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Introducing Men in Non-Traditional Occupations

Introduction

This book is about men who serve and care. In other words, it focuses on men who enter what have been identified as ‘feminine’ occupations. These are occupations that are traditionally held by women and which are notable for requiring feminine skills and attributes (for example, sensitivity, service, nurturance and beauty) that society normally attributes to women (Heilman, 1997; Hochschild, 1983). It explores specific themes that are key to understanding men’s experience in these roles – identity, visibility and emotions – and sets out the results of a recent research project based in Australia and the UK on men working in four ‘non-traditional’ occupational groups: nursing, primary school teaching, librarianship and flight attendance. The study addressed career issues (for example motivations, aspirations), implications of men’s ‘token’ status for experiences in the organization, perceptions of gender differences in occupational practices (specifically in terms of performances of service and emotional labour) and how men manage potential mismatch between gender and occupational identity.

Evidence suggests continuing and strong ‘sex typing’ of jobs with built-in assumptions concerning their suitability for women or men (Acker, 1990). Occupations are consequently labelled as masculine or feminine and carry gender-linked associations concerning the skills required for effective performance (Fletcher, 2003; Williams, 1995). Such skills and attributes are then hierarchically arranged in that occupations that carry power and influence are seen to require attributes associated with men while those lacking power and authority become associated with women – so preserving the gender order (Ely and Padavic, 2007). The prevalence of these associations can be seen in the
high levels of gender segregation by occupational groups. In the UK, for example, 84 per cent of service workers and 81 per cent of administrative and secretarial staff are women, while 92 per cent of skilled trades, 84 per cent of machine operatives and 66 per cent of managers and senior officials are men (EOC, 2006). In fact, a recent report by the EOC (2006) has indicated that over 60 per cent of occupations are performed mainly by men or by women.

Despite this, there has been a trend for men and women to move into gender-atypical areas (Hakim, 2000). For example, men now account for 9 per cent of all nurses in Australia (AIHW, 2007), while the figure in the UK is currently 10.9 per cent (Information Centre for Health and Social Care, 2008). However, while the proportion of women moving into ‘male’ jobs has increased, there has been a slower movement of men into traditionally ‘female’ jobs – perhaps reflective of the sacrifices in both pay and status, as well as the possibility of encountering disapproval from family and peers, that can accompany these career decisions. So while there is extensive literature on women who have previously been excluded from ‘male’ jobs and who have now moved into these male-dominated occupations (e.g. Cross and Bagilhole, 2002; Kanter, 1977; Simpson, 1997, 2000), with a few notable exceptions (e.g. Lupton, 2000, 2006; Sargent, 2001; Williams, 1993) relatively little research has been conducted on the small but growing number of men who perform what could be seen as ‘women’s work’.

This absence may not only reflect the lower numbers of men who ‘cross over’ into female-dominated occupations, but also a tendency, until recently, for research on gender and work to focus on women. This gap has been partly redressed by recent work on the dynamics of masculinity (e.g. Collinson and Hearn, 1994; Connell, 1995, 2000; Kerfoot and Knights, 1993). These dynamics are particularly highlighted within the context of work and organizations which, as important arenas for the definition of gender, help produce, as we have seen above, characterizations of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ work. Such characterizations carry strong implications for occupants of non-traditional posts. For example, token women can be severely disadvantaged by their minority status through isolation and negative stereotyping (Kanter, 1977; Simpson, 1997, 2000) while, as some studies of male nurses have indicated (Floge and Merrill, 1986; Heikes, 1991), some positive career outcomes can accrue for token men. However, the fragmentary literature on men in non-traditional occupations means that little is known about the challenges they face in the organization and how they negotiate the