



The life and times of a senior scholar: an interview with Jane Dutton

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this paper was to interview a senior scholar in the field of management.

Design/methodology/approach – A structured interview method was used.

Findings – Jane discussed her life and times, a fascinating recounting of history.

Originality/value – The paper provides a unique perspective on the career of a management scholar.

Keywords Gender, Case studies, Business schools, Family life, Diversity management, Business history

Paper type Viewpoint

Jane Dutton, currently a Professor at the University of Michigan Ross School of Business, combines her research in the fields of strategy, management and organization and psychology. After gaining her BA at Colby College in Maine, Dutton went on to Northwestern, where she gained her PhD. Before joining the University of Michigan, she was a member of the strategy faculty at New York University for six years. A member of the University of Michigan faculty since 1989, Dutton shares a joint appointment between the departments of Management and Organization at Ross School of Business and the department of Psychology. She has published over 85 articles and book chapters, and has written a book for managers: *Energize your Workplace: How to Build and Sustain High Quality Connections at Work*.

Her current research connects processes, more specifically high quality connections and identity processes, that build and increase capabilities and strengths of employees in organizations. Dutton's research, known as Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS), encompasses compassion and organizations, resilience and organizations, and energy and organizations. Her research papers have won her many awards ranging from the Best Paper Award for the *Academy of Management Journal* the *Administrative Science Quarterly* Award for Scholarly Contribution and The Breaking the Frame Award for the *Journal of Management Inquiry*. Dutton has been co-director of the Interdisciplinary Committee of Organizational Studies (ICOS) for ten years, which is the largest interdisciplinary community of organizational scholars of any university.

Recently, *Journal of Management History* Board member Karl Moore sat down with Jane Dutton.

We plan to have this as a regular feature where Karl Moore interviews Senior Scholars in the Business School Community about their life and times.

This is Karl Moore for the *Journal of Management History*. Today I am delighted to speak to Jane Dutton, who's a Senior Professor at the University of Michigan Ross School of Business.

Good afternoon Jane.



KM: Jane, where did you grow up? What did your family do for a living?

JD: I grew up about 20 minutes outside of Boston in the town of Whalen, Massachusetts. My dad was a salesman and my mom was a stay-at-home mom.

KM: Where did you go to college?

JD: I went to Colby College – a small liberal arts college in Maine.

KM: Where did you go to after Colby?

JD: I worked as a Research Assistant at the University of Maine. At Colby, I was a reluctant sociology major and, looking back, I can see the imprinting that happened. I had a great professor, Tom Morrione, who had been a student of Herbert Blumer and I can still hear echoes of his voice of how he saw society which affects a lot of the work that I do, still.

KM: Where did you go to graduate school?

JD: I went to Northwestern University and only applied to one PhD program in Organizational Behavior. I went to the Kellogg School of Management and I only packed my summer clothes thinking I would only stay for the summer and, when I decided that a PhD wasn't for me and I got hooked.

KM: What did you do your PhD on? What was your thesis topic?

JD: My thesis was on trying to understand how issues got on the strategic agenda of firms. I did a qualitative historical study of 12 strategic issues over a 12-year time period, trying to understand the process of agenda-building in organizations.

Even though I was an organizational behavior PhD, I've always been really interested in these issues of strategy – how the everyday things that happen on the ground affect how resources get allocated.

KM: Where did you go after your PhD?

JD: I went to New York University, where I met my husband. There were only two students in the program and we got married and had our first child then. He went in a dual career situation at Columbia and I was at NYU. The whole time that I've been doing this career, I've been in this dual career. Two academics in the same field, trained exactly the same. It's also very important to say that I've had children right from the start too.

KM: Where's your husband at these days?

JD: He's at Michigan. They actually hired us as a couple. I was in the strategy department at NYU and he was in the management department. Michigan recruited us as a married couple with one position in the psychology department, one position in the business school, and, then, they split each of them. So, we were hired to be the bridge between psychology and the business school.

KM: So, married and having kids right away early in your career. Was that a fair bit of trouble back in that day?

JD: It was a challenge. At the time, the senior faculty was concerned that we weren't going to be serious, dedicated scholars, having kids. It was in the late seventies, early eighties, so, at that time, it was rare to actually be able to make it with a dual career and to have kids.

KM: So, you moved to Michigan. Did you get a break from the tenure clock having children?

JD: No.

KM: Today, women do.

JD: Now they would, but I didn't. But, I've done it pretty unconventionally. Even though it never looks like I've taken a non-traditional path, I've used what discretion I could have in renegotiating my contract at various times throughout. Most of the women of my age group have done the same thing, but no one talks about it. It was sort of below the radar.

KM: Do you think it's a lot easier for women today?

JD: Not at all. Institutions have provided more flexibility, but until they change the timing of the tenure clock, it comes right at the wrong time.

KM: Well, at McGill, when a woman has a child, you get a year off the tenure clock. It takes a year off and gets a year off the clock.

JD: We have the same thing, for both men and women.

KM: Are men taking it?

JD: Not really, no. In Michigan, we only have 23 percent of the faculty that are women and most of them are concentrated in "the soft" area. I hope to come back in 20 years and see a changed demography in business schools.

KM: Do you think that that helps young men being better fathers and husbands?

JD: Yeah, and I just think the argument for inclusion is about diversity of ideas and diversity of paradigms. Beyond the work-family perspective, I just think business problems could be reframed if we have more of female-informed kinds of perspectives in the workplace.

I've been studying compassion for the last 12 years and that is sort of traditionally seen as more of a female thing. As long as we continue to be in organizations where there's competition and pain, compassion is and always was seen very much as a girl kind topic.

KM: Starting with your thesis and looking at strategic decision making – how has your research evolved since then? Do you see a straight line or did things come along and opportunities arise?

JD: I saw it as a straight line and then I saw a major disjuncture. Even though I described my path as somewhat untraditional, I got tenure and I got promoted and all that kind of thing and then, I looked at my work and it had no meaning. So, I was doing it successfully but I didn't think that it was meaningful.

KM: Was this a midlife crisis? Were you sitting there in your office at Michigan going, "I'm a full professor, I got it all, but I'm not satisfied by what I'm doing."

JD: It wasn't that abrupt. For about two years, it was a lot of questioning, depression, talking about leaving the profession and asking "What's wrong with this picture?" Everything was so favorable on the outside but I felt so awful on the inside.

I am so excited about my work now and I have been the last 12 years and it's mostly due to this movement – this reframing that we're calling positive organizational scholarship.

KM: How did you come on to it?

JD: Well it wasn't just me. I'm a field researcher and I was always out talking to people and I felt that certain things weren't being talked about. So, my interest in compassion was from seeing so much pain in the workplace and no one talking about it.

So, I started with Peter Frost – this wonderful guy. He and I made this commitment in 1998 that we wanted to see more articles on compassion.

I was doing this work at Michigan and people couldn't really connect it to core business issues. After 9/11 happened, compassion went from the sidelines to center stage. We got all kinds of opportunities with the *Harvard Business Review* and we did a number of research articles.

A number of different things coalesced to help us to have the courage to say that we thought leadership management scholarship was leaving out things that were so fundamentally important to the human condition and to creating organizations that were good in many different ways.

KM: You're taking a risk by going to something that's moving, but you're kind of leaving behind the things that created your success and reputation. Was it because you were senior enough that you could afford to do that? You also know that you're a good researcher – it's not as if you're not going to produce something. Was it because of that that you had the safety to step out?

JD: I don't think it was very rational, but I think it was easier for me to do it because I was protected. It was a story very much of what tenure is supposed to do: to give you license to take risks about the things you really care about. It really felt like a change in my entire mindset about life.

KM: So, it's kind of spilled over into how you live your family life and your private life as well.

JD: What's so exciting is that we're part of a center now and we have scholars all over the world that define themselves this way – a handbook, *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Organizational Scholarship*, with 85 chapters that has just been showcased at this academy.

I think of myself as one of the midwives who is helping to birth this alternative perspective that is an enrichment of the perspective we currently have. It gives you very different ways of thinking about innervating. It is small moves in organizations that actually unlock resources from within the individual, the dyad, the group and the organization. Small moves in the quality of relationships between people builds capacity and changes trajectory of possibility for an individual, a group or an organization.

Teaching for the first 15 years, I was doing fine, but I didn't have a point of view that I really felt was making a difference for people. I'm 60 this year and I am proudest of being part of a conversation that is creating really useful tools and perspectives that people can use tomorrow and for the organizations that they're part of.

KM: What does the next ten years hold for Jane?

JD: A lot more co-creation with others about ways to bring this knowledge into the world of practice. We need to be much more creative about the kinds of knowledge products that we can distribute on the web. I hope, over the next ten years, to be part of various innovative efforts to have impact through the creation of new kinds of knowledge products that call forth the best and that create capacity and resources for human groups.

KM: So, no thought of retiring?

JD: There's the constant parallel thought of retirement. I feel like this job is really demanding yet really rewarding

KM: Okay, so you can't do this a day a week, though.

JD: Part time for me is going from seven days a week to five and a half or something like that. It's very consuming partly because I love it. When it's time for me to step out and do other roles that are important, I'll do it.

KM: Have you ever thought of being dean?

JD: No. I've been asked.

KM: Why not?

JD: I'm really good at believing in others – I'm going to have my biggest impact from my doctoral students and, if I were dean, I wouldn't be able to have that form of impact.

KM: We talked about the past, the present, the future, your research dreams, a bit about the role of women – how it's changed– so, anything else would be interesting?

JD: If I think about thriving moments or flourishing as a scholar, the most important things I've learned are about creating micro-communities that are like healthy gardens in which you can grow. The positive organizational scholarship is an example of a micro-community that is deeply generative.

I'm always encouraging this with our doctoral students – for example, when I did work with Peter, we had a compassion lab. It's really helpful to think beyond institutions – like the Ross School of Business or my department – both of which are wonderful but aren't enough to sustain me at my best.

It's really important for people to think about creating small relational worlds in which they can grow stronger, better etc.

KM: So, not everybody is going to be a growth person in your life.

JD: We are hardwired and our bodies detect when we are with others that are growing as well. Our bodies are really good detectors that feel the opening that happens – whether it's the opening of the heart – it's actually the opening of the mind. This is actually something to that I end up teaching a lot about.

KM: This has been Karl Moore of the Desautels Faculty of Management at McGill University for the *Journal of Management History*. Today I have had the considerable privilege of speaking with senior scholar Jane Dutton, from the Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan.

About the author

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