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# Editorial: Aesthetic Labour, Emotional Labour and Masculinity

Dennis Nickson and Marek Korczynski

This special issue of the journal focuses on the topic of service work and gender. The theme for this special issue arose out of a stream on service work and gender at the 2005 *Gender Work and Organization* conference. In many respects this special edition can be considered as complementary to an earlier special edition on gender and service work that came out in 2005. In the editorial for the 2005 special edition Kerfoot and Korczynski raised a number of issues, questions and points for debate. It is worth briefly reprising some of these here as in many respects they provide a point of departure for a number of the concerns of this particular special edition.

In the earlier editorial Kerfoot and Korczynski noted the numerical dominance of service jobs in the economy, but also the relative lack of research on these jobs. In seeking to address this lacuna the 2005 special edition concentrated on front-line service work, that is, jobs involving an interaction between the service employee and customer. Moreover, the focus was on those jobs below 'knowledge workers' and instead concentrated on jobs such as call-centre operatives, retail assistants in fashion retail, bank tellers and supermarket workers. As Kerfoot and Korczynski (2005, p. 388) recognize,

nearly all the jobs listed are ones in which women predominate and which are associated with a range of poor conditions, such as low wages and extremely limited career prospects.

A further aspect noted by Kerfoot and Korczynski was the manner in which gender stereotypes mean that the so-called 'soft' skills required in this type of service work are deemed to be 'naturally' feminine.

Beyond noting the numerical dominance of women in front-line service work, Kerfoot and Korczynski also sought to offer a conceptualization of how service work is gendered and how such gendering is done and maintained. This discussion was initially developed through the lenses of the customer-oriented bureaucracy, which argues that 'in contemporary capitalism, service work is driven by a competitive terrain in which both service quality and price are key factors' (p. 390).

For example, Kerfoot and Korczynski recognize how extant gendered occupational stereotyping also extends to the gendered assumptions that customers (especially male customers) bring to the service encounter. An obvious example noted by Kerfoot and Korczynski is flight attendants, who are expected to demonstrate 'feminized' emotional and aesthetic labour. Expanding on this discussion Kerfoot and Korczynski consider a range of issues with regard to work organization and the labour process. For example, with regard to recruitment and selection they recognize the undervaluing of the soft 'people' or 'social' skills involved in emotional labour and the sex-typing by management in the recruitment process. Kerfoot and Korczynski then go on to outline a number of research questions (pp. 393–5):

- How far do the dual logics of customer orientation and bureaucratization work together to create a gendered segregation and disadvantage in service work?
- In what ways are customers' gender stereotypes sustained and by what processes have gendered customer assumptions come to be internalized in service organizations?
- What are the key points of difference in the gendering of service work between different service occupations?
- What effect is the move towards sales likely to have on the relationship between gender and service work?

The five articles that follow in the 2005 special edition offer insight into these questions. Among other things the collection of articles in the 2005 edition allows for a consideration of the gendering of the service encounter, particularly in the manner in which it is sexualized and how differently this impacts on men and women. The recognition that gender is not just about women is of crucial importance and one that is of particular interest in this special edition. Specifically, there is a greater concentration in this issue on masculinity and how there may be multiple masculinities (see for example, Cross and Bagihole, 2002; Lupton, 2006) which vary significantly by dint of class and occupational status. A greater concentration on men and service work is thus one significant difference in this special edition. It also differs in offering articles that range across the labour market spectrum, from those who are unemployed (Nixon) to those working in skilled, professional service occupations (Gregory), though most of the five articles concentrate on front-line service work. As with the first special edition one of the articles is concerned with technology and the often gendered nature of technology (Hjalmarsson). Finally, unlike the previous special edition in which all articles were empirically based, two of the five articles here are wholly conceptual. These latter two contributions seek to enjoin debates about the extent to which emotional labour is a skill (Payne) and also offer a more nuanced understanding of the

sexualization of front-line staff in interactive service work (Warhurst and Nickson).

## **Masculinity and service work**

The two articles by Darren Nixon and Michele Gregory in this special edition offer very different accounts of the experience of men in the contemporary service economy. Nixon's work focuses on working class men with few skills and qualifications, while Gregory's work focuses on highly skilled professional service workers in advertising.

In his work Nixon notes that the economic restructuring of Manchester and the shift to a service economy has impacted on male employment, particularly men with limited skills or qualifications. Drawing on interviews with 35 unemployed men Nixon aims to assess the attitude of these men towards entry-level front-line service work. Nixon's interviewees span a range of ages from young men (18–25) through to older men (those over 40). However, regardless of their age, the idea of working in feminized front-line service work was anathema to his interviewees. In particular, the demands of emotional labour and the requirement to manage emotions in interacting with customers was seen to connote subservience and servility. As Nixon notes the men in his study expressed a need to 'front up' customers; the very antithesis of what service organizations seek in their front-line staff.

To an extent Nixon's results are similar to other work in this area. Lindsay and McQuaid (2004, p. 303), for example, in their research on unemployed job seekers in Scotland, note that the young men in their sample, 'whilst holding surprisingly few gender-related prejudices towards the service sector, consider many entry-level service jobs to be of low quality and "dead end", with few opportunities for progression'. Lindsay and McQuaid also note that for older unemployed men, work in areas like retail and hospitality was unacceptable both in cultural and economic terms. Many of the older men they interviewed saw hospitality and retail as 'women's work'. In more financial terms, the men over 25 in Lindsay and McQuaid's study were seeking jobs that paid weekly wages of over £200, thus ruling out many jobs in retail and hospitality (and see also Lindsay, 2005).

There is an interesting issue here in terms of class and how this is likely to significantly impact on the views of men towards front-line service work specifically, or feminized work more generally. While the working class men in Nixon's and Lindsay and McQuaid's work generally found front-line service work abhorrent, the same is not true for other segments of the labour market. Here, for example, we could point to the gender dimension of student employment. The influx of student labour means that many young (largely middle-class) men are now accessing jobs that have traditionally been

the preserve of female part-time labour and characterized as 'women's' work, particularly in areas such as retail and hospitality. Of course, the acceptance by male students of the need to work in sectors such as retail and hospitality is in large part simply a pragmatic response to the need to undertake paid work during study. Beyond this point, though, Canny (2002) recognizes the potential shift in the attitudes of young men towards retail as an employing sector as a result of their experience of working in the sector as students. As she recognizes, retailers may target students who are currently working part-time to be potential managers in the future, thus jobs that have traditionally been seen as dead end or junk jobs may now, in fact, facilitate upward mobility once students have completed their studies, such that it may now be considered by students as a sector with good employment prospects.

This same class dynamic also seems to be apparent in more professionally oriented female dominated occupations. A range of recent studies have sought to consider how men experience work in female dominated occupations. Simpson (2004) conducted 40 in-depth interviews with men in four occupational groups (primary school teachers, flight attendants, librarians and nurses). The interviewees are categorized as either 'seekers' (men who actively choose the 'female' occupation in which they work), 'finders' (those who find the occupation in the process of making general career decisions) and 'settlers' (men who had tried a variety of different, often 'masculine', jobs with limited levels of job satisfaction). Most of Simpson's interviewees are characterized as finders or settlers. Cross and Bagihole (2002) interviewed ten men working in a number of jobs in occupations that historically and culturally have been defined as women's work. These jobs included cleaning, nursery nursing, school teaching and registered general nursing. Cross and Bagihole note how, for the working class men in their study, the choice to work in these areas was largely pragmatic, with redundancy often being a catalyst for moving into a women's job. By contrast, their middle-class interviewees had always worked in female-dominated occupations. In a similar vein, based on 27 interviews in seven graduate entry occupations, including feminized and non-feminized occupations, Lupton (2006) notes how his research indicates that 'social class may be one of the keys to explaining the "gender typing" of men's occupational outcomes' (p. 104). As he goes on, 'notions of gender-appropriate work for a man were deeply ingrained in the thinking of many of the working class respondents' (p. 115) and particularly how they tended to articulate 'real' work as that associated with physical labour. In sum, Lupton argues that 'working in female-concentrated occupations appears to create particular difficulties for working class men in respect of their masculine identity, yet many working class men find themselves in such jobs' (p. 117).

Although there is some evidence that middle-class men are seemingly more comfortable working in feminized occupations, there is no simple explanation for this, nor should this point be overstated. Lupton (2006) notes

two key themes in the literature on men working in feminized occupations — men taking their gender privilege and sexual power into women's work; and the manner in which masculinity comes under scrutiny for men working in women's work. For the former aspect, there may be material advantages for men to work in predominately female occupations such as primary school teaching. An example of this is their ability to take advantage of the 'glass escalator' by standing out in a feminized occupation. For the latter aspect, asserting masculinity while working in feminized occupations may be problematic when they run up against the hegemonic constructions of masculinity that are prevalent. For example, there may be concerns about masculinity and heterosexuality stemming from working in female-concentrated occupations. The work of Cross and Bagihole (2002), Simpson (2004) and Lupton (2006) found evidence of men using a variety of strategies to make sense of working in predominately feminized occupations. For example, Cross and Bagihole found that the men in their study either attempted to maintain a traditional masculinity or (re)construct a different masculinity in which they identified with their work as being an indication of their 'true self', 'even if it does contain traditional feminine traits' (p. 220). For those men who sought to emphasize traditional masculine traits, 'pride in one's work, doing a proper job, having a career, being true to oneself, being assertive, being blatantly sexist' (p. 219, emphasis in original) were also seen as being essential to maintain a sense of themselves as 'real' men. Simpson found evidence of re-labelling jobs, for example, that of librarian as 'information scientist', and recasting of job content, for example, from cabin crew highlighting the safety aspect of their job as opposed to the serving aspect.

It can be seen, then, that men have a variety of strategies for coping with working in predominately feminized occupations. What though, of women working in mainly masculine environments? Simpson (2004, p. 366) notes how men and women 'experience minority status in different ways' and, in particular, some of the advantages that men may have in working in feminized occupations are far from apparent for women pushing into men's jobs. This point is the theme of Michele Gregory's article on how male employers and employees use homosociability in the British advertising industry to retain their hegemonic position and the importance in this process of the metaphorical 'locker room'. As Gregory observes, 'the locker room consists ... of both a place and a value associated with male power and identity, masculinities, competition, solidarity and adolescent behaviour'. The locker room acts in an exclusionary manner as it reinforces behaviour such as the use of sports, humour, banter, sexualization of women, drinking and going to strip clubs. Gregory considers these aspects in the advertising industry, focusing on three occupational groups: the creatives, who are the copywriters who write the advertisements and art directors who design the graphic and the artistic work, those responsible for account handling and account planners. Drawing on data initially gathered in the late 1980s and more up to date

accounts of gender in advertising, Gregory notes how the behaviour associated with the locker room is particularly prevalent in the creative department, which is characterized as the most important function in advertising and which is dominated by men. The result of such 'laddish' behaviour is a coercive and threatening environment that is inimical to women. Despite greater gender parity in the areas of account handling and account planning Gregory again notes significant evidence of sexism, which ultimately leads her to conclude that women have little power to change the prevailing male culture. In sum, Gregory's work is invaluable in demonstrating how the locker room is resonant in the corporate service economy, reliant as it is on high levels of socializing and socialization; which ultimately creates a very gendered labour market in the advertising industry.

## **Emotional, aesthetic and caring labour in front-line service work**

The essential starting point of the articles by Jonathan Payne, Marie Hjalmarsson and Chris Warhurst and Dennis Nickson is the seminal work of Arlie Hochschild. Hochschild's book, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (1983) introduced the concept of emotional labour, which has come to dominate the ever-increasing body of work examining how front-line service staff manage their emotions in the service encounter (see Korczynski, 2002, for a review of this literature). As has already been noted, the people or social skills of emotion work have frequently been deemed to be naturally feminine and as a consequence undervalued. This has led to debates about whether the (high) skill content of interactive service work is unrecognized and unrewarded. As Korczynski (2005, p. 3) recognizes with regard to emotional and aesthetic labour in customer-facing service work, 'there is a lack of clarity of what we even mean by "skill", let alone what can be done about skill levels in these jobs'. It is this issue that Jonathan Payne sets out to explore in his reappraisal of emotional labour and skill.

The starting point of Payne's article is a recognition of how increasingly emotion work has been articulated as denoting skilled work. In particular, he seeks to submit to critical scrutiny the view of Bolton (2004, p. 25) that 'emotion workers have never before required such a high level of skill'. Using the measures of job complexity, task discretion and control over the labour process, Payne develops a sustained critique of the proposition that all emotion work is skilled. Building on his earlier work, which considered the changing meaning of skill (Payne, 2000), he asks the crucial question, 'where does the basic requirement for politeness in the service work of an advanced western society *end* and skilled emotion work *begin*?'. In his answer he suggests that we need to view emotional labour as contingent. Thus, although some emotion work may involve more skilled emotion management, the bulk



of front-line service work is more likely to require what he describes as 'perfunctory politeness'. Bestowing the title of 'skill' on such politeness, in Payne's view, leads to defining the concept of skill so loosely that it loses its analytical or operational meaning. One consequence of such a loose conceptualization of skill is the danger that other deleterious aspects of front-line service work, such as deficiencies in work design, work organization or terms and conditions of employment, remain unchallenged and consequently are not addressed by employers or policymakers. Payne's contribution adds significantly to debates about skill in terms of emotional labour and is fully convincing in calling for an honest debate on the meaning of skill in the contemporary economy. By extension, many of Payne's arguments about emotional labour could also potentially ring true for aesthetic labour. The work of Nickson *et al.* (2004) can be considered a first step in this debate, though significant scope remains for further debate.

Hochschild's work on emotional labour has also been treated as a key point of departure by Lopez (2006). This contribution not only offers a useful counterpoint to the arguments of Payne but can also potentially contribute much to our understanding of gender and service work. Lopez argues that the concept of emotional labour rests too firmly upon Hochschild's initial assumptions about the service worker as doubly subordinated to management's tight feeling rules and to the sovereign customer. Drawing on three detailed case studies of caring work in nursing homes, he argues that it is more useful to think about caring organizations (but potentially service organizations more widely) as existing along a continuum, in which Hochschild's concept of emotional labour as a coercive extreme lies at one end, and what he terms 'organised emotional care', as a more autonomous extreme, lies at the other. A lack of discretion and a sense of subordination to service recipients should not be written into our definitions of what service work is. In a moving way (see also Toynbee, 2003), Lopez lays out how service work labelled as low skilled and entailing poor conditions can potentially, involve skilled caring work. Marie Hjalmarsson's article in this special issue lies between the ideas of Payne and Lopez, for it shows how the important caring skills of home care workers in Sweden are being marginalized by the introduction of new technology designed mainly for purposes of control. 'Organized emotional care' may be being pushed towards low-skilled emotional labour by surveillance technology. Underlying Hjalmarsson's article is the battle that is played out between the surveillance society and the caring society. Also implicit in Hjalmarsson's work is equating the surveillance society (Lyon, 2007) and the caring society (Fine, 2006) with the dominance of traditional masculine and traditional feminine values, respectively. Here lie further key questions to drive forward debates on gender and service work.

Payne's intention to engender critical debate is also the goal the article by Warhurst and Nickson on emotional, aesthetic and sexualized labour. Again

taking Hochschild as a starting point, they recognize how much of the discussion surrounding interactive service work is seen through the lenses of emotional labour, but note that this approach elides two key aspects; employee corporeality and the sexualization of employees, despite Hochschild signalling the importance of these issues. Warhurst and Nickson note that aesthetic labour comes into play when organizations commodify employee corporeality in an attempt to appeal to the senses of customer via the 'right look'. In prescribing this look, some employers may seek to mobilize, develop and commodify the sexuality of their employees. In considering this point, Warhurst and Nickson suggest there are three forms of sexualized work in interactive services — that which is sanctioned by management, that which is subscribed to by management and that which is a management strategy. In developing this threefold typology the authors suggest that it allows better conceptualization as to how organizations make up employees as sexualized labour. Specifically, they argue that much of the existing literature points to sanction and subscription, rather than the strategic intent of organizations and management. As a final point, both Payne and Warhurst and Nickson recognize, notwithstanding the earlier discussion of Nixon and Lindsay and McQuaid, the increasing number of men who are now engaging in emotional, aesthetic and sexualized labour. To date, though, sustained empirical analysis of masculinity and emotional, aesthetic and sexualized labour remains sparse and again these are all areas warranting further research.

## **Concluding comments**

This editorial has introduced a number of key themes that are considered in this special edition. In many respects many of these themes reiterate and reinforce previous analysis with regard to the gendered nature of service work, specifically, and paid employment more generally. For example, the articles considering front-line service work are largely premised on the prevailing view that this type of work is seen as 'women's work', with a number of consequences such as undervaluing soft skills. Equally, Gregory's work points to continuing disadvantage for women in the advertising industry, a situation sustained by overt sexism in support of hegemonic masculinity.

While this special edition adds to the sum of knowledge on the gendered nature of service work, it nevertheless also points to areas that require further exploration. The most obvious example of this is the need for further research considering the experience of men in front-line service work. In particular, class and gender need to be considered together in building explanations for differences in how working and middle-class men experience front-line service work.

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