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Schaub, Jason

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Chapter 17

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Jason Schaub

Introduction

The primary aim of this chapter is to disturb the gender regimes currently occupying social work. In order to accomplish this aim, a critical examination of men's experiences may be helpful. Men who are social workers run counter to their gender norm by pursuing a social work profession and social work student men experience a complex series of interlocking privileges and challenges (Schaub, 2017). Scrutinising their experiences can provide knowledge about the gender boundaries present in social work, and how social workers navigate these.

This work is situated within critical studies on men (Hearn et al. 2002) and mobilises feminist theories to illuminate the topic of men's position in social work. These theories require increased positionality descriptions from the researcher. Feminist methodologies are less commonly used in the study of men and masculinities, but can be useful to describe the intersecting issues experienced by men in education (Haywood & Mac an Ghaill, 2015).

Because of the aim and definitions described above, it is important to present my position and outline my involvement in this work. I am a white, gay, cisgender middle-aged immigrant man. I have experience of practising social work in the United States of America, Republic of Ireland, and United Kingdom, primarily in children's social care, but with some experience of working with people with mental health difficulties. I have been an academic for a dozen years. I use research to develop knowledge to help understand the challenges that are as yet poorly understood. During the production of this knowledge, I believe it is essential to engage with people who use services, to ensure that the search for this knowledge is both useful and has the least negative impact on participants. This chapter draws on, reviews and updates research conducted in my doctoral study into the experiences and progression of social work students who were men (Schaub, 2017).

It is a complicated task to use the lens of feminist theories to research men and masculinity. Using a critical pro-feminist lens is helpful when working within this space of dissonance. A pro-feminist standpoint requires the researcher critique the privileged societal power of men and how men's power perpetuates gender inequality, but a commitment to destabilise inequality is an important element (Pease, 2001). Whitehead (2002) suggests that a man researching society should ensure that their work does not increase men's hegemony. Some suggest that men are better able to jeopardise their position, because they occupy the positions of power, arguing that men are well placed to critique their positions of power and are useful in problematising the continuation of gender inequality (Kristeva, 1981).

The construction of this chapter draws heavily on West and Zimmerman's theory of ''doing gender'', where gender 'is the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category' (West and Zimmerman, 1987: 127). It also draws on concepts of *hegemonic masculinity* (Carrigan et al, 1985), an omnipresent masculinity theory where society measures men against an ideal of masculinity; the further from this ideal a man is, the less societal worth and consequential power he has.

This chapter considers the presented gender and not the originating sex. Participants were recruited about their presented gender, not their sex. It is important to recognise that not all male bodies are men. Derrida (1976; 1982) draws on concepts of linguistic deconstruction where language is understood to be both a means and an end, attempting to represent, but also to structuralise, to find new ways to express complex, inadequately described ideas. As a result, the term 'men' is used throughout instead of both 'male' and 'man'. Lexically, this creates some cumbersome phrasing, since English practice usually prefers a switch to 'male' (e.g., male social workers instead of men social workers), but these terms are used deliberately to refer to the presented gender, rather than the possible underlying sex[1i].

This chapter will outline two issues: first, how and why the proportion and position of men in social work is a feminist issue; second, a more focussed and nuanced examination of men social work students' experience and what this can improve understanding about how 'social work processes involve the production of gender

through practical means, which relate both to immediate, local, and wider, institutional contexts' (Hicks, 2015: 483).

Men's position in social work as a feminist issue

When examining the position of men in social work, it is important to remember that while men are a *numerical* minority in the social work profession, they do not experience all of the challenges of a minority group, as a result of the benefit of the patriarchal dividend (Connell, 2009). The proportion of men in social work has been decreasing for the past 30 years. As an indication of this (although not an exact relationship), the ratio of men studying social work dropped from 35 per cent in 1980 to 25 per cent in 1991 (Lyons et al. 1995), and continues to drop, currently at about 12% (Skills for Care 2019). There are challenges in accurately identifying the number and proportion of men in social work, primarily because workforce information is held and presented by a range of government departments. Men make up 18% of the registered social workers in England (HCPC, 2019). This proportion will continue to decrease as a higher proportion of qualified social work men are close to retirement age and there are fewer younger men joining the profession (GSCC, 2012). Policy makers and scholars have expressed concerns with the low number of men in social work in the UK (Ashcroft 2014; Parker and Crabtree 2014),

Although the proportion of men in social work is decreasing, they continue to hold disproportionately more (and greater) positions of power (Kullberg 2013; McLean 2003), and this unequal representation creates challenges about increasing the number of men in the profession (Hicks, 2015). Men predominate in management, academia and policy-leading positions (McPhail, 2004). For example, both the Chief Executive Officer and Chair of the newly formed Social Work England are men. This phenomenon, where men are numerically a minority, but experience a greater proportion of the power, is referred to as the 'glass escalator'. This concept is a play on the so-called *'glass ceiling'*, which is frequently used to describe women's struggle to reach the top of organisations. Williams (1992, 2013) found that men in women-majority occupations (including librarians, flight attendants and social workers) experience accelerated progression into management and other positions of power. There are several different elements that combine to create this effect, these elements are both in the workplace and private lives. In the social work

workplace, men are often encouraged into management (sometimes being told, 'you seem like you would be a good manager'), as well as sometimes seeking the distance from direct work with service users because of the increased risk for men of directly engaging with vulnerable people (Pringle, 2001). This acceleration is not uniformly experienced by all men for example, men from minority ethnic backgrounds do not experience the same benefits (Wingfield, 2009).

At this point, it may be helpful to consider why the social work profession may want to increase the number of men. There are generally three arguments provided for creating a profession with more men: firstly, the positive effect of men as role models; secondly, improving the status and prestige of the social work profession; thirdly, creating a more diverse profession (Pease, 2011). The first of these arguments suggests that men are useful role models for some service users, usually identified as men and boys, and that having more men as social workers provides them with professionals to whom they can connect. This perception predominates in the societal discussions about the topic and is found in news media reports about the low percentage of men in teaching and social work (Ashcroft, 2014; Galley and Parrish, 2014). The support for this reason has been rebuffed with work showing that children and young people are able to draw examples from a range of people irrespective of their gender (Tarrant et al. 2015).

The second argument, increasing the number of men to improve the status and prestige of the profession, is problematic as it runs counter to gender equality. This argument relies on gender inequality to improve the status of the social work profession, by perpetuating the higher status of men compared to women. It suggests that without the assistance of more men, the profession will struggle to increase its status and become more valued by society. Given the social work profession's connection to anti-oppressive practice (Cocker and Hafford-Letchfield, 2014; IFSW, 2014), this argument does not align to the social work values of diversity and inclusion.

A call for a more diverse profession is the final argument, that diversity would mean that social work would better support service users. This argument is often applied to other identities such as people with disabilities and people from ethnic minority communities and is useful when considering whether social work should attempt to

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increase the number of men in the profession. Fiore and Facchini (2013) suggested that seeking a more diverse profession was 'something which many social workers hope for' (pg. 321). By following this, men social workers could be encouraged to consider their choices through a gender equality lens and determine if they are increasing or diminishing inequality by their choices (such as promotion to positions of management or power). If one follows this argument through, it provides a logical process. If we want to have more women in positions of power, such as chief executives and directors of social work services, then it is appropriate to have more gender diversity in these women-majority[2ii] areas. As noted previously, it is important that men, when coming into women-majority spaces, ensure that their actions do not further disadvantage women. In order to assist in reducing gender inequality men should be encouraged to take pro-active steps, such as foregrounding the work of women. These actions will help to address concerns that men entering these spaces (such as social work) are not usurping them.

The leadership of public services are gendered, even though the workforces of these contains a greater than average proportion of women staff (Kalaitzi et al, 2017). In particular, healthcare leadership has been criticised for the over-representation of men in positions of power with a contrasting concentration of women in the workforce, with the issue being noted across the EU (Fjeldsted, 2013). There is a knowledge gap for examining gender as a factor in leadership for social care organisations (Lawler, 2007), but there are indications that there are barriers for women to seek and gain these leadership positions (Kalaitzi et al 2017).

Moving from thinking about men social workers generally to consider the more specific issue of men social work students, using men's experience of studying social work can help expose how gender inequality has effects for both women and men. There is some earlier work that considers the differing reasons men and women have for entering social work (Cree, 1996), with men suggesting they 'fell into' social work, rather than approaching the profession with a long-standing plan. This is contrasted with later work that shows that social care is a field with a higher-than expected proportion of men (Hussein and Christensen, 2017), with the supposition that social care provides a pipeline to social work qualification for some men.

Men Social Work Students: Engaging with the boundaries of feminism

There is a lack of knowledge about how men experience studying social work (Giesler and Beadlescomb 2015; Schaub 2015). There are a few notable examples, with increasing frequency over the past decade (Cree 1996; Parker and Crabtree 2014; Schaub, 2015, 2017). The literature is more developed about men's progression, men do not progress as well as women on social work programmes (Hussein et al. 2009; Schaub, 2015). My own research has shown that, even when managing against other variables, such as ethnicity, age and disability, men had more progression issues during their social work programmes than women. This should not be shocking, as men and boys do not perform as well as women and girls in education (Hillman and Robinson 2016); although this experience is not symmetrical across all education settings. Girls perform better at all levels of education, including GCSEs, A levels, and other examinations (Skelton 2006; OECD 2015). In higher education, in the UK women comprise a higher percentage of students overall and gather a higher proportion of what are considered 'good degrees' (Firsts or 2.1). These findings are replicated in a number of studies, with some broad agreement among them that women have within the past decade begun achieving better results overall across a range of subjects in higher education (Woodfield 2014). These studies show a gendered pattern to achievement. What is interesting to note, however, is that men on women-majority programmes (such as social work) are more likely to drop out of their programme than women in men-majority programmes (such as STEM programmes) (Severiens and ten Dam, 2012), suggesting that there is a gendered effect that is differently experienced.

Given their entry to the profession, the views of men that are social work students can potentially help reveal issues that other, more experienced, social work men no longer identify. It is likely that the issues have become so familiar for the experienced practitioner that they cannot see them in such detail. In particular, students can help identify when there are professionally specific approaches or situations that cause friction, as a result of joining the *community of practice* (Wenger-Traynor et al, 2014). This entry to the profession through training likely brings these issues into sharper relief for students than for those that have become acculturated to social work. The liminal space of studenthood allows the opportunity to gather the experiences of men

that have recently started to engage with the profession and seek their perspective on where the difficulties lie.

Examining the reasons for these progression issues, it is useful to consider the ways that gender influences the choices that people make on a daily basis, and the far-reaching consequences of these choices. The gendered nature of a profession is likely part of the consideration when someone chooses a career (compare social work and policing, and the gender profile of these two professions in the United Kingdom). When men enter women-majority professions, they can experience retribution from friends and family as a result of crossing these gendered occupation boundaries (Weaver-Hightower 2011).

Men in Social Work Education: A study

I undertook an interview study of 21 undergraduate social work student men in England (Schaub, 2017), the first study considering how progression and experience interacted for social work student men. My research found that social work student men experienced a number of interlocking issues that increased their challenges with progression. The themes developed from the analysis were: feeling unwanted by the social work profession; concerns that men are not 'natural' social workers; feeling silenced; self-protection (including being cautious); and disengagement. These themes engaged with mitigating factors such as having a strong relationship with women in their family and being a father, as well as general student challenges such as time management and financial concerns. For the purposes of this chapter, to help illuminate how the findings can present issues of gender inequality, the following will explore the following themes: that men were not 'natural' social workers; concerns around physical contact; feeling the profession did not want them.

Men Are Not 'Natural' Social Workers

All of the participants in my study described a perception that men were not considered be 'natural' social workers. They talked about how social work was equated with caring, and that women were identified as caring. They each felt that they were doing something *against the grain* by choosing social work. Two different participants with different profiles (one a young A-level entry student, the other a mature student with children) described very similar concerns:

'People think [social work] is a caring profession and I don't want to sound oppressive to women or anything like that, but the fact that women seem to be more caring possibly than men.' (Mike[3iii], 41 years old)

'They are not going to look at social work and say, "Look, admire that man", maybe it's because it's a caring role. It may be more feminine than other jobs.' (Dean, 20)

The participants were generally able to present a nuanced perspective of gender roles, often suggesting that they believed themselves to be 'non-traditional'. These participants were aware that they are transgressing a gender boundary by joining the profession. They believed that society associated social work with caring and femininity and, therefore, a career in social work was an unusual choice for a man. This was commented on by their friends and family, usually along the lines of 'there are not many men in social work', with these conversations serving to increase the sense of being out of place. Another participant suggested simply that 'I think [social work] was more difficult for me because of being a man' (Will).

Social work is not a 'traditional' occupation for a man (Christie, 1998), which is shown by the reducing proportion of men in the profession. Following West and Zimmerman (1987; 2009), our gender is presented through our actions, and according to a set of social rules, which are different for men and women (Goffman 1977). Our actions signal our gender to those around us. These actions allow for reactions, which create a dialogue that either supports or opposes the action (Chafetz, 1990). This means that when a man chooses social work, he is transgressing a gendered boundary. These boundaries are socially policed, with retribution if one transgresses too much or too often (Butler, 2004). Butler (1990) described the 'heterosexual matrix', a combination of sexuality and gender norms that combine to create a demanding set of rules for men and women to follow. This means that when men in social work hear, 'You're a social worker, that's surprising, isn't it mostly women that do that?', this is an experience of policing the gender boundary, reminding the man that he is presenting something that does not fit gender norms. Several scholars have explored this policing of men that undertake women-majority professions, with descriptions of challenges from both friends, family and strangers (Simpson, 2009; Weaver-Hightower 2011).

Anxieties about Physical Contact

In addition to this general observation, the participants felt strongly that there are some areas of social work where it is more problematic to be a man. Physical contact with a service user takes on different connotations when the social worker is a man; research into other helping professions describe men's touch as 'sexualised' (Harding et al, 2008). Most participants were concerned about this, and often mentioned that men are more likely to physically and sexually abuse others than women. In my research for example, Owen said, 'If you hear about stuff going on, things like kids getting abused, it's more to do with men…' (Owen, 21). This is not without reason, since there are more men are dismissed from the professional regulator. An analysis of this statistic shows the regulator for the social work profession dismissed more men for inappropriate contact with service users (Furness 2015; Melville-Wiseman 2016). As illustrated in these empirical findings, these trends may well influence men student social workers concerns and given the wider societal issues regarding men's power relationships that lead to abusive situations this concern is justified, as described by Pringle (2001), with men's predominance as abusers, there are complications for them to be social workers.

Expanding on this theme, the participants were worried about physical contact with service users, particularly with children. One had a placement supervisor mention to him that a male employee had been sacked for having physical contact with a child (which was described as a 'side hug'), and Saban said, 'I learned straight away I have to be really cautious with how I present myself physically to the children' (Saban, 31). What was important about this exchange was that Saban had not been told whether the actions of the former employee were improper, only that he had been fired for having physical contact with a child. Generally, the participants felt that their concern for this was greater than that of their fellow students that were women. This concern about the impact of their being a man on their ability to engage with service users was a consistent and pressing worry for the participants. Whilst there are various stances about touch, often organisationally defined in procedures and culture, the knowledge base about the use of touch in social work is not very developed, even though the topic is frequently discussed (Green, 2017). This topic is more challenging for some men than others, with one participant noting that his

identity as a gay man made him highly anxious about being around children, out of fear that colleagues or service users might accuse him of inappropriate touching. Jeyasingham (2014) suggests that this additional challenge is because 'queer identities… are positioned as overtly sexual and requiring management in public arenas' (pg. 219), requiring that gay men, in particular, have to undertake additional work to manage how their identity interacts with their professional work.

Feeling Social Work Did Not Want Them

Finally, the men in this study also believed that the social work profession did not 'want them'. They felt that they were sometimes related to as representatives for *all* men, often in situations or discussions where they did not feel their experience qualified them to represent men. These feelings were particularly prominent during discussions of abuse and domestic violence. More broadly, though, the participants often felt they could not disagree without being seen as being combative, meaning they were unsure of how to engage (and often were less engaged as a result). John said, 'So if there's a debate and we have a view from a different perspective, you have to be really careful what you're gonna say' (John, 34). He raised these concerns that were echoed by other participants, who suggested they sometimes felt the whole class (who were predominantly women, and usually led by a woman teacher) turned to them as if they could speak on behalf of the abuse perpetrated by all men. Dominelli argues that 'being identified as an oppressor can cause feelings of paralysis and guilt, especially where it is difficult for the individual concerned to individually extricate him or herself from a privileged status' (2002: 46). These discussions are important in social work education, as they are the focus of a significant amount of social work practice, and if these students are unable to engage fully, it is likely that their understanding of the topic is hindered. In addition, when thinking of some of the participants in my UK study, it would be unfair to expect a 19-year-old new university student to represent all men, particularly if one reason he chose social work was to address the abuse of other men.

One of the key questions emerging from my research was: Does social work actually want more men? Some of the experiences of the participants showed that there were some people in the profession who made them feel they were not welcome, which might lead one to think that there are some in the profession that do not wish

there to be a greater proportion of men. Nick felt that his experience at university suggested that 'some of the older [lecturers] are a little bit institutionalised and think that male social workers aren't right… It's an observation that came to mind that's made my experience a bit more uncomfortable' (Nick, 26). What he highlighted from this situation was that some of his teachers felt that he (and other men) should not be social workers, but it is also possible that these teachers were reacting to the 'glass escalator' effect of men entering the profession.

Peter, a Black African father of two, provided an example from his first placement; he described this situation as the defining experience of his degree. He described feeling upset when his placement manager told him that the placement's staff and service users did not want a man on placement with them:

> 'The manager told me, "I specifically asked for a male student."… Every staff have rejected it, and all the service users have said they didn't want a male student... The manager told me they don't welcome me, but she will support me. Anything happening, I should inform her. She had specifically asked for me, so she's going to see me through.. It was very hard. I wasn't comfortable. I don't know who is my friend, who isn't my friend. The first few weeks were very, very challenging.' (Peter, 38)

This situation was difficult to hear, and he felt it was difficult to experience. He described this experience as something that he had to 'get over' so he could engage with his first placement. While there may have been very good reasons for feeling uncomfortable with men, to expect a student to successfully engage in this environment would provide a challenge. Peter was aware of their discomfort and felt that this was a situation he needed to address to be successful on his placement. What was interesting was that he felt that this experience was likely to be similar to what he would experience across the rest of his career.

The men in this study clearly felt that they had made a choice that contrasted them with a hegemonic ideal of masculinity (Carrigan et al, 1985). Further, this study helped show how individuals can experience complicated privilege and marginalisation. Similarly, Coston and Kimmel (2012) found that some men can experience gendered privilege, but marginalisation because of another factor. They found that that 'among members of one privileged class, other mechanisms of

marginalisation may mute or reduce privilege based on another status' (Coston and Kimmel 2012, p.110). In the social work context, it is important to remember that men are privileged generally but are expected to be able to easily avoid stigmatising situations (Crocker et al, 1998). This means that they are less likely to have developed the coping mechanisms that those with more marginalisation need to develop. Some of the quotes presented above suggest this, such as Nick's challenge in accepting that some lecturers may have conflicts about men's position and advancing in the social work profession.

It is important to recognise that gender inequality produces challenges for women and girls which are multi-layered and dynamic. Gender inequality places an unequal burden on women and girls. Behaviours are often codified into gender norms that support the division of labour for men and women into gendered forms that help perpetuate gender inequality (Chafetz 1990). From my research, it is clear that we need to think more carefully about gendered expectations of 'care'. In particular, we need to consider how care relates to social work and gendered notions of 'suitable' professions. Given that men are challenged by gender stereotypes of not being 'caring' enough for social work, it seems reasonable one mechanism to improve gender equality is by investigating these gender stereotypes to better understand the gendered notions of 'care'.

Conclusions

This chapter examined men and their engagement with social work as an issue that may be useful when attempting to understand gender inequality, a central tenet of feminist theory (Wendt and Moulding, 2016). The proportion of men in social work in the UK is dropping and will continue to do so. Men's position in social work is complicated, particularly as a result of their predominance and swifter advancement to holding positions of power. Similar issues are found in related occupations, such as nursing, and is called the *glass escalator*. This unequal representation creates challenges when considering increasing the number of men in social work. There are some arguments that can assist examinations about why and whether the social work profession wants to increase the number of men in social work.

Men as social work students present a more visible example of these issues, because they are joining the profession, and may not have developed the coping strategies of men with more experience. The men in the study presented in this chapter felt keenly that they were out of place, and many thought that their gender made them unwelcome to the profession. There were some sites of specific difficulty, such as physical contact and discussions about domestic abuse. Their experiences can help us identify when society in appropriately suggests that women are more naturally suited to caring roles and men are, therefore, not appropriate to undertake tasks related to caring. Social work is often described as a 'caring profession'. These gendered norms create challenges for male social work students, but the same norms also support the continued overburdening of women and girls with caring responsibilities. If we seek to address these gender norms in an attempt to improve women and girls' lives, then it is problematic and sexist to suggest that women are 'natural' carers and that men, therefore, are not suited to these roles. Examining how we engage and support men to undertake social work can help to address gender equality, as well as providing more nuanced understandings of how people (of all genders) can undertake caring roles.

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ii The phrase 'women-majority' is used decidedly here (instead of 'female-dominated' or 'traditionally female'), because while there are more women in these occupations, they do not predominate in positions of authority, power or financial reward (McPhail 2004).

iii All the participant's names have been changed to pseudonyms and any identifying characteristics have been removed from their presented narrative, to protect their identities.