

Feminisation, Professional Projects and Paradox

There is little doubt that many reforms have created new opportunities for women in the professions and such a statement is numerically supported by the sheer numbers of women entering previously male dominated areas such as law and management. Further evidence suggests that women are also being embraced as a means of feminising professional projects in qualitative ways, adding a soft dimension to the traditional professional image. Of course, both quantitative and qualitative moves towards professionalisation are supported by a fundamental economic logic. Women and women's ways have been linked to improved performance, increased productivity and a broadening of the customer base (Carvel, 2004; Gorman, 2005; Beckman and Phillips, 2005). The symbolic resource of 'woman' has become the newest source of advantage for contemporary professional projects. Yet, beneath these optimistic assumptions, the comparative experiences of a broad range of professional projects reveal the obstinate persistence of patterns of gendered exclusion, segmentation and stratification.

We explain this tension between realities and rhetorics within contemporary professions in the context of the complex, historically grounded patterns of masculine cultural projects which bind together processes of professionalisation, de-professionalisation and feminisation. In particular, gender emerges as a key resource shaping the origin, development and ultimate outcome of the professional project. At the most basic level, the sociography of an occupation including the proportion of female members it employs may be a relevant factor in accomplishing professionalisation as it could compromise the ability to win the support of the predominantly male elites which control established centres of power. This might explain why certain female dominated occupations have failed to fully professionalise; especially when they work in the confines of a state sponsored project (teaching) or under the formal authority of high status male dominated professions (nursing) (Bolton, 2007). Indeed, the mass entry of women may spell processes of de-professionalisation, even in the context of the established professions, as feminisation is connected with decreasing earnings and autonomy, salaried employment, elongated hierarchies and managerial supervision (Muzio and Bolton, 2006; Bolton and Muzio, 2007).

However, the relationship between gender and professionalism is a complex one, as feminisation can acquire a strategic significance and be deployed by certain sections to further their own professional project. In particular, as indicated by the case of the legal profession, the surplus generated by a rapidly expanding cohort of predominantly female salaried workers is supporting the income levels and occupational interests of a, predominantly, male elite of senior partners. Thus feminisation is being deployed as a strategic resource within the context of a masculine professional project as it allows elites to deflect the pressure of an increasingly hostile institutional and operational environment onto subordinate groups in the legal division of labour and to protect their own professional status and privileges through the effective de-professionalisation of whole sectors of the profession.

Equally interestingly, professional projects may offer an avenue for collective mobility for female occupations, such as human resource management. Here, professionalism, with its emphasis on rationality, performativity and competence (as well as with its opportunities for concerted action), can provide defensive mechanisms and

ideological resources which can enhance social capital and sustain favourable jurisdictional settlements in the organisation and in the broader political economy. It is not surprising, therefore, that it is the most feminised and consequently less prestigious areas of management which are at the forefront of professional projects in a clear attempt to escape the stigma of women's work.

Thus, in the processes and negotiations that surround professional projects, the fluid process of doing gender can assume a multiplicity of roles and functions and reveal several paradoxes; it can hinder successful professionalisation whilst also making it more appealing; it can trigger dynamics of de-professionalisation whilst also offering a defence mechanism for embattled professional elites. Yet, despite this fluidity, professional projects remain a masculine cultural project that repress, oppress and subordinate the feminine (Davies, 1996) as they attempt to attain and retain professional status according to the prevailing male paradigm. Whether this can be claimed to be an accident of patriarchy or a masculine project of exploitation and control, the exclusion/ inclusion of women has strategic significance for the unfolding of a professional project.

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Key Readings

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