

Doing "Women's Work"

Men in Nontraditional
Occupations

RESEARCH ON MEN AND MASCULINITIES

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Men in Nontraditional
Occupations

Edited by Christine L. Williams



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Doing "Women's Work"

RESEARCH ON MEN AND MASCULINITIES SERIES

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Contemporary research on men and masculinity, informed by recent feminist thought and intellectual breakthroughs of women's studies and the women's movement, treats masculinity not as a normative referent but as a problematic gender construct. This series of interdisciplinary, edited volumes attempts to understand men and masculinity through this lens, providing a comprehensive understanding of gender and gender relationships in the contemporary world. Published in cooperation with the Men's Studies Association, a Task Group of the National Organization for Men Against Sexism.

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Finally, I am indebted to the contributors who devoted their time to this project. They displayed great professionalism and patience, making the process both enlightening and enjoyable for me.

Foreword

When I was a graduate student, I earned extra money teaching at a local nursery school. I was the only male teacher in the school, and I recall distinctly the reaction of one of the childrens' parents to my presence on the first day of school. Brad was a quiet boy, shy and very sweet, who loved painting on the easels we had set up inside the classroom. The other boys would often enter school by tearing through the indoor play areas and go right for the gross motor areas we had set up outside. When Brad's parents saw me, their eyes lit up and they were overjoyed. "A male teacher," they sighed with relief. "Please get Brad away from the painting and out to the yard to play with the truck and the other boys," they pleaded. Their fear about the meaning of Brad's gender nonconformity was palpable, and I wondered if we would collaborate in the discouragement of a future artist. Interestingly, however, the fact that I was a man doing "women's work" did not dissuade them from their belief that I could rescue their son from a life of gender nonconformity.

A few years later, I was again confronted with these issues. I appeared in a television documentary about the ways men's roles were changing. One of the men interviewed was a nurse, whose mother was somewhat embarrassed about her son's occupation. When asked what her son did for a living, she would respond—without pausing for breath—"My son's a nurse and he's not gay."

I've been wrestling with similar issues ever since I undertook a documentary history of "pro-feminist" men in the United States (published in 1992 as *Against the Tide: Pro-Feminist Men in the United States, 1776-1990*). After all, aren't men who support women's equality actually men who are doing "women's work," agitating for gender equality in the public and private spheres? And the men whose work I documented had always faced questions about their manhood, from Frederick Douglass, who was branded a "political hermaphrodite" and an "Aunt Nancy Man" to contemporary men who are decried as "wimps" by those who think that support for women indicates insufficient gender identity.

I was reminded of these issues when I read Christine Williams's excellent book, *Gender Differences at Work* (1989), and I invited her to assemble the best research available in the social sciences that concerns itself with the question of gender nonconformity in occupations. Now, I am delighted to introduce *Doing "Women's Work": Men in Nontraditional Occupations* into the Sage Series on Men and Masculinities, because I believe that it presents a challenging set of articles that raise the issues of gender and the workplace in very significant ways.

Interestingly, the articles in this book suggest that crossing over—men doing "women's work"—cuts both ways. On the one hand, there are significant costs for the men, as their manhood and sexuality are often questioned as a result of occupational choices. On the other hand, there are often significant gains that they also receive, such as higher wages than women doing the same work. The articles in this book provide a nuanced and complex understanding of the ways in which occupations, as well as individuals, are gendered.

MICHAEL S. KIMMEL
Series Editor

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1

Introduction

CHRISTINE L. WILLIAMS

In most industrialized countries of the world, women are about as likely as men are to work in the paid labor force. Women make up more than 40% of the labor force in the United States, Canada, most countries of Europe, and Australia. But despite their growing representation among paid workers, only rarely do women work alongside men, performing the same tasks and functions in the same industries. Most jobs are very clearly divided into "men's work" and "women's work." In the United States, for example, more than half of all men or women would have to change major job categories in order to equalize the number of men and women in all jobs (Reskin & Hartmann, 1986). In Sweden, which has the highest rate of women's paid labor force participation in the world, sex segregation is even more extreme (Borchorst & Siim, 1987).

Occupational sex segregation is a major social problem for working women. Often it is credited with sustaining, if not causing the wage gap, the substantial difference in the salaries paid to full-time men and women workers. Women earn less than men in every country, largely because they are concentrated in "female" jobs that pay less than "male" jobs. Female jobs also tend to be less prestigious and autonomous than male jobs. It is no wonder, then, that feminists have worked hard to break down the barriers of segregation and encourage more women to enter traditionally defined male jobs.

Sociologists too have focused their analyses of occupational segregation on women's exclusion from predominately male jobs. Books have been written on practically every male-dominated occupation—from medicine and law to business management and the trades—to

determine what keeps women out of these fields, and to document the ongoing discrimination suffered by the few women who manage to break through the barriers. Indeed, most of what we know about occupational segregation is based on these studies of women's experiences in male jobs (e.g., Epstein, 1981; Kanter, 1977; Reskin & Roos, 1990; Stiehm, 1989).

But looking at segregation as something that happens only to women gives us only a partial picture. Occupational sex segregation is a two-way street: It is just as important to understand what keeps men out of female jobs as it is to understand what keeps women out of male jobs. And the fact is that men are even less likely than women to aspire to and work in gender-atypical jobs. While the proportions of women in several male-dominated jobs have dramatically increased over the past 20 years, predominately female jobs have changed their sex compositions very little, if at all (Jacobs, 1989; Reskin & Roos, 1990).

Yet very few people have examined why men are vastly underrepresented in traditionally female jobs, and what happens to the few men who do "cross over." This collection of essays is one of the first attempts to systematically examine these questions. It brings together research from a variety of disciplines to document and explain the social and economic forces that sustain the exclusion of men from predominantly female jobs.

Bringing men into our analysis of segregation has the potential to transform our sociological understanding of how gender operates in the work world. For too long, the study of occupations has been conducted with a gender-neutral framework. Sociologists and economists typically have assumed that capitalism creates occupational slots, indifferent to who fills what positions. Conservative theorists have argued that because men and women are socialized differently, they are suited to different types of work, hence women predominate in the more nurturing, expressive jobs, whereas men are concentrated in jobs that require more technical proficiency and decision-making ability (e.g., Parsons & Bales, 1955; Simpson & Simpson, 1969). Other, more radical theorists have claimed that patriarchy, rather than socialization, accounts for women's concentration in lesser-paying and lower status jobs (e.g., Eisenstein, 1979; Hartmann, 1976).

Both of these positions are inadequate because, as several of the essays in this volume show, occupations are structured with the particular gender of the laborer in mind. In other words, the positions themselves are not gender-neutral but have built into them assumptions

about the kind of workers likely to be employed in them (Acker, 1990, 1992; Baron, 1991).

One of the clearest examples of this "gendering" of occupations is the medical division of labor between doctors and nurses. Prior to this modern division, both men and women performed diagnostic, curative techniques as well as caregiving functions (although on very different clienteles). Separating these functions involved barring women from schools of medicine, and excluding men from nursing programs. In other words, assumptions about gender were built into the elaboration of these two separate professions. Similar developments occurred in the history of secretarial work, teaching, retail trade, and certain types of factory work: Jobs were developed for women, based on cultural assumptions of women's nature and their proper place in society (Baron, 1991; Davies, 1982; Kessler-Harris, 1990; Reverby, 1987; Vicinus, 1985).

The man who crosses over into a female-dominated occupation upsets these gender assumptions embedded in the work. Almost immediately, he is suspected of not being a "real man": There must be something wrong with him ("Is he gay? Effeminate? Lazy?") for him to be interested in this kind of work. If these popular prejudices are not enough to push him out of his occupation, they will certainly affect how he manages his gender identity on a daily basis. Men in these occupations often emphasize their masculinity and attempt to distance themselves from their female colleagues, as a way to legitimize their working in female jobs (Williams, 1989).

Women who "cross over" are also subject to suspicions that they are not "real women," but they are far more constrained in how they respond to these prejudices (Spencer & Podmore, 1987). Emphasizing their femininity (whatever that may mean) will have limited benefit for women in an occupational structure defined and controlled by men. But for men in women's jobs, masculinity can be a boon, because qualities associated with men are more highly regarded than those associated with women, even in predominantly female jobs. This is partly because men tend to monopolize positions of power in these occupations, and they can make decisions about employees that favor other men. But also, this fact reflects a widespread cultural prejudice that men are simply better than women. Thus, men are rewarded for emphasizing their difference from women; women are typically penalized for any difference they (willingly or not) represent from men.

The essays in this collection document the consequences of our societal preference for men: The men who work in predominantly

female occupations receive greater pay and benefits than their female counterparts. But the essays also show that despite this privileged status, it is still quite rare for men to cross over into these jobs, and the few men who do cross over usually don't stay very long. While popular prejudices might account for why some men leave these jobs, many leave after a short period of time to take jobs that are more "appropriate" for men. In most cases, this will mean an increase in pay and prestige, as jobs that are predominantly male are more highly rewarded than those that are predominantly female.

Looking at occupations as gendered institutions can help us make sense of why so few men work in nontraditional jobs, and why those who do are generally so successful. Research has shown that women cannot simply "fill in" slots intended for male workers; this collection also shows that men cannot simply "fill in" slots intended for women. People do not check their gender at the factory gates or office door; whether they are men or women will greatly affect how they are treated in the workplace. Occupations are not gender-neutral. As several of these essays indicate, jobs are transformed when the gender of the worker changes.

In addition to broadening our understanding of the process of occupational sex segregation, the study of men working in predominantly female jobs also informs the more overtly political project of ending segregation. As I have already mentioned, most of the energy devoted to breaking down segregation has focused on getting women into male-dominated fields. Young women today are being told that to obtain decent salaries and respectability, they need to take classes in mathematics and science, and eventually enter "men's jobs." This advice is rarely accompanied by encouragement to young men to enter "women's jobs." But, clearly, eliminating segregation would require equalizing the proportion of men and women in all jobs, not just the jobs that are currently male-dominated. Of course, this is all very complicated, because once men enter female-dominated jobs, they tend to rise to the top, reproducing gender hierarchy within jobs. So ending segregation is no simple matter. But if we do not work to change the gender composition of all jobs—which means both encouraging women to be more like men and encouraging men to be more like women—we run the risk of reproducing the sexist devaluation of everything female/feminine, making men the ultimate measure of success.

The essays in this collection all indicate just how difficult it will be to get men into predominantly female jobs. In "Across the Great Divide,"

Harriet Bradley examines the very limited circumstances under which men have historically crossed over into female-dominated jobs. She points out that there are far more examples of occupations changing from male to female than from female to male. A radical transformation in female jobs is usually necessary before men are attracted to them in any great number. This is a recurring theme throughout many of the essays: Crossing over does not necessarily undermine the system of occupational segregation, or the sexism that underlies it. Rather, as Bradley indicates, the large-scale movement of men or women into gender-atypical occupations is typically produced by some crisis or industrial change that leaves the system of gender hierarchy intact.

Men's reluctance to enter female-dominated jobs is usually attributed to their lesser pay. Paula England and Melissa Herbert assess the claim that men who work in predominantly female jobs earn less than those employed in more traditional lines of work. They find that there is indeed an economic penalty suffered by both men and women for working in jobs that employ mostly women, and that men suffer a greater wage loss than women (compared to what they could be making in male jobs). The wage disparity between men's and women's work is not due to characteristics intrinsic to female-dominated work. Rather, they conclude that the economic difference in pay is due to the cultural devaluation of women—and overvaluation of men. In their view, achieving economic equality between men and women would require a radical reassessment of the cultural value placed on "women's work," which is precisely the political strategy endorsed by the "comparable worth" movement.

The next two essays examine the careers of men who aspire to and enter predominately female occupations. Jerry Jacobs applies his concept of "revolving doors" to analyze the mobility patterns of men into and out of female-dominated jobs. His research demonstrates that, while very few men aspire to or work in female jobs, the few that do express interest in pursuing these jobs, or actually enter them, do not stay very long. He suggests that a system of lifelong social control produces a revolving door for those men who try to cross over: They are typically channeled and rechanneled out of these jobs, and into jobs that are more male-dominated.

L. Susan Williams and Wayne J. Villemez look closely at the characteristics of men who work in female-dominated jobs. They found that while some men aspired to these jobs, others entered these jobs through a "trap door": They intended to pursue more traditional male careers

but for some reason they ended up in predominantly female jobs. Also, like Jacobs, Williams and Villemez note that the few men who do cross over rarely stay very long: Some men find they are barred from obtaining female jobs, despite their aspirations; others are escalated to better jobs after only a brief tenure in nontraditional areas of work. Their study provides a nuanced view of how the occupational structure operates in a gendered way to restrict individual choice.

Kaisa Kauppinen-Toropainen and Johanna Lammi provide a comparative perspective by examining case studies of men in female jobs in the Nordic countries. Their research confirms that occupational sex segregation is indeed a cross-cultural phenomenon, although the specific occupations labeled male or female can and do vary. In general, though, those occupations that involve direct personal caretaking (particularly of people who are either very young or very old) tend to be female-dominated. These jobs also tend to be lesser paid, of lower status, and less autonomous than jobs that are more traditionally held by men. Kauppinen-Toropainen and Lammi review several studies on the reasons for men's reluctance to enter traditionally female jobs, and the various satisfactions and dissatisfactions men experience while working in selected female jobs.

These first five essays provide the social, economic, and cultural context for understanding men's experiences in nontraditional occupations. The essays that follow document the actual experiences of men in four specific female-dominated occupations: elementary school teaching, secretarial work, unpaid elder care, and striptease dancing. These case studies provide rich accounts of the dynamic ways that gender differences are reproduced at work, and how men's advantages in the workplace are sustained even when they cross over. Men use various strategies to maintain their masculinity in these occupations, often transforming the work in the process.

Jim Allan discusses the advantages and disadvantages that accrue to men in elementary school teaching, focusing on hiring decisions. He shows that even though there is a preference for hiring men teachers in primary grades, this can place men in an untenable situation vis-à-vis their male supervisors and female colleagues: While their male bosses expect them to engage in male bonding activities with them, this sort of behavior places them at odds with their female colleagues. Similarly, if male teachers ally themselves with the women teachers, they are perceived as a threat by the men in charge. Allan argues that men must negotiate the meaning of their masculinity in the workplace, navigating

between the extremes represented by others' expectations of them. He suggests that leaving the occupation is one of the ways that men respond to these conflicting demands, which obviously leaves the gendered structure of the occupation intact.

Rosemary Pringle examines additional ways that occupations engender differences in male and female employees. Her study of male secretaries shows that even when men and women are employed to do the same tasks, they are rarely categorized together as sharing the same occupation. However, in the few instances she did encounter of men categorized as secretaries, she found that they redefined their work to accommodate their sense of maleness. In her view, occupational integration holds very little promise for challenging gender inequality. Occupational sex segregation is a symptom of men's desire to differentiate from women and dominate them, and it is this deeper problem that must be addressed before workplace equality between men and women can be achieved.

The next essay, by Jeffrey Applegate and Lenard Kaye, examines an unpaid female occupation: caring for the elderly. Drawing on interviews with men who have primary responsibility for caring for their elderly relatives, Applegate and Kaye show that men can and do develop the skills and personality traits normally associated with women. Nevertheless, their research indicates that the ideology of masculinity remains viable, despite this apparent transformation in the men. That is, even though these men are engaged in nurturing and expressive tasks, they do not question the traditional division between male and female roles. Their study indicates that the system of gender differentiation is apparently resilient to the kind of work men and women actually perform, suggesting once again that occupational integration will not solve the problem of gender inequality.

The final essay, by Richard Tewksbury, examines an underground occupation, striptease dancing. Tewksbury studied four all-male stripping troupes who perform for male audiences. Using a dramaturgical approach, he argues that when men perform this traditionally female role, the role is transformed—not the men. New elements of masculinity are incorporated into the role that enable men to preserve a sense of themselves as masculine and powerful.

Taken as a group, the essays in this collection do not bode well for the future of gender equality. They convince me that occupational integration is no panacea to the economic problems of women. Without addressing the underlying problem—our cultural overvaluation of men