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Challenging Professions: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Women's Professional Work

Critical analyses of the professions have been few and far between. The early literature, largely American, tended to define professions by listing the traits or attributes of particular occupations. Theorists such as Eliot Friedson (1973) later challenged this perspective, thus paving the way for more theoretical analyses that placed professions in the context of the larger stratification system (see Natalie J. Sokoloff, Black Women and White Women in the Professions, New York: Routledge, 1992). Most of these more recent contributions, however, have focused on class relations, with relatively little attention to the relationship between gender and professionalization. For their part, feminist researchers have tended to move away from the study of paid employment generally, and there have been only a limited number of new feminist studies of women in the professions (see for example, Kathryn McPherson, Bedside Matters, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1996; Natalie J. Sokoloff, Black Women and White Women in the Professions, New York: Routledge, 1992; Anne Witz, Professions and Patriarchy, London: Routledge, 1992). The collection of articles edited by Elizabeth Smyth, Sandra Acker, Paula Bourne, and Alison Prentice therefore comes as a welcome and timely contribution to those of us who still care about women and work; the material inequities in women’s lives, and the gendering of jobs and occupations. The authors of Challenging Professions were participants in an SSHRC-funded interdisciplinary network on women and professional education. The collection is the culmination of ongoing discussions of this group. On the whole touched by feminist scholarship, the authors seek to “pare away some of the mystique of professionalism, by putting particular professional groupings under
La révision et l'examen de leur genre et ses conséquences, dans divers endroits et sur le long terme. Le réseau, composé majoritairement de professeurs d'université, a entrepris ce projet avec un regard critique sur les revendications professionnelles d’expertise exclusive, le pouvoir d'une profession sur l'autre, la catégorie de demi-profession, et d'autres thèmes liés. Une critique attentive de la relation entre le mystère des professions, le contrôle et le pouvoir professionnel, et les relations de genre est en effet longtemps due. La promesse d'une approche fraîche de la concept de profession du passé est inspirante. J’ai donc abordé la collection avec enthousiasme.


Un problème est que la collection renferme des commentaires minutieusement recherchés et instructifs sur les vies et les carrières des femmes professionnels, mais nous ne nous éloignons pas des particularités de leurs vies. J’ai trouvé les chapitres de la troisième partie (notamment la discussion de Millar et Gidney sur les étudiantes médicales féminines, la recherche de Sandra Acker sur les éducatrices féminines, et la recherche de Linda Muzzin sur les pharmaciennes féminines), des articles qui dévarent du thème de la mobilité individuelle, plus intrigants. Le contenu substantiel de ces cas a conservé l’actualité dans ma mémoire pendant plusieurs semaines après lecture. Et je suis probablement confronté à des données utilisables pour enseigner des cours sur les femmes et le travail. Malgré tout, il reste que seulement un petit nombre d’articles dans la collection significativement avancent notre compréhension du contrôle professionnel, le processus de professionnalisation, et les intérêts sociaux, politiques et économiques qui ont façonné le processus. Enfin, dans certains cas d’études, les discussions de professionnalisation font peu de mention de lutte (ou même processus).

Importantement, en lisant de nombreux chapitres, j’ai commencé à ressentir une sensation de détachement et de distance à partir de ces femmes et leurs vies. Peut-être, cette distance est due à la présentation des auteurs de ces femmes. Claramente, le nombre de pièces (encore une fois, ceci est particulièrement évident dans les deux premiers sections) se concentre sur la carrière. En conséquence,
some women seem to be lacking in human dimension. While a dual roles approach to women and professions (that is, competing and conflicting demands of paid work and family) is clearly limited, feminist research has also taught us the importance of understanding women workers in the context of the totality of their lives. In overlooking the latter, the authors run the risk of relying on a traditional masculine framework in which to study women.

The portraits of professional women are furthermore limited insofar as they focus on gender identity and location, without much (adequate) mention of race, cultural background, citizenship status, and with a couple of exceptions, sexual-orientation. The class background of women medical students is highlighted in Millar and Gidney’s article, but is given only passing mention in most of the other pieces. Not only did the majority of the women come from privileged families, but in their professional capacities, they themselves represented the status quo (for example, Florence Murray and Violet Ryley). Admittedly, the editors attempt to address the neglect of these considerations in the introduction to the book. They state that while they aimed for as much diversity as possible, “we ourselves were not as diverse, as authors, than we might have wished. Although there was one young woman among us, we are otherwise a group of white, middle-class, middle-aged women and (two) white middle-class, middle-aged men.” They further assert that “[n]ot surprisingly, the focus in much of our work was on English-Canadian white women.” Is this a convincing explanation? One does not have to possess a shared racial identity in which to document racial exclusion from the professions; it is not a requirement that one be oppressed in order to examine privilege. The assumption that the reader will feel an immediate affinity, if not familiarity with, indeed empathy for the women is disturbing.

Notwithstanding these critical points, I do wish to emphasize that good portions of Challenging Professions reminded me of the reasons I chose to study gender and work.

Given that the barriers and challenges women have long faced are still with us, these longstanding concerns are worth echoing. Yet, at the same time, I would have hoped that the collection would also prompt me to think through new and innovative ideas about the field, to further extend the earlier writings on women, work, and the professions. For example, one could probe the relationship between sex and gender (that is, theoretical inquiries about an essential woman), thus prompting questions about what it is that brings these women together? What do they have in common? In what ways are their struggles aligned? Moreover, where do the politics of gender come into play? How are these politics played out? These questions lead to others. Can we speak of a larger political agenda? Did these women share an agenda? Could we describe them as feminists? What could we say about their relationship to feminism? Are the authors themselves presenting a strong critique of professionalism/professional control, or are they speaking to women’s entry and acceptance into the professions, as well as the definition of women’s work, as professional. And lastly, it would have been interesting to reflect on the relationship between professional women and other groups of women (clearly, the majority of women in Canadian society), and comment on the implications of this well-funded project for understanding issues of power and control in the lives of working women generally—women for whom a professional designation, much less workplace control and recognition, are beyond reach.

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