

**GIRLS' JOBS FOR THE BOYS?**  
**MEN, MASCULINITY AND NON-TRADITIONAL OCCUPATIONS**

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# **GIRLS' JOBS FOR THE BOYS? MEN, MASCULINITY AND NONTRADITIONAL OCCUPATIONS**

## **ABSTRACT**

Occupational segregation by sex remains the most pervasive aspect of the labour market. In the past, most research on this topic has concentrated on explanations of women's segregation into low paid and low status occupations, or investigations of women who have crossed gender boundaries into men's jobs, and the potential impact on them and the occupations. In contrast, this article reports on a small scale, qualitative study of ten men who have crossed into what are generally defined as 'women's jobs'. In doing so, one of the impacts on them has been that they have experienced challenges to their masculine identity from various sources and in a variety of ways. The men's reactions to these challenges, and their strategies for developing and accommodating their masculinity in light of these challenges are illuminating. They either attempted to maintain a traditional masculinity by distancing themselves from female colleagues, and/or partially (re)constructed a different masculinity by identifying with their non-traditional occupations. This they did as often as they deemed necessary as a response to different forms of challenge to their gender identities from both men and women. Finally, the article argues that these responses work to maintain the men as the dominant gender, even in these traditionally defined 'women's jobs'.

**KEYWORDS:** Men, masculinity, non-traditional occupations.

## INTRODUCTION

### Gender Segregation of the Labour Market

Despite varying over time and by place, occupational segregation by sex is extensive in all countries, and present no matter how they are economically or politically organised (Anker, 1998). In Europe, the main policy focus in the reduction of sex segregation has involved ways of getting women into men's jobs (European Commission, 1998). However, despite several decades of women's expanded labour force participation, women and men still tend to work in different industries. Table 1 reveals the extent of gender segregation by major employment sectors in Great Britain.

**Table 1 Employment by Major Sectors, 2000**

Major sectors	Women (%)	Men (%)
Construction	9	91
Agriculture & fishing	22	78
Energy & water	23	77
Transport, storage & communication	25	75
Manufacturing	26	74
Real estate, renting & business	41	59
Public administration & defence	45	55
Wholesale, retail & motor trade	50	50
Banking, insurance & pension funding	52	48
Hotels & restaurants	59	41
Education	71	29
Health & social work	81	19

Source: EOC Facts About Women and Men in Great Britain 2001.

The main industrial groups, where male employees represent over 70% of the workforce, remain construction (91%), agriculture and fishing (78%), energy and water supply (77%), transport, storage and communication (75%) and manufacturing

(74%). The two main industry groups where female workers are concentrated are health and social work (81%) and education (71%).

In keeping with gendered employment patterns across the European Union, most men and women in Great Britain are concentrated in occupations that employ workers of predominantly the same sex (European Commission, 2000). In fact, 54% of men are in occupational groups in which more than 60% of workers are male. These groups include managers and administrators, craft occupations, and plant and machine operatives. Similarly, 52% of women are in occupational groups in which more than 60% of workers are female. These groups are clerical and secretarial, service and sales occupations. Gender segregation is even greater in more narrowly defined industries than in the broader labour force sectors.

**Table 2 Occupational Segregation, 2000**

<b>Selected Occupations</b>	<b>Women (%)</b>	<b>Men (%)</b>
Drivers of road goods vehicles	2	98
Production, works & maintenance managers	7	93
Warehouse & storekeepers	15	85
Technical & wholesale reps.	19	81
Computer analysts/programmers	21	79
Marketing & sales managers	29	71
Chefs & cooks	50	50
Secondary teachers	53	47
Sales assistants	72	28
Book-keepers & financial clerks	74	26
Computer & records clerks	76	24
Waiters & waitresses	77	23
Counter clerks & cashiers	80	20
Retail check-out operators	81	19
Cleaners & domestics	81	19
Catering assistants	82	18
Primary & nursery teachers	86	14
Nurses	90	10
Care assistants & attendants	92	8

**Source: EOC Facts About Women and Men in Great Britain 2001.**

Table 2 shows that drivers of road goods vehicles, production works and maintenance managers, warehouse and storekeepers, technical and wholesale representatives, and computer analysts/programmers were overwhelmingly men. At the other extreme, two major occupational groups employed a workforce of 90% or more women (care assistants and attendants, and nurses), whilst five other occupational groups employed at least 80% women (counter clerks and cashiers, retail check-out operators, cleaners and domestics, catering assistants, and Primary and nursery school teachers). These statistics are pertinent reminders that gender is a fundamental feature of employment patterns in Great Britain.

Gender segregation in the labour market operates horizontally and vertically; not only are men and women allocated qualitatively different types of jobs, the labour market is marked with women overwhelmingly concentrated at the lower levels of the occupational hierarchy in terms of wages or salary, status and authority. Even in nursing, for example, where men are a clear minority within the profession, men dominate the top management (MacDougall, 1997; Evans, 1997a). Crucial to understanding why men dominate managerial positions in nursing is the impact of gender on promotion-seeking opportunities. Men nurses are encouraged to apply for promotion, whilst some women's domestic commitments are interpreted by interviewers as constituting potential difficulties (Evans, 1997b; Villeneuve, 1994). Commenting on men's gender advantage in nursing in the US, Williams (1992) pointedly reworks the metaphor of the 'glass ceiling' to that of 'glass escalator' in order to reflect men's smooth and inexorable rise to senior management.

There have been various theories put forward to explain the persistence of gender divisions in employment. Many have concentrated on women's inability to compete on equal terms to men in the labour market. Underpinning explanations of gender segregation in the labour market are issues concerning male power, and gendered assumptions of the division of labour (see Bagilhole, 1994; Crompton, 1999). But many men are experiencing what may appear to be a different, and in some cases problematic, relationship with the world of remunerative work. In Great Britain, for example, official figures show male unemployment now exceeds the female unemployment rate in all age groups, and men are more likely to experience long term unemployment than women (EOC, 1998). These figures may be questioned as they

only record those who register as unemployed, and this is more likely to be men than women due to the nature of benefit entitlement in households. However, further projections suggest that 1.7 million new jobs will come into existence in the UK by 2011 of which an estimated 1.4 million will be taken by women (ONS, 1998). Therefore, permanently high levels of structural male unemployment are an increasingly likely prospect for the future. Much of this is the result of changes in the nature and patterns of work over the last three decades. The service sector, including personal services, retailing, and leisure/recreational services, has grown markedly during this period. The development of low paid, part-time, non-unionised, work has contributed to a rise in female-dominated jobs from nearly one million in 1951 to almost seven million in 1991 (Bagilhole, 1994). In almost a quarter of British homes, the woman is the main earner, and in a further seven per cent she is the only earner (Crampton, 1996).

However, according to Meadows (1996), many southern European countries show a converse employment picture to that of Great Britain. In places such as Italy or Spain men appear willing to take jobs traditionally held by women (e.g. catering, waiting at tables, child care), whereas British men are unwilling to do 'women's jobs'. This is not the complete story, however. Some British men are doing what has been defined as 'women's work'. For example, there are 50,000 male nurses, 48,000 male primary and nursery teachers, 40,000 male care assistants/attendants, and 14,000 male secretaries (Labour Force Survey, 1997). Therefore, Bradley's (1993) argument that some men may be responding to a reduction in 'male' skilled and unskilled jobs by infiltrating 'women's jobs' appears convincing. This argument is reinforced by the

fact that men entering non-traditional occupations often suffer the lower wages, which are generally designated to 'women's work'.

Bradley's infiltration thesis suggests men in non-traditional jobs may be undermining historical gender relations by exercising a pragmatic response to transformations in the job market. These statistics have also been taken as an indication of the potential loosening of identification with definitions of masculinity which cohere around male-dominated occupations as men lose their entitlement to this work: 'In this sense, their position in the labor market has made them predisposed to criticise dominant or hegemonic masculinity, the common sense about breadwinning and manhood' (Donaldson, 1993: 650).

### **Men, Masculinity and 'Non-Traditional Work'**

Inspired by feminist criticism of men as a seemingly unproblematic gender, a developing debate within academia has identified the analysis of men and masculinity as particularly important in the study of work and organisations (e.g. Collinson, 1992; Morgan, 1992; Hearn, 1992; Collinson and Hearn, 1996). However, masculinity has been found to be far from uniform. It is seen not as 'the essence of man', but rather as a product of cultural and historical forces, which assumes many dimensions. Thus, Hearn (1996) rejects a normative and culturally specific standard of masculinity which might suggest that it can act as 'a reference point against which behaviours and identities can be evaluated' (203). Despite this, some scholars have used an idea of a standard of masculinity, and have therefore produced self-limited accounts of the interaction between men, masculinity and non-traditional work. For example, Jome



and Toker (1998) explored the influence of masculine identity on men who did non-traditional work compared with men who did traditional work. They argued that 'career-traditional men, compared with career non-traditional men endorse significantly more traditionally masculine values and behaviours ... and report more homophobic attitudes' (129). Similarly, Chusmir (1990) has argued that men in non-traditional occupations tended to present a less masculine gender-type compared with men in traditional male-dominant occupations.

Because men and masculinity are seen as diverse, differentiated and shifting categories (Connell, 1987, 1995; Hearn, 1987, 1992; Hearn and Morgan, 1990; Morgan, 1992), the concept of 'masculinities' has been developed to refer to different forms of masculinity. 'In particular, it refers to the way in which particular forms of masculinity persist not just in relation to femininity, but also to other forms of masculinity. Accordingly, different forms of masculinity exist in relations of power, that may be characterised as hegemonic or subordinated in relation to one another' (Hearn, 1998a: 18). As Collinson and Hearn (1996) point out masculinities are 'socially produced, reproduced and indeed changeable' (6). Segal (1999) agrees that: 'Identities, of whatever sort, are generated in social contexts which are nowadays always dynamic and shifting' (158).

This is echoed in Galbraith's (1992) study of men elementary teachers. It reveals that many men found 'relationship-oriented factors' to be an important part of their teaching work and derived from a desire to break with traditional gender boundaries. However, he also claims that many of his subjects saw it as important to keep intact their masculine identity. Galbraith's study concludes at the point at which he suggests

that men elementary teachers may have adopted a 'transformed' masculinity in which some traditional masculine norms and values such as careerism are maintained at the same time that traditional gender boundaries are rejected. Also, Luhaorg and Zivian's (1995) study of men and women working in predominantly male and female occupations found that individuals (both men and women) who rejected stereotyped gender roles, and who performed non-traditional work, reported little or no gender role conflict. However, as with Galbraith's study, the question of how individuals *accomplished* their transformed gender identity within the organisational context of non-traditional work remains unanswered.

Hearn (1998b) goes even further in his analysis of the diversity of masculinity to question the usefulness of the concept at all. He argues that; 'Masculinity, still less masculinities, are not a single essential and coherent attribute attached to all men everywhere. Indeed, in some senses, masculinities do not exist in any firm or absolute sense' (ibid.: 39). Certainly as Segal (1999) points out the rise of men's studies and accompanying surge of literature on masculinity exemplifies the position of 'masculinity as an issue newly fraught with personal doubts, social anxieties and conceptual fragmentations' (163). Hearn's discomfort with the concept of masculinity/ies stems from what he sees as a tendency in 'men's studies' to submerge the crucial issue of men's material relations with women under the weight of discourse(s) about 'changing masculinity'. This is an important point and is mobilised to guard against theoretical complacency concerning the slow pace of change in hierarchical gender relations (cf. Segal, 1993).

However, despite the slipperiness of the concept, and with Hearn's criticisms in mind, we nonetheless retained the notion of masculinity/ies as a shorthand for 'gender identity' in our analysis of men working in non-traditional jobs. Firstly, because it was raised as an important issue by the men we interviewed in their stories of their experiences. Secondly, it enables us to gain insight into the continual process of 'gender identity work' that men (and women) routinely put in to make sense of and cope with their occupational habitat as has been demonstrated in other studies. For example, the issue of how femininities are actively (re-)constructed by women in male-dominated occupations has been investigated (Kvande, 1999). Also, the challenge to men posed by women entering male-dominant jobs has drawn attention to how men actively (re-)negotiate their masculinity in the presence of female co-workers (Cockburn, 1991). Finally, it allows us to examine the effects of this 'gender identity work' on the maintenance or otherwise of gender relations between men and women.

As Segal (1999) argued 'few would seriously doubt [masculinity's] continued significance in shaping people's sense of self-identity, whatever its diversity and instability' (50). It is because of its very dynamism and complexity that Segal (1999) argues we 'need to explore the very specific ways in which it functions, paying close attention to the effects of cultural ruptures detected by sociological or historical frameworks' (159). One of these potential ruptures is the infiltration of men into occupations traditionally defined as 'women's work'. Therefore our study aimed to look at ways in which masculinities are defined, (re-)constructed, and maintained by men working in non-traditional jobs.

## **THE STUDY**

The purpose of the study was to begin to explore the perceptions and experiences of British men working in non-traditional jobs, by which we specifically mean workplaces which have been historically and culturally defined as 'women's work'. The research reported here is an attempt to expand upon previous studies (see Allen, 1993; Applegate and Kaye, 1993; Murray, 1996; Penn and McQuail, 1997; Pringle, 1998; Christie, 1998) by exploring the possibilities for and implications of men's gender identity in the context of their work in non-traditional jobs.

A total of 10 men all from the East Midlands were interviewed as case studies across different occupations; they were all white, and all but one reported being heterosexual. Their occupations were as follows: cleaner; nursery nurse; occupational therapist; senior community care assistant; registered mental nurse; registered general nurse; primary school teacher; social worker; social services day care officer; and midwife. All but one (the social services day care officer) reported working full-time, that is a minimum of thirty eight hours per week. One man (the cleaner) reported working up to seventy hours per week in a variety of cleaning jobs. In terms of their class and occupational background, five of the men had working class backgrounds. One had taken up his non-traditional occupation as his first job, but four had previously worked in either skilled or semi-skilled male-dominated, manual occupations. For three of these men their redundancy had been a catalyst into moving into their present occupations. The other five men came from middle-class

backgrounds. For three this was their only occupation, and two had moved previously from skilled female-dominated occupations.

Selection of potential interviewees was based upon the authors' local knowledge of men working in non-traditional jobs. Due to pressures of time only men whose personal consent to be interviewed could be given without the need for formal institutional clearance were chosen. Potential interviewees were contacted informally, in some cases via introductions from third parties. Those expressing interest in the project received a follow up telephone call to clarify their interest and secure a time and place for interview. Interviews lasted between one and two hours, and eight were conducted at the men's home. The remaining two interviews were conducted at the interviewees' place of work. Given more time and resources it would be interesting to interview more than one man in the different occupations, particularly bearing in mind their differentiation by class, background, age, sexuality and race. This would have allowed an analysis more informed by differences among men that could address the issue of which men are most likely to succeed in non-traditional occupations. The authors intend to pursue this line of investigation in a future research project.

A semi-structured interview schedule was used to explore with the men the personal and professional issues that had been identified in previous studies of men in non-traditional occupations. This methodology was based on an attempt to follow Segal's (1999) exhortation of the 'importance of collecting "thick" data, which is rich enough to expose the fragility, contradiction and context-bound resistance or compliance within gendered experiences and performance' (159). Therefore, the men were asked open-ended questions about their motivations for doing the job, reactions from family

and friends, reaction from female and male colleagues, the impact of non-traditional work on their personal lives, and issues related to the classification of their work as 'women's work'. Each interviewee was allowed to expand and elaborate on any issues they felt were particularly important in their experiences. Each interview was taped and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The open-ended responses were used to provide data to tell the story in the men's own words.

During the early stages of the research design a decision was taken that the named male co-author would conduct all interviews. This was partly due to work commitments by the other named author, but was also influenced by a second important factor. It was felt that interviewees might be comfortable and more expansive talking about their non-traditional work with a man who had personal experience of working in a non-traditional job. Consequently, all interviewees were informed that the interviewer was himself a former registered mental nurse with an academic interest in men working in non-traditional jobs. In some cases, interviewees drew attention to the interviewers' own work history in order to elaborate points and establish common understanding about working in a predominantly female occupation. However, we are mindful that other forms of talk may have been *precluded* by our interview strategy. For example, had the men spoken to a woman interviewer or another man, we may have encountered much more individual justification for the type of non-traditional work that they performed.

## **FINDINGS**

## Men's Experiences of Challenges to their Gender Identity

Men who cross the gender boundary into non-traditional work initiate a challenge to traditional ideas of appropriate gender behaviour. This is particularly so when some men want to work in a caring job. As Crompton (1999) argued, unpaid caring work and paid market work are 'gender coded', with women doing the bulk of the former. Also, even paid caring work is considered to be women's work. As one man explained:

*'Caring is seen as a predominantly female job because people see carers as being female. Aspects of caring like being empathic and sensitive to people's needs are seen as something that men can't do - that men can't be caring or sympathetic. It's seen as somehow below men to do this.'*

Social Services Day care officer, 42 years old.

Like other men in the study, this man's involvement in caring work has been nurtured despite pressure from family socialisation to conform to a traditional masculine work role:

*'My father's generation - my dad's in his seventies - he would probably have preferred I went into being something like a mechanic. He wanted me to go into something practical. He said this to me. My brother served an apprenticeship in sheet metal work, which is obviously not a female-dominated profession. My dad also managed a football team that my brother was in. My brother's career was*

*very predictable really. ... I suppose I was encouraged in some ways, but I don't think he ever understood what it was all about'.*

Such indirect pressure to enter a workplace saturated with traditional masculine values means that men who pursue caring work risk being seen as different from 'real men', who not only confirm their masculine identity, but also their heterosexuality, through doing 'men's work'. It is important to note that gender identity includes sexual preference as a major component of 'maleness'. As Lorber and Farrell (1991) pointed out, men who consider themselves male are supposed to be sexually attracted to women to maintain their virility. As Segal (1999) argued, 'heterosexual engagement is quintessential to the confirmation of masculinity' (63). Thus the social construction of gender also contains the social construction of sexuality. This added social dimension constitutes Rich's (1980) 'compulsory heterosexuality'. In other words; 'Men's dread of effeminacy [has been brought about by] men themselves in their collective attempt to affirm mastery over those they definitively exclude to preserve the category of manhood' (Segal, 1999, 169). To reinforce this and ensure its continuance men carry out a mutual, 'continual and ubiquitous policing of any "effeminate" deviance' (157).

This was confirmed in the present study where all but two of the men reported experiencing a questioning of their sexuality. Some had experienced the contradiction of positive support from some friends, but also direct challenges to their sexuality and hostility from others. Interestingly, the first respondent's comments demonstrate that the support from his friends also acknowledged the attraction of middle class



professional occupations even if they were perceived as non-traditional for men, in comparison to their experiences of working as coal miners.

*'A lot of [coal] mining friends that I keep in touch with were very supportive. They said, "Go for it, owt's gotta be better than this". And there were a lot of 'em that actually said "I'd love to do something like that myself but I can't afford it, I've got a family". I were single then of course and didn't have any sort of commitments, I didn't have any real responsibilities except to myself. I could afford to take that drop in money and do it. But there were still a few who said "I always had me suspicions about you" and then automatically you're seen as dodgy ... But I think it were probably slightly more than just tongue-in-cheek right, 'cos I'm sure there's still that attitude that there's got to be something slightly wrong with the man if he wants to go into training be a nurse'.*

General nurse (previous job – coal miner), 42 years old.

*'There is this thing, I've gotta admit it, that being a lad and saying that you're gonna be a nurse is difficult (laughs). You do get some comments. I've heard it all from some people. "You poof" (laughs). Basically it was, "What? Are you a shirtlifter now or something?" It was really quite stark. Some of my really close mates were nice to me, but at the end of the day I still used to get lots of ribbing from my mates ... Some of them were actually quite nasty about me. They were quite cutting, I think. I'm trying to think what sort of things they said to me. They were sort of like, sort of really really into questioning my, you know, my sexuality'.*

Psychiatric nurse, 33 years old.

Ironically, as the following testimony demonstrates, some men even experience challenges from male colleagues whose own jobs also transgress the gender barrier:

*'I've had problems dealing with nurses, and they've been quite significant. I've had lot of piss taken out of me by male nurses. For a while it was quite bad. Working on a [forensic] psychiatry unit does tend to attract a certain type of large male nurse. There is definitely a testosterone culture. If you're a male and you don't subscribe to that culture, if you don't fit in, you can become a target of it, and for a while I was a target. I had verbal jibes - remarks about my masculinity and the type of work I do. They said, "You make baskets - how can you be a real man in a women's job?". They saw their type of nursing as macho nursing - jumping on rapists, murders, arsonists ... It was real harassment. Then they'd turn round and say; "It's just a joke. It was not intended to hurt you". In that sort of culture they would argue that being the butt of the joke was a way of being included. But it was a very non-PC culture and as an OT [Occupational Therapist] I didn't feel included'.*

Occupational Therapist, 34 years old.

It could be that these harassing male nurses are attempting to construct an occupationally-grounded sense of their own masculinity by setting up a traditionally masculine culture in their work environment and by distancing themselves from the particular (i.e. feminised) working practices of other men in caring jobs. Certainly, the nurses' comment, 'You make baskets – how can you be a real man in a women's job?', emphasises both the social difference and occupational distance between men

in psychiatric nursing and men in occupational therapy. At the very least, one can view the Therapist's account of his treatment by the nurses as a challenge to their preferred identity as men who perform dangerous work. This is an example of Connell's (1987, 1995) conception of different forms of masculinity, where one form can be seen as hegemonic and the other as subordinated (also see Hearn, 1998b). This experience confirms Segal's (1999) argument that 'without undermining the wider ramifications of gender as a cultural system, men will continue to displace their fears about themselves ... and to express antipathy towards other men more excluded and subordinated than their own peers' (170).

The idea of hegemonic masculinity may even function at a more 'psychic' level (Segal, 1999), where men in caring professions can interpret questions about why they are doing such work as challenges to their heterosexuality, even if it is not openly stated. The following example from one man may illustrate this:

*'Well in the first year, we had us Christmas party, and me and Sue [his partner, name changed] went to it. And the reaction I got from the males, the husbands of my female colleagues, was, "Why is a man doing that job?". For their wives doing that job it was quite all right, but for a male to be doing it it was no, and that was the main reaction I got ... They'd said to 'em that, "Mick's coming to tonight. He's one of the care assistants we work with". But I know I reckon one or two of 'em did think I were gay'.*

Senior community care worker, 48 years old.

This man is only surmising that the men's reactions were questioning his sexuality. Nevertheless, men's anxiety about what other men *might think* about their masculine status because of their non-traditional career choice is a factor in determining the decision of nearly half of the men in the study to keep secret or disguise the type of work they do.

*'Well my friends don't know what I do even now. They think I'm a porter and that I take dead bodies to places. I don't tell 'em 'cos it's a female job and if I tell 'em I'm a domestic they're gonna take the Mickey. I'm never gonna live it down, so they don't know to this day what I do. I have worked with dead bodies before so I tell 'em that's what I do ... I exaggerate. I have to exaggerate ... I wouldn't be as close to 'em if I told 'em what I really did for a living. I think they'd call me a poofster 'cos it's a woman's job. Everybody knows that it's a woman's job. It's been a woman's for years now and it will always be a woman's job ... Because my mates are all in men's jobs. They're all bricklayers and car mechanics and HGV mechanics, roof or steeplejacks. Things like that. My friends would see me as a low life who can't get a proper job'.*

Cleaner (previous job – car mechanic), 24 years old.

Also, the two younger men kept it hidden from women they met socially having experienced adverse reactions in the past.

*'When I went out clubbing and you'd meet a girl and you tell them you were a nurse, that was it they didn't want to know you. So I found I had to lie and tell them I wasn't a nurse. I'd have to say I was a carpenter, or something like that.*

*When I was on holiday, and you were telling what you were, I used to pretend I wasn't a nurse because women were not interested if you're a nurse. Being a nurse doesn't work with women, as they either think you're gay, or they'll tell you about all their problems and you think great 'I'm not going to get anywhere here!' And I found it was off-putting because you were caring and they didn't want anyone who's caring down a pub or club'.*

Psychiatric nurse, 33 years old.

As shown above, these men experienced direct and indirect challenges to their sexuality and masculine identity. Indeed, as the examples reveal, the two may be collapsed together in order to cast doubt on their integrity as 'men'.

### **The Men's Responses to These Challenges**

#### *Attempts to Maintain Traditional Masculine Values*

In the study reported here, six of the men responded to the challenges they have experienced to their sexual and masculine identity by emphasising 'shopfloor' pride in the quality of their work, or commitment to doing a more professional job than female colleagues:

*'I think if there was a lot more male domestics than female there'd be probably an uproar 'cos I think male domestics take a lot more pride in their work than a female. And they can do a lot more as well. The female attitude where I used to work was, "They only used to come in to get paid". I don't know, half of them have got kids and it's just a job to get them out and just earn a bit of money.*

*They're only there to earn money. Whereas I take a lot more pride and I think a lot more men do as well'.*

Cleaner (previous job – car mechanic), 24 years old.

*'I felt almost embarrassed at the way some of my female colleagues treated the women. Because their practice skills were a bit shoddy. I felt that I had to be absolutely perfect because I didn't want them to think I was any worse because of my gender, at practising. While in fact, whether it was because I was male ... I found that when I was examining women they kept, almost all of them kept saying how gentle you are compared to the women. If it was an abdominal palpation or vaginal examination, I don't know, they just kept saying the women were rougher. Well I always took it as a compliment'.*

Midwife, 37 years old.

These men's approach to their work illustrates their desire to be seen as *identifiably better workers* than women. In the case of the midwife, for example, performing gentle examinations is an indication of his *professional* ability, perhaps even to beat women midwives at their own game. As Segal (1999) argues 'conspicuous displays of so-called "feminine" skills may be just the sort of "modernization" of men's behaviour which will increase their power as individual men over women and other men' (166). It is an approach shared by other men in the study, almost to the denial that women's work is really any different to men's work. The following example is from a man who had also experienced the very traditional male job of coal-mining:

*'I don't want to sound funny but a job is a job. When I say that, I mean care assistants do a care plan for every service user. So if I go to an unknown service user and he's already had an home care assessment and home care staff might be on holiday or ill, I go in. So you have a quick look at this home care plan and it might say, "Up, washed, dressed, breakfast. Pension on a Tuesday, make sure he's got his prescriptions". Or it might just say, "Breakfast, shopping on a Tuesday, make sure he's got his prescriptions". Now if I go to that male or female service user and they've wet, or they've had an accident, do I just say, "Oh, I've only come to get your breakfast" or "I've only come to get your pension". With me, right, you need somebody to clean it, and that comes from when I worked in the pit. 'Cos I could say to you, "Oh, I'm only here to join the pipes together. I work in the pit but I'm only here to join the pipes together and that's my work"... I take it as I find it you see. I've had good jobs at the pit, everything's going absolutely marvellous and all of sudden you've got a 20 foot hole, which you've got to go in a timber it up. And nobody said nothing about a 20 foot hole, but somebody's gotta go and do it. So that's how I look at it. If they're wet or dirty it doesn't bother me 'cos that's the job'.*

Senior community care worker (previous job – coal miner), 48 years old.

This approach to care work, derived from the contingencies of working in the pit, underlines the importance of having a job ("a job is a job") over concerns about what a caring job might entail. Similarly, another ex-miner described the meaning of being a nurse in terms of having a professional career, a job for life:

*'I think you were taken seriously in the fact that you are coming into a caring job as a career; that this is going to be my job for the rest of my life. And I think a lot of times when you look at males coming into nursing, once they've made that step they're probably going into nursing for the rest of their career in one form or another. And I think there is a lot of female's that have the attitude that females only go into nursing as either a second job or as something to do until something else comes along. Or until they get married and have children'.*

General nurse (previous job – coal miner), 42 years old.

The importance this man attached to the prospect of nursing “for the rest of my life”<sup>1</sup> marks out his personal *and* professional distance from female colleagues. To him nursing was to be a continuous, uninterrupted, career in which individual females feature only periodically and therefore peripherally.

Williams (1989; 1995) has explored the place and practice of masculinity amongst men in non-traditional jobs. Her findings, based on qualitative, in-depth, interviews with men nurses, elementary teachers, social workers and librarians, suggest that they embed their gender identity as ‘men’ principally through gender-differentiated workplace activities. For example, men nurses report distinguishing what they do *as nurses* from traditional conceptions of nursing tasks (such as caring). Similarly, some of the men in the present study articulated their identity as workers in terms of a different professional role to that of women colleagues. Thus, in the following three

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<sup>1</sup> It is perhaps worth noting that the idea of “a job for life” is itself an historically specific, deeply masculine notion. For example, young males entering steel work and coal mining began their working lives believing (possibly with good reason) that the job would be theirs for life. It is poignant that despite having been made redundant from mining, this man still harboured the notion of “a job for life” *at the outset* of his nurse training.



examples, an alternative interpretation or reformulation of their work avoids any suggestion that they might simply be seen as 'carers'.

*My role is not just to care you know, it's also to plan and organise for people's overall needs. I have to liaise with social workers, OT's, outside agencies. I have to draw up different activities and negotiate care plans. I have multiple roles. I also have to do a bit of advocacy and speak up for others who can't speak [for themselves]. It's in my job description. I have to try and keep people in their own homes. That's my job.*

Social Services Day Care Officer, 42 years old.

*'Our role is facilitators, enablers - we're not carers. They're horizontal relationships - we don't care for someone. Women colleagues might see it as more nurturing. I choose to see OT as adult to adult, not adult to child'.*

Occupational Therapist, 34 years old.

*'There is a difference in the way women and men interact with kids. Women can hug kids but men can't really hug kids. They naturally hug kids but men naturally avoid hugging. Also, there's differences in discipline - different use of the voice. Teaching isn't a caring job. I want kids to develop. Nothing more important than helping them develop. Absolutely fantastic helping people develop. But I'm keen to get out of classroom - and be a Head. My strengths lie on the philosophical side. I can influence the whole school. It's withdrawing from kids, but I can still have a role shaping kids future'.*

Primary school teacher, 30 years old.

Also, some men retain their attachment to traditional masculinity by emphasising the changes in women that now make them more like men, 'one of the boys'.

*'I find being in the staff room very similar to the way men are when they're all together. You have a laugh and you take the Mickey out of people. I find it very similar to the way men are together, for example when we're at the rugby club. It's exactly the same in our staff room. In the staff room its both the men and women who lead the banter equally. It lets both of us let off steam pretty equally. We can say what we like to each other provided it doesn't go too far ... It's definitely a laddish culture in our staff room. The women appreciate it though. In fact, we're the whipping boys in there, we are definitely the whipping boys. It's us that bear the brunt of it. It's us that get the stick. We're the targets especially if there's only one of us in the room'.*

Primary school teacher, 30 years old.

For some other men, proclaiming that being in a 'women's job' is not any indication that they have any feminine traits and has definitely not turned them into a 'new man' is important in identifying with traditional masculinity:

*'It's great to be a bloke in primary teaching. I don't get the shitty jobs. I often huddle up with the men to talk football and have a completely sexist 10 minutes. It blows out the cobwebs and lets out steam. It's great just being "laddish". Women are getting stronger and are expressing their views more. This means that men have got to be elsewhere from women, in the school context, to express their*

*masculinity ... Every bloody dinnertime women talk about women's issues and it gets bloody boring. We men have lots of flirty, sex-related talk. The boss joins in. He's a man'.*

Primary school teacher, 30 years old.

For many men maintaining traditional masculinity acts as a buffer against challenges other men (and women) pose towards their integrity as 'real men'. As the various responses above indicate by emphasising traditional masculine traits - pride in one's *work*, doing a proper *job*, having a *career*, being true to oneself, being assertive, being blatantly sexist - men maintain a sense of themselves *as men* even though they work in non-traditional jobs.

#### ***(Re)constructing a different masculinity?***

By contrast, at times men in non-traditional occupations can take the route of identifying with their work as being better indications of their true self, even if does contain traditionally feminine traits. Four of the men in the study reported embracing their work because it brought out their true nature as a caring person:

*'I was conscious of the job being female-dominated when I applied. But I didn't think about it - that 9 out of 10 people doing my job are female. It doesn't worry me at all. I just got on with things. You have to have it within oneself to be caring - you can't really train for it. Lending an ear to listen to someone has to be part of you. It's got to be part of your general characteristics. I think caring has to come naturally. The actual natural caring side is basically me'.*

Social Services Day care officer, 42 years old.

Importantly, the following three examples show this brings differential rewards for the men:

*'I found that I'm quite a caring person so that's always a plus side for attracting females. They like to see a caring sort of chap, because in psychiatric nursing there's a shortfall of males who are genuinely caring - or rather men don't overtly show they're caring. They might come into nursing because they're caring, but it's still unusual for a male to hold on an old lady's hand. I'd have no qualms about that. If she was crying I'd hold her to me and let her cry. A lot of females like that. I felt it was the best thing to do whereas a lot of males are not like that. They'd say oh no, I'm not doing that - I'm a psychiatric nurse - especially the old prison warden types'.*

Psychiatric nurse, 33 years old.

*'I've always been an emotional person, never been one not to shed a tear, if I felt that was appropriate. If there's a weepy film on telly I might cry. I've always been like that, but maybe when I worked down the pit, it came out more as anger. When I started nursing it was the first time I'd shown emotion in public. Before it were more a private thing. Now it wouldn't really bother me if I was showing emotion in public ... I feel I can. I can't speak for all men but it wouldn't bother me because I'm working with women. Nursing is liberating in that respect. Before when I became emotional and upset it was something I did in private, but now I don't mind actually sharing it with somebody - my wife or close friends that I work with'.*

General nurse, 42 years old.

*'I show empathy because of how I am as a person. I wouldn't say that shedding a few tears when you're emotional is feminine. I wouldn't see it as that. I don't care, I think its what a man can feel as well, it shouldn't be called masculine or feminine, its just human. I come from a large family. I've got four sisters. I suppose there's always been a liberal view or liberal-type discussions amongst us, so my sisters come to me with their gynie [gynaecological] problems and stuff like that. I get labelled as an agony aunt. I recently had one of my colleagues lying up on the table with her belly up saying, "I haven't felt any kicks for 3 days, can you examine me". So I had a listen in. I locked the door but somebody knocked on the door and she said, "Shhh- don't say a thing". You know if they had come in and saw me lifting up her skirt and feeling her bump it would have been outrageous (laughs)'.*

Midwife, 37 years old.

Some women who enter non-traditional occupations, and who must 'give up' or hide aspects of their femininity under pressure to become 'one of the boys', report feeling a loss and less than complete (Bagilhole, 1993; Bagilhole, *et al.*, 2000). It is an irony, therefore, that the four men whose testimony is reproduced above explicitly acknowledge how their embrace of the feminine side of their personality enables them become 'more complete' as a person.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

By exploring men's experiences and agency within gendered work situations, we have attempted to understand how and why men construct and define a sense of gender identity within the institutions in which they find themselves in the minority and as the 'other sex'. We have also considered the implications of this 'gender identity work' for the continuing dominance of men over women even in these female-dominated occupations.

Firstly, the study reported here can contribute to contemporary theorising on men, masculinities and men's practices. These men's reactions to challenges to their gender identity, and their strategies for developing and accommodating their masculinity in light of these challenges are illuminating. They either attempted to maintain a traditional masculinity by distancing themselves from female colleagues, and/or partially (re)constructed a different masculinity by identifying with their non-traditional occupations. Bearing in mind the pitfalls of essentialising masculinity/ies, we feel it useful to draw attention to the following three dimensions, none of which should be thought of as static or exclusive categories. The men articulated three types of masculinity: either only traditional masculine values, or traditional values plus a re-constructed masculine identity, or only a re-constructed masculinity. This they did as often as they deemed necessary as a response to different forms of challenge to their gender identities from both men and women.

Interestingly, these men's ways of maintaining and recreating their gender identities articulated above coincide quite closely with the three dominant patterns of gender practice Gerschick and Miller (1995) identified in their study of disabled men. They named these three frameworks as: reformulation (which entailed men's redefinition of

hegemonic characteristics on their own terms); reliance (reflected by adoptions of some, but not all, the hegemonic characteristics); and finally, rejection (characterised by renouncing these characteristics and creating new ones of their own). Again, as in our study, none of their interviewees entirely followed any one of these patterns, but used a mix of two or at times all three. In a similar way to these disabled men, the experiences of our men in 'non-traditional' occupations can be seen as important because they illuminate and add to our understanding of both the continuing power and the potential weakness of contemporary masculinity. The gender practices of some of these men suggest an alternative, reconstructed masculinity that might be available to many men.

However, a serious note of caution must be added to any predictions for men in 'non-traditional' occupations offering any potential catalyst or model for change. We have seen and continue to see the feminisation of the labour market. Less 'men's work' is very likely to push even more men into what has traditionally been defined as women's work. But it is debatable whether this will also make them more likely to criticise and reject traditional hegemonic masculinity. It might in fact do the reverse. Most of the men in the study reported here are actively maintaining traditional male values. They are not challenging gender identity. Interestingly, nearly half actually conceal their occupation from their friends and the strangers they meet.

Some previous studies on men in non-traditional work claimed to show that men who do 'women's work' are 'less masculine' because of the nature of the work they do and/or because the context in which they work is female-dominant. This appears too simplistic. Our findings suggest the picture is more complex. The majority of men in

our study showed signs of trying to maintain a traditional masculinity. However, four out of the ten also appeared to be beginning at times to (re-)construct a different masculinity which encompassed traditional feminine traits, thus demonstrating that an individual's masculinities can be 'internally contradictory, [and] in tension' (Collinson and Hearn, 2000).

We feel that this study demonstrates the usefulness of maintaining masculinity/ies as a shorthand for 'gender identity'. It had resonance with the men who were interviewed and proved to be a helpful analytical tool for interpreting the data offered in terms of the men's testimonies. The findings do however confirm that 'masculinity' should not be taken as a given but as a variable. We need to recognise the dynamic, shifting, ambiguous, and multiple nature of gender identities even within individual men's agency and subjectivity, and as part of their responses to the complexities of organizational contexts.

Connell (1987) argued that at any given historical moment there are competing masculinities. Hollway (1996) more starkly renamed these as 'clashing masculinities' in her analysis of the gendered relations between male management and male workers. She identifies this as a contest, which demonstrates 'the fundamental and enduring clash of masculinities involved in the conflict of manual and mental labour, of body and mind' (35). Using this idea of looking through a 'lens of competing masculinities', the above study demonstrated the pertinence of this concept, even within small minorities of men within non-traditional occupations. One stark example of this in the study was around the dimension of 'macho male' psychiatric nurses who harassed the male occupational therapist. Following the idea of male-dominated



occupations giving men their traditional masculinity, they transferred this to their non-traditional occupation by constructing a traditional masculine culture within it. They sought to maintain their traditional dominant form of masculinity over what they saw as his subordinated (re)constructed masculinity by bullying other men and thus distancing themselves from them. This demonstrates the existence of different 'clashing' masculinities and the consequences for other men in female-dominated occupations. It also highlights the importance of a sophisticated analysis of masculinity as a product of relations both between men, as well as between men and women.

Secondly, this study highlights the importance of studying men and problematising the concept of masculinity to enhance our current understanding of the complexity of gendered work, non-traditional occupations and organisations. As Collinson and Hearn (2000) point out, all too often are the categories of men and masculinity still 'taken for granted, hidden and unexamined'. In contrast we have made these men in non-traditional occupations the focus of our interrogation, and central to our analysis.

Exhortations have been made for men to get more involved in caring work as a development in equal opportunities. The EOC is promoting the employment of men in social work (and other female-dominant occupations). Also, the under-representation of men in women's work has recently been perceived as a problem by ministers from within the European Union. But these prescriptions must be seen as inadequate solutions for changing gender relations. This is affirmed in the present study of men in non-traditional occupations. Challenges to their masculinity have produced in some men responses, which attempt to maintain traditional masculine values. By arguing

that they do a better, more professional job than their female colleagues, even when they are sometimes utilising skills normally identified with women, the men maintain themselves as the dominant gender. Also, some men reformulate the perceptions of their work as being more like men's work, for example denying that it involves caring only or emphasizing the different tasks they perform than their female colleagues. Also, they might suggest that even the women who do the work have to be in some ways masculine themselves, or they emphasise their strong identification with the other men in their occupation showing they are still 'one of the boys'.

In contrast, some of the responses by the men in the study appear to be beginning to (re-)construct a different masculinity by identifying with traditionally defined feminine traits. However, even these responses can be seen as being interpreted by the men as enriching them and making them more complete as a person. They interpret this as becoming more of a 'complete man', who has managed to successfully colonise some feminine skills and abilities. As Segal (1999) argues, 'Once we note the hybrid nature of masculinity ... we find that men have remained the dominant sex by constantly refashioning masculinity' (Segal, 1999, 167). Ross (1995) agrees that 'the reason why patriarchy remains so powerful is due less to its entrenched traditions than to its versatile capacity to shape-change and morph the contours of masculinity to fit with shifts in the social climate' (250). Connell (1995) also argues for the continuance of what he calls the 'patriarchal dividend', and acknowledges the limitations of any project to reform masculinity as it may only 'help modernize patriarchy rather than abolish it' (211).

It can be argued that our study has demonstrated that some men adapt to their occupational environment, and use tensions, contradictions and challenges they have experienced 'to shore up a personal sense of gender dominance, by whatever means possible' (Segal, 1999, 168). As Segal (1999) argued, 'the complex edifice of polarized gender hierarchy, at the structural, interpersonal and psychic level ... have all to be undermined, before attempted shifts in the meanings adhering to appropriate gender roles or identities have any secure context or foundation' (166).

We would argue that the way the men in our study have met the challenges to their gender identity in non-traditional occupations have enhanced their career opportunities over women. Therefore we would argue that men's entry into non-traditional jobs does not necessarily signal a change in men's dominance as a sex. The history of men's success in nursing management tells us that much at least. Equally, it does imply that the female-dominant workplace is not necessarily a 'natural' setting for contestation, negotiation and change in gender relations. Women do not maintain their position (certainly in terms of their hierarchical position) even in the face of the relatively small number of men who enter non-traditional occupations. This study has shown how men's behaviour and practices contribute to their dominance.

Thus, it should be emphasised that any investigation of possible sites of changing masculinities should not ignore or disguise the continuing material dominance of men over women as shown here even in female-dominated occupations. Men's organizational dominance requires continual interrogation and further analysis in today's complex and dynamic organizational settings. Thus the present study has attempted an exploration of men's experiences in 'women's jobs', and enabled us to

consider, connect and develop contemporary theorizing about masculinity/ies with an analysis of how men successfully maintain their traditional advantage even in these female-dominated workplaces.

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