

## BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

**Ruth Simpson**, *Men in Caring Occupations: Doing Gender Differently*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, 208 pp. \$US 85.00 hardcover (978-0-230-57406-9).

The study reported in this book is based on interviews with seventy-four men, from the UK and Australia, who were working in occupations stereotypically seen to be feminine: nursing, primary school teaching, librarianship and airline cabin crew. Six female nurses who worked with male nurses were also interviewed. The first chapter reviews and discusses previous studies, mainly from the 1980s and 1990s, which have also looked at men who entered gendered occupations. While acknowledging the value of these earlier studies, Simpson notes that they generally used a “role-based perspective” that “can lead to a neglect of underlying processes or practices that may be saturated with power” and “can overlook the complex ways in which gender is ‘managed’ and maintained.” In place of a focus on roles, Simpson indicates that she will be drawing upon the gender-as-performance and doing/undoing difference arguments developed by Candace West, Don H. Zimmerman, Sarah Fenstermaker, and others.

In the next three chapters (which together with the first constitute Part I of the book) Simpson reviews a number of general theoretical issues. The discussion here is not really rooted in the results of her own study, though she occasionally uses quotes from her study to illustrate a point, but rather expands upon issues and arguments raised by earlier commentators. Topics in this section of the book include: the insecure nature of the masculine identity that men often construct for themselves; the usefulness of “the One and the Other” as an analytic concept; the processes that create conditions of visibility and invisibility for both males and females in gendered occupations and how this affects who is scrutinized and who is not; and the ways that men do gender in service-oriented occupations that involve substantial emotional labor.

The different chapters in Part II each focus more specifically on one of Simpson’s four occupational groups: male cabin crew (ch. 5), male nurses (chs. 6 and 9), male primary school teachers (ch. 7), and male librarians (ch. 8). In each chapter Simpson uses the arguments and analytic tools discussed earlier to provide insight into the data she gathered. I found Simpson’s remarks on bodies and embodiment in her discussion

of male nurses (and to a lesser extent in her discussion of male cabin crew) to be especially nuanced and insightful.

I did have one minor quibble with this book: Simpson does not provide information on the ages of her respondents, either when discussing the sample characteristics of each of her four occupational groups or when presenting quotes from particular individuals to illustrate some point. Given that age, or least generational cohort, is so often tied to issues surrounding gender, this seems an odd omission.

As I say, this is a minor quibble. If there is a *major* weakness in the book, I think it has to do with sexual orientation. Simpson tells us that “between one quarter and one-third of the sample identified themselves as homosexual,” but that “issues about sexual orientation were not pursued specifically as a line of inquiry in interviews, on the grounds that this was likely to be a particularly sensitive area of discussion,” and “sexuality was only discussed if it was raised, unprompted, by interviewees.” Minor point: since we’re only dealing with 74 men, how come the best she can do is tell that “*between* one quarter and one-third” self-identified as homosexual? But more importantly, while I might understand why the matter of sexual orientation was not pursued explicitly in cases when respondents themselves did not raise the issue, I don’t understand why Simpson did not take it into account to a greater extent in her analysis — especially given that she understands clearly the link between hegemonic notions of masculinity, sexual orientation and the societal tendency to associate men in the occupations studied with homosexuality.

For example, Simpson tells us that because of the historic association of cabin crews with heterosexual femininity, and the resulting attribution of homosexuality toward male cabin crew, straight males working as cabin crew engaged in “repeated displays of interest in women.” The quote that she presents to illustrate this point is from a gay male talking about his heterosexual male colleagues; both this quote and Simpson’s later remarks suggest that these displays by heterosexual males took place in galley conversations with other cabin crew. True, she does say that gay crew “were reported as routinely ‘camping it up’ in a flamboyant parody of sexual alterity” — but this is a single passing remark. Missing from her discussion is any sustained analysis of how the gay males in her sample negotiated the exaggerated displays of heterosexuality by their nongay colleagues or whether these displays were in fact directed at their gay or their heterosexual colleagues. Another example: Simpson notes that although men in all four occupations were aware of the attributions of homosexuality directed toward them, this awareness was *most* prevalent among male cabin crew (as compared to the other groups studied) — but she never goes on to investigate or explain this pattern, except to

say that the asexual image of librarians likely served to diminish attributions of homosexuality in the case of male librarians.

My point is only that a good book would have been better if Simpson had made more of an effort to weave sexual orientation into her analysis in a systematic and comprehensive way, rather than making a dozen or so scattered remarks about sexual orientation throughout the book. Still, these concerns notwithstanding, Simpson does deliver on the promises made in the first chapter and so overall this is a book that investigators interested in gender performance, and doing/undoing gender difference, in gendered organizational contexts, will want on their bookshelves. I would also recommend it for advanced undergraduate and graduate seminars on gender.

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