paradigms but updates it by showing that attempts at pluralism do not always materialize in practice and that mechanisms of invisibility continue operating within the field itself.

2 DEVELOPMENT

2.1 PARADIGMATIC APPROACH WITHIN ORGANIZATIONAL STUDIES

To begin, the concept of paradigm proposed by Kuhn (2001) can be understood as a set of beliefs, values, and techniques shared by members of a specific scientific community. When a paradigm is widely accepted by the scientific community, it becomes a mandatory reference for addressing research problems. In other words, paradigms are grounded in the need to share and transmit knowledge among individuals who belong to the same scientific community. They thus reveal the ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological choices of a given group of researchers (Creswell, 2010).

The model proposed by Burrell and Morgan (1979) states that theories related to the field of organizational studies are based on a philosophy of science and a theory of society. They conceptualize social science in terms of four sets of assumptions (Figure 1), which present two extremes along a subjective–objective dimension. These assumptions refer to ontology (nominalism or realism); epistemology (anti-positivism or positivism); human nature (voluntarism or determinism); and methodology (ideographic or nomothetic) (Burrell & Morgan, 1979).

Burrell and Morgan (1979) also discuss the dimension of the sociologies of regulation and radical change. Theories situated within the sociology of regulation aim to explain society using terms that reinforce its unified and cohesive structure, such as social order or the

satisfaction of needs. In contrast, the sociology of radical change presents a counterpoint to this perspective by focusing on structural conflicts, modes of domination, and structural contradictions characteristic of modern society (Burrell & Morgan, 1979).

Figure 1

The four paradigms of Burrell and Morgan (1979).



Note: Adapted from Burrell and Morgan (1979).

In this regard, the four paradigms developed by Burrell and Morgan—functionalism, interpretivism, radical structuralism, and radical humanism—present differences in their ways of studying society, and forcing researchers into a single paradigm may limit the scope and depth of research, given that the complexity of the field may require a broader and more integrated understanding. Feyerabend (1975) had already emphasized the importance of continuously questioning the limits of the perspectives adopted by theorists and evaluating whether their efforts contribute to the development or rigidity of established paradigms.

A central question emerges: Is this even possible? Part of the studies that raise criticisms of Burrell and Morgan (1979) argue that: (i) there is a proliferation of competing perspectives, leading to polarization and segregation of these perspectives (Caldas, 2005); (ii) they have encouraged an excessive orthodoxy of so-called “paradigmatic incommensurability,” the banning of dialogue, and interparadigmatic closure (Caldas, 2005); (iii) they are used to reify research approaches (Deetz, 1996); and (iv) their contrasting dimensions obscure important differences in current research orientations and lead to poorly structured conflicts and debates (Deetz, 1996).

Responding to these criticisms, studies such as those by Guba and Lincoln (1994, 2000, 2005) and Paula (2016) propose alternatives that foster debate on the need for communication among paradigms. Within this discussion, Paula (2016) argues that combining different paradigms is both possible and beneficial. By revisiting the thesis of paradigmatic

incommensurability proposed by Burrell and Morgan (1979), the author suggests that this concept does not adequately align with the social sciences, especially in the context of organizational studies. Guba and Lincoln (1994) emphasize that mixing elements from one paradigm into another is acceptable only when minimum criteria of axiological convergence are respected. For them, some paradigms are so distinct that they may even behave as adversaries, thus becoming irreconcilable.

Although these authors (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Paula, 2016) ground their discussion in alternative and pluralistic proposals, they argue that dialogue among paradigms should be approached with caution, as uniting axiologically incompatible paradigms may compromise research rigor. However, Paula highlights that, within the social sciences, the ideal would be to conceive a unity of knowledge in a transdisciplinary sense, so that critique mediates between the empirical-analytical and the hermeneutic. This raises questions about functionalist hegemony and opens organizational research to alternative paradigms and epistemic approaches capable of fostering boundary-crossing theories and methodologies or hybrid sociological approaches.

In the field of Management, Caldas (2005) argues that the unawareness of an unconscious and unquestioned paradigmatic reality, along with the predominance of the functionalist paradigm, is limiting the development of the field. This creates a need to break with this narrow functionalist view and explore new theoretical approaches that may enrich and expand the field. Recognizing and promoting dialogue among paradigms during scientific development can bring significant benefits, such as greater reflexivity and depth, contributing to the field's advancement (Caldas, 2005).

In line with this, Amboni et al. (2017) emphasize that a multiparadigmatic approach to studying organizations and society may encourage researchers to generate new insights by filling the gaps left by exclusive adherence to a single paradigm. No paradigm in isolation can fully explain the behavior of organizations and society (Amboni et al., 2017), something a multiparadigmatic approach may offer. Such an approach would allow researchers to combine the functionalist, interpretivist, radical humanist, and radical structuralist paradigms as needed, yielding a more complete and representative picture of organizational reality.

2.2 THE PARADIGMATIC DEBATE WITHIN GENDER STUDIES

Since the 1970s, the scientific field of gender studies within organizational research has received increasing attention from scholars, expanding debate and recognition of the area

(Broadbridge & Hearn, 2008; Engeli, 2020; Dodge, Eikenberry & Coule, 2022). According to these authors, this growth has been evident in diverse spaces, such as the publishing market, activities of leading international editors, recurring calls for papers in journals, and courses in undergraduate programs. Within the interdisciplinary field of gender and diversity studies, it is common to adopt a multifaceted and multiparadigmatic view, reflecting a strong orientation toward qualitative research methods (Davis et al., 2006; Metcalfe & Woodhams, 2012).

Although organizational studies have developed into a robust field enriched by diverse and often controversial perspectives that can strengthen the understanding of paradigmatic pluralism (Lewis & Kelemen, 2002; Amboni et al., 2017), issues remain that discourage researchers from employing alternative paradigms. This may favor the production of gender research increasingly centered on managerialist, atheoretical, and ahistorical approaches aligned with a functionalist/positivist worldview (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Hearn & Parkin, 1983; Serva et al., 2010).

Critical engagement is a necessary component of empirical and conceptual development regarding gender and diversity in workplaces and organizations more broadly. This critique involves reevaluating several key elements: the concept of “organization”; the concept of “gender”; the relationship between gender and sexuality; gender, sexuality, violence, and violation; the intersection of gender and other social divisions; and broader methodological critiques (Hearn & Parkin, 2003).

As a consequence of this lack of criticality, much gender research continues to reflect insufficiently and inadequately on these issues, often maintaining a binary understanding of gender—male and female—even when clear distinctions exist within and between the categories of women and men. As a result, experiences shaped by race, class, sexuality, generation, or disability are not incorporated into analytical designs, impoverishing the understanding of the phenomenon and reinforcing exactly the type of limited framing this essay seeks to problematize.

Reinforcing this view, Dodge, Eikenberry and Coule (2022) argue that traditional research standards, strongly inclined toward positivism, may be inadequate to evaluate issues that require a critical orientation. There is a need to recognize and apply evaluative standards aligned with critical approaches to bring diversity and pluralism to the field. Without this adjustment, critical research and the unique insights it offers risk being marginalized or underestimated. This would be harmful not only because it limits understanding of important phenomena but also because it diminishes attention to ethics and morality in the research

process (Dodge, Eikenberry & Coule, 2022).

Regarding gender research, problematizing these issues does not mean restricting or invalidating traditional approaches but reflecting on how a “gender as variable” approach may be insufficient to address inequalities and differences and may even fail to counter prejudices. Based on arguments from Haynes (2008, 2017), the problem may lie in the absence of a gender approach as part of the methodological and theoretical framework, which currently treats gender merely as an object of study.

For this reason, we support the use of a critical approach, beyond any “partisan affiliation” with the radical humanist paradigm or any other paradigm that might polarize science and confine scientific production within fixed epistemological, ontological, and methodological boundaries. As emphasized by Haynes (2017), although the richness of critical research is widely acknowledged, we consider it here in a broad sense—as an intentional project of emancipation, social change, and advancement of the field. In other words, the argument is that researchers adopting a critical approach may use theory as a lens through which to uncover hidden assumptions of social phenomena and identify the discomforting erasures that mask inequalities and injustices and allow their persistence (Dodge, Eikenberry & Coule, 2022).

Based on this elaboration, this essay argues that the difficulty in achieving a truly pluralistic approach in gender studies stems, in part, from the way research production has been conducted from a “single-paradigm” perspective that privileges certain framings and consequently pushes other issues “back into the closet.” In other words, by adhering to an ostensibly neutral and universal idea of “good science,” some research neutralizes the social, moral, and political dimensions of gender, reducing it to an object accommodated within already legitimized models (Dodge, Eikenberry & Coule, 2022). The closet metaphor is useful precisely because it names forms of silencing and conformity that persist even in organizational contexts that claim to be open to diversity and pluralism. The literature on sexualities and gender in organizations shows that visibility is always negotiated and that institutional practices may keep subjects and agendas in the closet despite inclusion-oriented discourse (Rumens, 2016; Fotaki, 2013; Pullen & Knights, 2007).

Within this context, criticisms directed at these more single-paradigm productions highlight the need to reopen the field to pluralistic approaches. This occurs, first, because there is now a declared interest in ontologies and epistemologies that move away from conventional social science and acknowledge the legitimacy of multiple ways of knowing (Guba & Lincoln,

2005). Second, because social transformations associated with the shift from modernity to more reflexive forms of modernity lead society to expect science not only to describe but also to reconstruct meanings about past, present, and possible futures (Silva et al., 2020). Third, because scholars have argued that social science can and should operate as a mediating space between empirical-analytical and hermeneutic traditions, stimulating transdisciplinary and non-exclusionary interpretations (Paula, 2016). Taken together, these arguments reinforce—though not exhaustively—that a pluralistic, particularly multiparadigmatic, perspective is relevant and necessary for gender studies in organizations, as it expands the critical repertoire and prevents certain agendas from being pushed “back into the closet.”

In general, it is important to highlight the essential role of mapping the paradigms of Burrell and Morgan (1979) and their contributions to the field of organizational studies (Prolo et al., 2018). However, the central argument of this essay is that the scientific field of gender research needs to overcome the objective/subjective dichotomy (functionalist and interpretivist) and the exclusivist framing assigned to each proposed paradigm (Chia, 1996; Prolo et al., 2018; Serva et al., 2010; Paula, 2016), in an attempt to foster a more pluralistic debate that encourages greater engagement with these issues, especially considering the historical, political, and social context in which they develop.

Although the spread of multiparadigmatic approaches appears promising for the current development of organizational studies (Silva et al., 2020), challenges remain that may discourage researchers from adopting them. Amboni et al. (2017) point out that, when dealing with different approaches, researchers may lack reference or grounding and may struggle to distance themselves from the dominant paradigm. Therefore, these paradigm articulations can be made as long as researchers maintain a reference and a theoretical foundation to ensure coherence and consistency.

In gender research within organizational studies, although still in an embryonic stage, the inclusion of more subjective alternative approaches such as poststructuralist, constructionist, and interpretivist perspectives has been observed (Bleijenbergh, Booyesen & Mills, 2018). The field of gender studies thus shows potential for more pluralistic approaches that encourage researchers to revisit existing approaches or paradigms and even reinvent new methods of inquiry.

However, despite the official discourse of pluralism, evidence indicates that barriers persist that keep critical perspectives in the background. Fotaki and Pullen (2024) remind us that feminist approaches should recover “silenced and neglected voices and perspectives,” yet

in practice such voices remain subordinated. Similarly, Mandalaki and Pérezts (2023) highlight that in academic institutions permeated by patriarchy, sexist events are often “ignored or disparaged,” and abuses or discrimination tend to silence women and intersectional minorities (e.g., racialized, LGBTQ+, disabled individuals) within organizations. These silencing practices are mirrored in scientific production: Dodge, Eikenberry and Coule (2021) found that only 4% of articles published in leading gender journals adopt a truly critical approach, and that this small share has increasingly been assimilated into hegemonic methods over time. These findings suggest that discourse on pluralism coexists with conservative institutional practices that silence and delegitimize feminist, poststructuralist, and intersectional epistemologies, keeping them away from the center of organizational debate.

Thus, the core questions of this debate are revisited—Is it possible to speak of paradigmatic pluralism, or are we facing a new concept of the “closet”? The argument developed here is that the current stage of the scientific field studying gender issues is marked by attempts to break paradigm boundaries and employ more alternative approaches (Dodge, Eikenberry & Coule, 2022). However, these attempts still fall short of a multiparadigmatic approach—one that uses more than one paradigm within the same study (Amboni et al., 2017). This gap reflects the polarization of modern paradigms and the ruptures between modern and postmodern positions (Lewis & Kelemen, 2002), which can be seen as a movement toward a new form of fitting or a new concept of the “closet” for gender issues.

3 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In light of the reflections presented in this essay, it becomes clear that research on gender within organizational studies, while promising, still requires deeper engagement and a less reductionist perspective. Approaches grounded in alternative paradigms and multiparadigmatic frameworks could foster a more substantive discussion of the phenomenon and its implications for organizational contexts. As noted by Amboni et al. (2017), the lack of awareness of paradigm diversity, combined with the silent and nearly hegemonic endorsement of the functionalist (objectivist) paradigm, tends to confine and limit the field’s advancement.

Regarding these points, it is relevant to consider that even when gender research adopts a more alternative paradigm, it is not exempt from “fitting,” especially in terms of methodological choices, which are often already conditioned by a particular paradigm. In this sense, as highlighted by Bleijenbergh, Booysen, and Mills (2018), qualitative research—although promising and widely used in gender studies, particularly within critical

investigations of diversity—may risk turning in on itself amid the emergence of mixed methods and methodological pluralism.

Thus, this essay supports a multiparadigmatic perspective within these studies, one capable of illuminating the meanings and (re)significations underlying gender issues and contributing to a narrative that reveals the hidden and uncomfortable assumptions embedded in society (Dodge, Eikenberry & Coule, 2022). Such an approach offers a way to address paradigmatic limitations and the polarization between modern paradigms, thereby contributing to the development of the field.

Moreover, it is important to reflect on how paradigms and research methods in diversity studies can be better understood, expanded, and critically assessed, and how methodological innovations may enhance our understanding of diversity within organizations (Bleijenbergh, Booyesen & Mills, 2018). Nonetheless, it is equally relevant to encourage researchers to continue advancing scientific inquiry in the field of diversity—even when operating within a single paradigm—given the rich, diverse, and mutable nature of gender and feminisms (Hearn & Hein, 2015).

As emphasized by Hearn and Hein (2015), gender is not everything, but it is one of the few structuring elements that consistently crosscut individuals, groups, bodies, relationships, and broader social contexts. Precisely because of this diffuse and relational nature, gender is rarely captured in its entirety by a single theoretical perspective or paradigm; still, efforts at conceptual framing remain important, as they enable the visibility of certain issues and help organize the scientific field.

In this regard, the discussion developed here is timely and may stimulate further investigation. This essay sought to offer theoretical-epistemological contributions with social implications as well. From a theoretical standpoint, we repositioned the debate on the use of Burrell and Morgan’s framework when the object of study is gender, suggesting that the automatic application of this framework may reinforce hegemonic perspectives and, consequently, silence feminist, intersectional, or post-structuralist approaches. By introducing the metaphor of the “return to the closet,” we provide a lens for understanding how such silencing may occur even in contexts that claim to value pluralism, thereby connecting the argument to the critical literature in organizational and accounting studies. From a social perspective, we emphasized that the ways we conduct gender research shape which experiences and inequalities gain prominence within academic and institutional agendas. In this sense, by advocating for a multiparadigmatic posture, we highlight the expansion of spaces for voice and

recognition of historically marginalized subjects.

Finally, we understand that this debate opens avenues for a research agenda that moves beyond treating gender as a simple control “variable.” Some possibilities that emerge from the essay include: (i) empirical studies mapping how journals and conferences in the field have received gender-related work and which paradigms have been privileged or overlooked; (ii) investigations that articulate gender with race, class, and sexuality in organizations and specific professional fields (such as accounting), precisely to determine whether the epistemological “closet” persists in these spaces; and (iii) analyses of how institutional devices, such as calls for papers and evaluation criteria, may favor more functionalist and depoliticized approaches to gender. Exploring these issues may help determine the extent to which gender research in the organizational field is, in fact, expanding its critical repertoire or whether it still operates under constraints that keep it metaphorically “in the closet.”

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