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Gendered Jobs and Gendered Workers

A 1959 article in *Library Journal* entitled "The Male Librarian—An Anomaly?" begins this way:

> My friends keep trying to get me out of the library. . . . Library work is fine, they agree, but they smile and shake their heads benevolently and charitably, as if it were unnecessary to add that it is one of the dullest, most poorly paid, unrewarding, off-beat activities any man could be consigned to. If you have a heart condition, if you're physically handicapped in other ways, well, such a job is a blessing. And for women there's no question library work is fine; there are some wonderful women in libraries and we all ought to be thankful to them. But let's face it, no healthy man of normal intelligence should go into it.[1]

Male librarians still face this treatment today, as do other men who work in predominantly female occupations. In 1990, my local newspaper featured a story entitled "Men Still Avoiding Women's Work" that described my research

on men in nursing, librarianship, teaching, and social work. Soon afterwards, a humor columnist for the same paper wrote a spoof on the story that he titled, "Most Men Avoid Women's Work because It Is Usually So Boring."[2] The columnist poked fun at hairdressing, librarianship, nursing, and babysitting—in his view, all "lousy" jobs requiring low intelligence and a high tolerance for boredom. Evidently people still wonder why any "healthy man of normal intelligence" would willingly work in a "woman's occupation."

In fact, not very many men do work in these fields, although their numbers are growing. In 1990, over 500,000 men were employed in these four occupations, constituting approximately 6 percent of all registered nurses, 15 percent of all elementary school teachers, 17 percent of all librarians, and 32 percent of all social workers. These percentages have fluctuated in recent years: As table 1 indicates, librarianship and social work have undergone slight declines in the proportions of men since 1975; teaching has remained somewhat stable; while nursing has experienced noticeable gains. The number of men in nursing actually doubled between 1980 and 1990; however, their overall proportional representation remains very low.

Very little is known about these men who "cross over" into these nontraditional occupations. While numerous books have been written about women entering male-dominated occupations, few have asked why men are underrepresented in traditionally female jobs.[3] The underlying assumption in most research on gender and work is that, given a free choice, both men and women would work in predominantly male occupations, as they are generally better paying and more prestigious than predominantly female occupations. The few men who will-

Table 1
Men in the "Women's Professions": Number (in thousands) and Distribution of Men Employed in the Occupations, Selected Years

Profession	*1975*	*1980*	*1990*
Registered Nurses			
Number of men	28	46	92
% men	3.0	3.5	5.5
Elementary Teachers[a]			
Number of men	194	225	223
% men	14.6	16.3	14.8
Librarians			
Number of men	34	27	32
% men	18.9	14.8	16.7
Social Workers			
Number of men	116	134	179
% men	39.2	35.0	31.8

SOURCES: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Employment and Earnings* 38, no. 1 (January 1991), table 22 (employed civilians by detailed occupation), p. 185; vol. 28, no. 1 (January 1981), table 23 (employed persons by detailed occupation), p. 180; vol. 22, no. 7 (January 1976), table 2 (employed persons by detailed occupation), p. 11.

[a]Excludes kindergarten teachers.

ingly "cross over" must be, as the 1959 article suggests, "anomalies."

Popular culture reinforces the belief that these men are "anomalies." Men are rarely portrayed working in these occupations, and when they are, they are represented in extremely stereotypical ways. For example, in the 1990 movie *Kindergarten Cop,* muscle-man Arnold Schwarzenegger played a detective forced to work undercover as a kindergarten teacher; the otherwise competent Schwarzenegger was completely overwhelmed by the five-year-old children in his class. A television series in the early

1990s about a male elementary school teacher (*Drexell's Class*) stars a lead character who *hates children*. The implication of these popular shows is that any "real man" would have nothing to do with this kind of job; indeed, a "real man" would be incapable of working in a "woman's profession."

This book challenges these stereotypes about men who do "women's work" through case studies of men in four predominantly female occupations: nursing, elementary school teaching, librarianship, and social work. I show that men maintain their masculinity in these occupations, despite the popular stereotypes. Moreover, male power and privilege is preserved and reproduced in these occupations through a complex interplay between gendered expectations embedded in organizations, and the gendered interests workers bring with them to their jobs. Each of these occupations is "still a man's world" even though mostly women work in them.

I selected these four professions as case studies of men who do "women's work" for a variety of reasons. First, because they are so strongly associated with women and femininity in our popular culture, these professions highlight and perhaps even exaggerate the barriers and advantages men face when entering predominantly female environments. Second, they each require extended periods of educational training and apprenticeship, requiring individuals in these occupations to be at least somewhat committed to their work (unlike those employed in, say, clerical or domestic work). Therefore I thought they would be reflective about their decisions to join these "nontraditional" occupations, making them "acute observers" and, hence, ideal informants about the sort of

social and psychological processes I am interested in describing.[4] Third, these occupations vary a great deal in the proportion of men working in them. Although my aim was not to engage in between-group comparisons, I believed that the proportions of men in a work setting would strongly influence the degree to which they felt accepted and satisfied with their jobs.[5]

I traveled across the United States conducting in-depth interviews with seventy-six men and twenty-three women who work in nursing, teaching, librarianship, and social work. Like the people employed in these professions generally, those in my sample were predominantly white (90 percent). Their ages ranged from twenty to sixty-six, and the average age was thirty-eight. I interviewed women as well as men to gauge their feelings and reactions to men's entry into "their" professions. Respondents were intentionally selected to represent a wide range of specialties and levels of education and experience. I interviewed students in professional schools, "front line" practitioners, administrators, and retirees, asking them about their motivations to enter these professions, their on-the-job experiences, and their opinions about men's status and prospects in these fields.[6]

The link between masculinity and work has only recently become a topic for sociological investigation. Although many books have been written about male workers, most contain no analysis of gender. They may tell us a great deal about the meanings, purposes, and aspirations that characterize men's working lives, but not how masculinity relates to these general concerns. On the other hand, most of the research that does address gender and work has focused on women and on their struggles

to achieve economic equality with men. Women currently constitute 45 percent of the paid labor force, but they continue to lag behind men in earnings and organizational power.[7] Several books and articles now document this economic disparity and explain it in terms of the different meanings, purposes, and aspirations that women *qua women* experience in the labor force. In other words, in the sociology of work, gender seems to be something that affects only women, and affects them only negatively.

To explain how and why a woman's gender impedes her economic success, two general theoretical approaches have been developed. On the one hand, conventional theories—such as human capital or status attainment theory—attribute women's lesser achievement in the workplace to the gender characteristics that women bring with them to work. According to this perspective, women cannot compete as successfully as men for the best jobs either because they were not properly socialized to acquire highly valued worker characteristics (such as aggressiveness and ambition), or because they have competing household responsibilities. If men are more successful, this argument goes, that is because they have superior skills or they have made better organizational choices.[8]

Feminist researchers have generally rejected this perspective, claiming instead that women's lesser achievement is due to gender discrimination and sexual harassment, not to women's supposed deficiencies compared to men.[9] In fact, several studies have demonstrated that women and men are not treated equally at work, even if they possess the same qualifications and are hired to perform the same job. In nearly every occupation, women encounter barriers when they try to enter the most lucra-

tive and prestigious specialties. A "glass ceiling" prevents them from reaching the top positions.[10] From this perspective, the organizational dynamics—and not the "feminine" attributes of women—result in women's lesser pay and status in the work world.

One of the most important studies documenting this organizational inequality is Rosabeth Moss Kanter's *Men and Women of the Corporation*. In this book, Kanter argues that the barriers women face in predominantly male occupations can be attributed to their *numerical* minority in organizations. Although men and women may have similar qualifications, the organizational structure nevertheless promotes gender differentiation through the mechanism of tokenism. She maintains that because all tokens "stand out" from the dominant group and receive more than their fair share of attention, they are therefore subjected to stereotyping, role entrapment, and various other forms of marginalization.

Kanter based her theory of tokenism on a study of women in a major U.S. corporation, but she argued that the harassment and discrimination women encountered there would affect a member of *any* token minority group. This is a problematic assumption, but her exclusive focus on women precluded a systematic analysis of this claim. However, Kanter did provide two individual examples of tokens who were male to illustrate her point; rather fortuitously, one of these was the case of a male nurse:

> One male nursing student whom I interviewed reported that he thought he would enjoy being the only man in a group of women. Then he found that he engendered a great deal of hostility and that he was teased every time he failed to live up to a manly image—e.g., if he was vague or subjective in speech.

> The *content* of interaction when men are tokens may appear to give them an elevated position, but the process is still one of role encapsulation and treating tokens as symbols. Deference can be a patronizing reminder of difference, too.[11]

Token dynamics clearly do affect the men who do "women's work." Like Kanter, I found that when men enter nursing and other predominantly female professions, they are treated differently from women: They tend to receive preferential consideration in hiring; they are channeled into certain male-identified specialties; and they are pressured to perform specific job tasks that are identified as "manly." But unlike women tokens, men apparently *benefit* from this special treatment: As Kanter herself points out, men are "elevated" by their token status. They make more money than women (on average) in each of these occupations, and they are greatly overrepresented in administrative positions. The theory of tokenism, developed to explain discrimination against women in nontraditional occupations, ironically does not account for the very different consequences of minority status for men and women.

Kanter's study is a good example of how the exclusive focus on women in the research on gender and work has resulted in an incomplete theoretical picture of how the work world discriminates against women. To fully understand the source of women's disadvantages in the workplace, it is essential to examine the source of men's advantages. Shifting the focus to men therefore is not intended to abandon the concerns of women, but rather to implicate men in the overall pattern of discrimination against women. However, including men's experiences in the analysis of gender and work does substantially alter the research questions: Instead of asking, "What are the

deficiencies of women?" or "What are the barriers to women?" the questions now become, "Why is gender a liability for women but an asset for men?" and "What are the mechanisms that propel men to more successful careers?"

To address these questions, I rely on a theory of "gendered organizations."[12] According to this perspective, cultural beliefs about masculinity and femininity are built into the very structure of the work world. Organizational hierarchies, job descriptions, and informal workplace practices all contain deeply embedded assumptions about the gender and gendered characteristics of workers. These beliefs about gender—which are often unstated and unacknowledged—limit women's opportunities while enhancing men's occupational success. In other words, work organizations contain built-in advantages for men that are often unnoticed; indeed, they seem like natural or inevitable characteristics of all organizations.

On the most basic level, work organizations are gendered in that employers prefer to hire workers with few if any nonwork distractions. This is not a gender-neutral preference: Men fit this description far more easily than women, because of the unequal division of household labor in most families. Joan Acker writes,

> The closest the disembodied worker doing the abstract job comes to a real worker is the male worker whose life centers on his full-time, life-long job, while his wife or another woman takes care of his personal needs and his children.[13]

Women's careers often suffer because work organizations typically do not accommodate their additional household responsibilities.[14]

This organizational preference for men exists even in

the "women's professions." An Arizona nursing director who is in charge of hiring the staff of the emergency room explained why men in his hospital are overrepresented in the best positions:

> I've sometimes stopped to wonder whether there is a little bias there. I'm not sure. . . . The men sometimes tend to be a little more stable than the women. A lot of the men who work in the ER [emergency room] have really been here for quite a while. They're married; most have kids. When it's time to have a baby, they're not the ones who take off. It's the same problem, it's really not a lot different than a lot of other professions.

Although organizations that employ nurses and members of the other "women's professions" often permit leaves-of-absence to tend to family responsibilities, no one is actually rewarded for taking this time off. Instead, those who demonstrate unconditional devotion to their work receive the best jobs, giving men an unfair advantage over women even in these "female" occupations.

There is a second, even more profound way that organizations are deeply gendered, and that is through the hierarchical division of labor. Gender segregation exists in nearly every organization and every occupation, with men occupying the best paying and most prestigious jobs, and the highest positions of organizational power.[15] In the United States, more than half of all men or women would have to change major job categories to equalize the proportions of men and women in all occupations. This overall degree of segregation has changed remarkably little over the past hundred years, despite radical transformations in the U.S. job market.[16] Technological

developments and management directives have created millions of new jobs and eliminated others, but the basic structure of the gendered division of labor has remained intact. Largely because of this division of labor, women earn far less than men: On average, women still receive less than seventy-five cents for every dollar earned by a man.[17]

According to the theory of gendered organizations, the division of labor by gender favors men because organizations value men and qualities associated with masculinity more highly than they value women. Organizational hierarchies reify the male standard, rewarding only those who possess putatively masculine characteristics with promotion to the best positions. This preference for masculinity seems to happen regardless of the proportional representation of men in an occupation.

In fact, the higher value placed on men and masculinity is especially evident in traditionally female professions, where men are the tokens. Men have been overrepresented in the top positions in these occupations ever since the nineteenth century, when women were first actively recruited into them. At that time, employers deliberately set aside jobs in administration and management for men because they believed that these positions required the job holder to be level-headed, impartial, technically proficient, and even aggressive.[18] All of these qualities were associated with white, middle-class masculinity. Black men and newly arriving immigrant men typically were not believed to possess these highly touted traits; they were definitely not among those recruited for the top positions. The middle-class white men who did enter these jobs were rewarded for their "masculine" qualities with higher salaries than women received. Also, men were

paid more because employers assumed that unlike women, these men needed extra money to support a dependent spouse and children.

Men still are overrepresented in the most prestigious and best-paying specialties in these occupations. Today, male nurses tend to specialize in certain "high tech" areas (such as intensive care and emergency room nursing) or in areas that demand a high degree of physical strength (such as psychiatric and orthopedic nursing), and they are overrepresented in administration. Men in elementary school teaching typically teach the upper grades (fourth through sixth), and they often supplement their teaching with coaching or administrative work. Male librarians concentrate in the high technology computer information specialties and administration, and they are more likely than female librarians to work in major academic and public libraries. And male social workers tend to work in corrections and in administration. Men are drawn to specialties associated with stereotypical masculine qualities, such as strength, technical proficiency and managerial ability. Indeed, in some organizations, these specialties have become all-male enclaves.

Many men entering these professions today anticipate working in these masculine enclaves. But others find themselves pressured into these specialties despite their inclinations otherwise. That is, some men who prefer to work in the more "feminine" specialties—such as pediatric nursing or children's librarianship—encounter inexorable pressures to "move up," a phenomenon I refer to as the "glass escalator effect." Like being on an invisible "up" escalator, men must struggle to remain in the lower (i.e., "feminine") levels of their professions.

Some organizations mandate this gender segregation through policies that prevent men from working in the

most female-identified specialties. For example, some hospitals bar male nurses from working in obstetrics and gynecology wards, and some school districts prohibit the hiring of men as kindergarten teachers.[19] These prohibitions are motivated in part by fears of men's sexuality: The assumption is that only men who are child molesters or sexual perverts would be drawn to these specialties. In these instances, gender is an overt part of the job description.

But often the pressures that move men into the more "masculine" specialties are more subtle than this, embedded in informal interactions that take place between men and their supervisors, co-workers, and clients. For instance, physicians occasionally ask male nurses their opinions on medical issues (practically unheard of among female nurses), and this can contribute to the promotion of the male nurses to supervisory positions.[20] Male supervisors sometimes share an interest in sports or other hobbies with their male employees which can lead to male bonding and camaraderie in the workplace, thereby enhancing men's chances for successful careers. Because most of the organizations that train and employ nurses, librarians, teachers, and social workers are "male-dominated," men are often in positions to make decisions that favor other men.

In addition to supervisors, women colleagues and clients often have highly gendered expectations of the men working in these professions that can contribute to men's advancement. For example, some men told me they were pushed into leadership positions by female colleagues, who believed men to be better able to represent their interests to male management. Even the negative stereotypes held by the public can sometimes escalate men into higher positions: A librarian working in the children's col-

lection of a public library made some parents uncomfortable (according to his supervisors), so he was transferred to the adult reference division—resulting in a promotion and an increase in pay. While some men may be uncomfortable with these expectations—and some probably leave these professions because of them—those who remain and conform to them are often rewarded with the higher status and pay this special treatment can bring.

Women who work in these professions are also constrained by beliefs about gender, but for women, others' beliefs about femininity and female sexuality tend to limit instead of enhance their professional opportunities. Women who work in these professions are expected to possess such feminine attributes as care-giving, service orientation, and sexual availability and attractiveness—all qualities associated with women's traditional domestic functions. These attributes are often emphasized in popular media portrayals of women in these occupations: Female nurses, librarians, social workers, and school teachers are typically represented as pseudo-wives, mothers, or unmarried daughters of their male bosses or supervisors, and they are often sexually fetishized in these roles. The perennially popular movie *It's a Wonderful Life* contrasts Donna Reed as happily married wife and mother with an image of her as a dowdy, spinster librarian, complete with tight bun, glasses, and nervous, repressed sexuality. Card shops and video stores contain myriad examples of women nurses portrayed as sexy nymphomaniacs or castrating battle-axes. These cultural representations filter into the actual practice of these jobs: Because many of the women in these occupations work under the direct control and supervision of heterosexual men, they are often subjected to sexual flirtations,

bosses' requests for nonwork favors, and outright sexual harassment.[21]

This is not to claim, however, that there is any necessary or inevitable connection between these jobs and femininity. Prior to the nineteenth century, when most teachers, nurses, and librarians were men, these occupations did not connote femininity and female sexuality as they do today. Moreover, many working in these jobs perform administrative or highly technical tasks that do not involve any so-called "feminine" qualities. Nevertheless, once gendered expectations are embedded in jobs, workers are assumed to possess the appropriate gendered attributes; they may even be evaluated on how well they conform to these expectations.[22] But because feminine qualities are devalued, by conforming to gendered expectations, a woman does not usually enhance her economic prospects within organizations. Engaging in heterosexual flirtations and affairs has been shown to be especially damaging to women's careers, even when women are willing participants.[23]

Organizations thus treat men and women very differently regardless of their proportional representation in an occupation. The workplace is not gender-neutral; it is a central site for the creation and reproduction of gender differences and gender inequality. Both men and women are constrained to act in certain ways by organizational hierarchies, job descriptions, and informal workplace practices that are based on deeply embedded assumptions about masculinity and femininity, but this social construction of gender favors men by rewarding them for the "masculine" qualities they are presumed to bring with them to the workplace.