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Ambivalent Gender Accountability Male Florists in the Swiss Context

Nicky Le Feuvre^{*}, Isabelle Zinn^{**}

This article investigates the ways in which male florists mobilise, neutralise or challenge sex category membership in the course of their daily activities. Our main interest lies in the idea that individuals invest gender norms with varying levels of salience in specific social contexts. We therefore focus on the ways in which male florists account for their professional activities in normative gendered ways, whilst also stressing the opportunities for challenging gender norms that are associated with the minority status of being a man in a highly feminised occupation. Our findings will suggest that the concept of “accountability”, combining the dimensions of orientation to sex category, gender assessment and enforcement (Hollander, 2013), provides a useful framework for analysing situations that apparently do not correspond to gender accomplishment in the normative sense of the term. In conclusion, we show that the accountability of male florists to sex categories and gender norms varies considerably, according to the particular dimension of their experiences studied and that in this sense, sex category membership is activated, neutralised or challenged with varying levels of intensity on the different scenes of professional florists.

Keywords : florists, gender, masculinity, skills, switzerland

I. Introduction

The aim of this article is to investigate when gender becomes salient for individuals at work and to better understand exactly how they mobilise, neutralise or challenge gender stereotypes in the course of their daily activities. We thus intend to explore “accountability” to sex category membership (Garfinkel, 1967 ; Heritage, 1984 ; Hollander, 2013 ; West/Zimmerman, 1987, 2009) amongst male florists in Switzerland. Although we describe the vertical segregation that places men in the most rewarding positions of this highly feminized occupation, our main interest lies in the idea that sex categories and gender norms (being a man or a woman, acting in a masculine or feminine way, *etc.*) are invested with varying levels

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of salience by individuals in specific social contexts (Zinn, 2012, 2013). In so doing, we focus here on the ways in which male florists account for some aspects of their professional activities in normative gendered ways, whilst also neutralising or challenging gender norms in other settings. The minority status of being a man in this highly feminised occupation is thus associated with what could be called ambivalent gender accountability (Hollander, 2013). This finding clearly stresses the interest of investigating when and how sex affiliation becomes salient or not to individuals.

The article is based on an on-going research project on the accomplishment and experience of masculinities in two occupations (florists and butchers), which are characterised by contrasting gender compositions. Here we will focus exclusively on data from the fieldwork on florists. This project uses a variety of methods (formal and informal interviews with florists, discussions with their occupational representatives and floral school teachers, and participant observation in different occupational settings, e.g. flower markets, florist shops, training sessions), which we also draw on here¹. The aim is to understand how individuals relate to existing gender categories and to analyse the effects this may have for men's experiences in occupations that are statistically "feminised" or are numerically dominated by men. In this article, we are interested in exactly how Swiss male florists "gender" (or not) their professional activities². We propose to explore the extent to which giving a client advice about wedding flowers or preparing other floral arrangements are portrayed as gendered activities. Whilst investigating under what circumstances gender categories become salient for individuals, we are also interested in exploring the extent to which they may be perceived as irrelevant to the interactions taking place in a given workplace situation. We thus focus on the significance male florists attach – explicitly or implicitly – to sex categories and gender norms in order to tease out the extent to which gender categories become significant (or not) in particular occupational activities.

The article is structured around five main sections. After briefly presenting the gender composition of florists in the Swiss context (II), we will present a short review of the theoretical perspectives developed to date for the analysis of men in highly feminised occupations (III), before presenting our research methods (IV) and going on to analyse when and how male florists make gender relevant to their career paths, interactions with clients, perceptions of skill and daily activities (V). In discussion of this data (VI), we will argue that the "accountability" of male florists to gender categories varies considerably according to the particular dimension of their experiences under study. They clearly relate very strongly to sex cat-

¹ Isabelle Zinn carried out the fieldwork on which this article is based in the course of her PhD research. The authors have jointly analyzed the interview and ethnographic data collected, notably within IP6 of the National Centre of Competency in Research (NCCR LIVES) "Overcoming Vulnerability : Life-Course Perspectives", of which both authors are members. See : <http://www.lives-nccr.ch/en>.

² We are grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful and constructive comments on a previous version of this article.

egories when explaining their personal trajectories, and men's position within the profession more generally. Likewise, they systematically mobilise gender categories in their assessment of clients. However, sex category membership is seen as largely irrelevant to the sexual division of tasks or to their description of professional skills and performance. In this sense, we can conclude that sex category membership is potentially mobilised, neutralised or contested differently on a variety of professional scenes.

II. The Gender Composition of Florists in Switzerland

In Switzerland, becoming a florist usually involves a 36-month apprenticeship, leading to a CFC qualification³. This diploma is acquired either entirely through an apprenticeship in an established floral business (floral shop or supermarket)⁴ or through a dedicated course at a vocational school⁵, during which the students do more limited internships in florists' shops. Although it is legally possible to set up a floral business or to work as a florist without this CFC qualification, more than 80% of Swiss florists are qualified in this way (OFS, 2011a)⁶. Officially, each trainee florist follows the same course, since there is a national curriculum and no options for specialization. However, in reality, some differences exist, according to the location of work placements.

Official career advice documents indicate that florists undertake the following tasks : welcoming clients and giving advice about floral compositions, cutting and preparing fresh flowers, creating floral bouquets and arrangements in accordance with orders, organizing delivery and delivering flowers, carrying heavy equipment, attractively arranging commercial outlets in order to enhance business, decorating various locations (offices, churches, *etc.*) with flowers (CSFO, 2012b). In addition to these tasks, our field observations also revealed a number of additional activities for self-employed florists, including obtaining the "right" flowers at the right time, negotiating prices at auctions, book-keeping, stock control and staff management.

The most recent data from the Swiss Federal Statistical Office (in 2000) indicate that, of the 6122 florists in Switzerland, just 366 (6%) are men⁷. Since the beginning of the Swiss census in 1970, the profession has had a clear-cut majority of female workers (OFS, 2011a). In fact, the number of male florists has been slowly decreasing since the 1970s. However, as in other occupations (e.g. Tain, 2007), although the profession is clearly nu-

³ The CFC (certificat fédéral de capacité) is a nationally recognized diploma (CSFO, 2012a).

⁴ The apprenticeship includes practical and theoretical modules ; each apprentice spends one day a week at school, following classes on topics that include botany, floral art, commercial techniques and standard academic subjects (CSFO, 2012b).

⁵ There are only two training centres that offer such a full-time course in Switzerland, which means that most trainees follow the apprenticeship route into the occupation.

⁶ Out of the 80% of florists that have the CFC diploma, 8% also hold a federal certificate, which is a diploma in advanced vocational training (OFS, 2011a).

⁷ These data are from the 2000 Swiss census. Unfortunately, no more recent data is currently available.

merically feminised, men tend to dominate representative functions. Thus, in 2012, the Board of the Swiss Professional Florist Association⁸ is composed of three men, plus the General Secretary, for just one woman. Furthermore, the directors of the six major floral auctions in Switzerland are also men. In other words, the small minority of male florists tend to occupy the most visible positions within the occupation, whereas the overwhelming majority of female workers occupy full- or part-time salaried positions (Table 1).

There are also some gender specificities regarding employment conditions : nearly 20% of florists are self-employed, they own or rent their own florist shop, pay themselves from their commercial profits and usually employ salaried collaborators and/or apprentices. Whereas 52% of the male florists are self-employed, this is only the case for 17% of their female counterparts (OFS, 2012a). However, because the occupation is so highly feminized, the vast majority of florist shops in Switzerland (n = 1027) are nevertheless owned and run by women rather than by men (n = 190). Furthermore, 351 of the 366 male florists (96%) work full-time⁹, as against 74% of their female counterparts. However, compared to the Swiss average of just 42.2% of women in full-time jobs (OFS, 2012b), rates of female part-time work are surprisingly low here. This would seem to be explained by two specific characteristics of the occupation : women's discontinuous activity patterns and the relatively low levels of pay salaried florists can command in the Swiss context (see below).

As indicated in Table 1, 57% of female florists in employment are aged below 30 years, whereas this is the case for less than 22% of their male counterparts. While the number of male florists working full-time is high and stable throughout the course of their professional life, women's career paths are characterized by more diversified employment patterns. An overwhelming majority (94%) of young female florists (20-24 years old) work full-time, but this is the case for just 16% of those aged 35-39 years. We can therefore hypothesize that the relatively high average rate of female full-time employment is due to the fact that many female florists leave the labour market when they have children¹⁰ and generally do not return to jobs as florists. In other words, most female florists are young and childless.

⁸ Membership of this association is limited to florist businesses, rather than individual florists. In 2012, about 54% (660) of all established florist shops were registered members of the Swiss professional florist association, covering 2800 or about 47% of all professional florists. The association represents, promotes and defends the interests of the so-called "green industry". It provides its members with information and documentation on various issues, including : training opportunities, job vacancies, and ongoing events in the floral business. The association also provides legal advice and business consulting for its members. The web site search engine also enables members of the public to locate the nearest floral shop (Swiss Professional Florist Association : www.florist.ch).

⁹ It is important to note that full-time employment for salaried collaborators is usually equivalent to five working days a week, often with irregular hours, such as working on Saturdays and Sundays and/or late on weekdays. Most of the self-employed florists work at least a six-day week.

¹⁰ In Switzerland, the average age of women at first birth is 28.7 years (OFS, 2011b).

This hypothesis can be partially confirmed by a comparison between the census data for 1990 and 2000, which shows that qualified female florists do indeed tend to leave the profession in large numbers over time. Thus, in 1990, 1537 women aged between 20 and 24 years were employed as florists (OFS, 2012c). Ten years later, there are only 527 women florists aged between 35 and 39 years, suggesting that approximately 1000 women had left the profession over that period. One potential explanation for this discontinuous pattern of female employment lies in the pay levels of florists, reflecting the low remuneration of shop work more generally¹¹. The high cost of childcare and the unfavourable fiscal provisions for dual earner couples are well documented in the Swiss context (Bütler/Ruesch, 2009) and these conditions would seem to explain the difference in patterns of male and female investment in this particular occupation over the life-course.

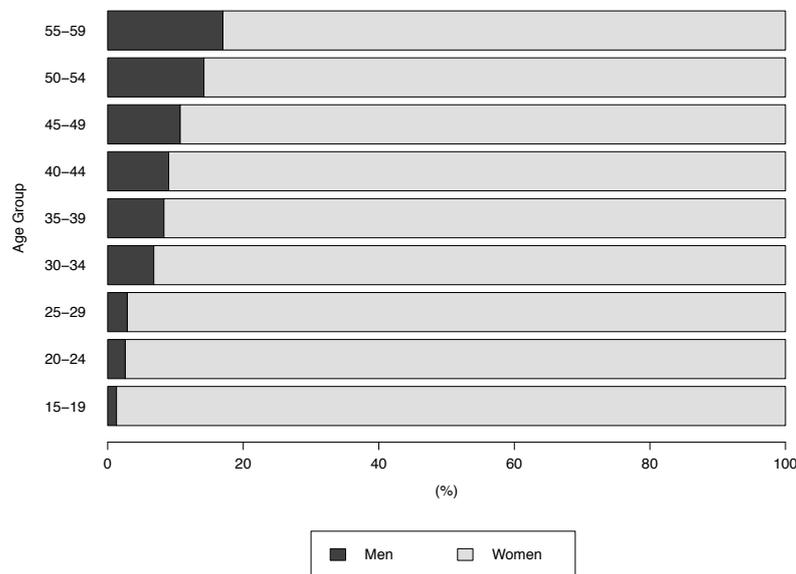


Table 1. Florists by Sex and Age Categories, Switzerland, 2000.

Source : Office fédéral de la statistique, 2012c.

III. Theoretical Framework : Atypical Careers from a Gender Perspective

The existing literature is rather ambivalent as to the implications of men's presence in highly feminized occupations ; not least because the focus of attention varies quite considerably from one study to another. On

¹¹ There is no legal minimum wage in Switzerland, but the florist's professional association recommends a full-time salary scale of 3'800 – 4'040 Swiss Francs a month for qualified workers (Swiss Professional Florist Association, 2012). This puts salaries in the lowest quartile of the Swiss wage range (OFS, 2008). Unfortunately, no precise data is available about the income of self-employed florists. Although the relative profitability of a florist shop obviously depends on number of factors (location, type of clientele, *etc.*) and is subject to seasonal variation, our respondents unanimously suggest that self-employment is financially advantageous compared to salaried work. Our self-employed respondents estimated that their own income was twice as high as that of their salaried employees.

the one hand, some authors have analyzed the implications of minority status for male and female career paths and promotion opportunities, often stressing the asymmetrical consequences of minority status for men and women (Bourdieu, 1998 ; Fortino, 2003). On the other hand, some authors have been more concerned with the implications of such atypical career choices for the gender order (Connell, 1987) or specific gender regimes (Fusulier *et al.*, 2009 ; Lapeyre, 2006). The main focus has been to analyze atypical¹² career choices from the perspective of weakening or consolidating gender boundaries more generally (Gianettoni *et al.*, 2010 ; Le Feuvre/Laufer, 2008).

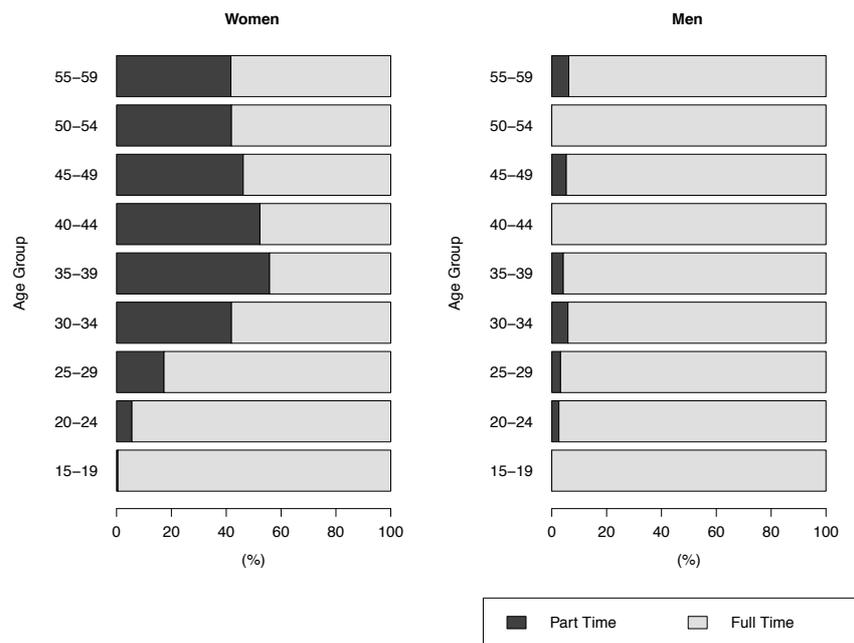


Table 2. Working-time Patterns of Florists, by Sex and Age Categories, Switzerland, 2000. Source : Office fédéral de la statistique, 2012c.

In this section, we will rapidly summarize the state of the art on these two themes, before going on to explore the analytical potential of a third corpus of literature, less often focussed on atypical gender configurations, but potentially useful for thinking about the ways in which men and women in non-traditional occupations “do gender” on a daily basis and about the multiples ways in which “gender accountability” (West/Zimmerman, 1987, 2009) may prevail in such contexts.

A. The “Bonus” of Being a Man in a Highly Feminized Occupation

Whilst the notion of “glass ceiling” has become commonplace in the analysis of women’s experiences within “male bastions” (Buscatto/Marry, 2009), the term “glass escalator” (Williams, 1989, 1993) has also been coined to describe the advantages that accrue to the small number of men who enter occupations that have been historically dominated by women.

¹² *i.e.* statistically limited.

Although such men usually have fewer economic and cultural resources than their female counterparts in highly masculinized occupations, several studies have shown that being a man in a highly feminized occupation can be a bonus (Charrier, 2007 ; Le Feuvre, 2007). Men in atypical occupations more easily attain positions of power and influence, because those qualities associated with masculinity still tend to be more highly regarded than those associated with femininity, and because the shared idea of what constitutes professional success and performance : «privileges those characteristics that culture associates primarily with men» (Schein, 2001 :683). In other words, even in occupations statistically dominated by women, “masculinity” (or simply maleness) is strongly associated with professional performance and leadership potential (*Ibid.* :683). In some cases, it would seem that men are also able to create a “masculine” niche within the occupational structure that is often associated with particular symbolic or material advantages (Tain, 2007).

B. The Consequences of Atypical Career Choices for the “Gender Order”

A second corpus of research takes atypical career choices as an opportunity to reflect less on the experiences and career paths of individual men and women, but more on the internal mechanisms of the “gender order” at the macro-social level or for occupational level “gender regimes” (Connell, 1987, 1995, 2005 ; Lapeyre, 2006 ; Williams, 1993, 1995). The main issue here is to determine the significance of the apparent inversion of traditional sex roles (e.g. men doing what is generally seen as “women’s work”) from a more global perspective. The central question addressed in such studies concerns the meaning of atypical career choices in relation to existing gender norms. Some of the research conducted under this heading reaches similar conclusions to that presented in the previous sub-section : despite certain signs of “gender mobility” (e.g. men moving into highly feminized occupations, or *vice versa*), the founding principals of the gender order remain unchallenged and, ultimately unchanged by these individual “transgressions”. Thus, there is no weakening of the “similarity taboo” (Mathieu, 1971 ; Rubin, 2006), which makes it normal for men and women to occupy different jobs ; nor is there any reduction in the “differential value” placed on each of the sexes (Héritier, 1996, 2002) ; precisely because men’s career paths in feminized occupations generally do not resemble those of their female counterparts (Le Feuvre/Laufer, 2008).

However, within this second perspective, a few authors reach somewhat different conclusions, suggesting that the mere presence of men in female dominated occupations leads to a partial blurring of gendered boundaries within the workplace, making it harder to maintain the normative belief that men and women are better suited to particular kinds of work or that they necessarily mobilize gender differentiated abilities (Guichard-Claudic *et al.*, 2008). Authors who defend this position do not necessarily deny the fact that men generally reap a bonus from their minority position. They

simply argue that any partial transgression of the gender norms that pre-empt the sexual division of labour has the potential to erode the taken-for-granted nature of gender hierarchies and to open the way for a more transformative process of the gender order as a whole (Murcier, 2008).

Although they are often based on detailed empirical studies of the professional practices of men and women in atypical occupations, most of the research carried out under these two perspectives focuses on the consequences of such gender “transgressions”, either in terms of individual career paths, or in terms of gender norms and occupational segregation. Little attention is paid to the ways in which individuals relate to sex categories and mobilise, neutralise or challenge these in the course of their daily activities. This is the focus of a third corpus of literature.

C. Men “Doing Gender” in Atypical Occupations

This final corpus of literature builds on the “doing gender” approach, initiated by Goffman (1976, 1977) and developed by Garfinkel (1967), West & Zimmerman (1987) and West & Fenstermaker (1995). According to this perspective, gender is not a fixed characteristic of individuals, but rather something «they must constantly accomplish in interaction» (Hollander, 2013 :5), notably by putting their beliefs into practice (Martin, 2001). In other words, individuals do not necessarily “do gender” by conscious choice, but rather due to the accountability pressures that prevail within a given social setting (Martin, 2003). West and Zimmerman suggest that, in the mundane activities of daily life, individuals of both sexes are : «held accountable for performance of that activity as a woman or a man» (1987 :136). Thus :

To be successful, marking or displaying gender must be finely fitted to situations and modified or transformed as the occasion demands. Doing gender consists of managing such occasions so that the outcome is seen as gender-appropriate or, as the case may be, gender-inappropriate, that is, accountable (*Ibid.* :135).

However, as Hollander (2013) has suggested, there is some ambivalence about exactly how West and Zimmerman define the notion of “accountability”, leading to confusion in studies that claim to have been inspired by their approach. One of the main ambiguities in this notion lies in the role attributed to accountability in the reproduction of binary sex categories and gender norms. According to Hollander :

[...] people are occasionally called on to account for their behaviour as women or men, and they are always subject to the explicit and implicit consequences of others’ assessments. These consequences, and the assessments that underlie them, are what maintain the urgency of the individual’s orientation to sex category. The interactional manifestations of accountability [...] are an integral part of the social processes that follow from and reinforce orientation to sex category (Hollander, 2013 :10).

She therefore proposes to think of gender accountability as a three-part interactional process :

The foundation of the system is people's orientation to sex category [...] Next, is assessment, or the production of accounts that evaluate people's behaviour in relation to expectations for their presumed sex category [...] These assessments form the basis for the final element of the system, enforcement. Here is where the everyday use of the term accountability enters : People hold each other – and themselves – responsible for their accomplishment of gender by implementing interactional consequences for conformity or nonconformity (*Ibid.* :10).

In relation to the literature reviewed in the previous sub-sections, this is an important point, since it suggests that the concept of gender accountability could provide a useful framework for analyzing situations that apparently do not correspond to normative gender accomplishment. This three-fold conception of accountability enables us to better apprehend the practices of the male florists we have studied, by hypothesizing that individuals are not necessarily held accountable to sex categories in the same way at all times and that some social contexts may even offer the opportunity for individuals to neutralize sex category membership and gender norms to a certain extent.

To summarize the existing literature in order to provide an interpretive framework for our own data, we can stress three main points. Firstly, it is important to trace the potential bonuses men reap from their minority position within a highly feminized occupation. Secondly, it is important to analyze the discursive and interactional strategies that serve to legitimize the potential advantages of being a man in such an atypical position. Thirdly, in order to understand the extent to which “gender” becomes salient to individuals it is important to establish the mechanisms through which men are held accountable for their atypical career choices, in terms of orientation to sex categories, assessment and enforcement (Hollander, 2013).

IV. Research Methods

Our research findings are based on interview data and field notes collected in 2012, in various occupational settings, but with a main focus on two florists' shops (one located in the city centre of a medium-sized city in the German-speaking part of Switzerland, the other in a small town in the French-speaking part of the country). Besides the two male shop owner-managers, we also came into regular contact with five part or full-time employees, three apprentices and a person in charge of delivering flowers to clients.

We conducted six formal interviews with female (1) and male (5) florists, which each lasted for about two hours. Two of our interview contacts had been established through personal networks ; both of these florists gave us the names of other possible contacts (“snowball method”). In a

third case we just entered a florist shop and asked to interview the owner, who turned out to be a man. It was in this same shop that we also did part of our participant observations.

Despite having completed only a relatively small number of formal interviews to date, a large amount of additional data has been collected through informal discussions during several periods of participant observation. These were organized over a three-month period, starting with one whole week on the premises, followed by shorter periods (2-3 consecutive days), once every three weeks or so. In all cases, the researcher acted as an intern, with hands on involvement in the daily activities of the shop. Only overt observations (Gold, 2003) have been carried out, in so far as all the people within the workplace settings knew who we were and why we were there (for a sociological study of florists). Given the importance of apprenticeships in florist shops (see *supra*), we thus embraced a fairly familiar role ; our presence did not appear incongruous to the florists, since it followed the standard processes of integrating trainees into the occupation. We were thus able to observe in a more “natural” setting how male and female florists engage in constructing a situated gender order. We were particularly concerned about the possible influence of social desirability on the participants. We thus avoided direct reference to gender categories in the course of our interactions (although this theme was taken up during the formal interviews).

In addition to the formal interviews and periods of participant observation, we have also analyzed a number of professional publications and have studied the curricula for the different training programmes available to would-be florists in the Swiss context.

V. The Gender Accountability of Male Florists

Our main interest now lies in investigating when gender becomes salient for individuals and in better understanding exactly how they mobilize, neutralize or challenge gender norms in the course of their daily activities. Our results partially contradict the rather monolithic accounts of how individuals “do” or potentially “undo” gender (Deutsch, 2007 ; Lorber, 2000 ; Risman, 2009) in particular occupational settings. We have identified significant differences in the salience the male florists we have studied attribute to sex categories and gender norms in different dimensions of their professional experiences.

A. Making Gender Meaningful : Orientation to Sex Categories

Our study of male florists shows that sex membership categories are mobilized and seen as relevant to professional practices on at least two levels. On the one hand, they provide a ready-made justification for the gendered distribution of individuals within the occupation and particularly for the over-representation of men amongst self-employed florists and within professional representative organizations. On the other hand, gender categories and stereotypical beliefs about the floral preferences of men

and women serve as a vital resource for florists in the course of their interactions with clients.

1. Gendered Accounts of Vertical Segregation

In order to understand how the florists mobilize and relate to sex category membership, we focus here on the reasons that male and female florists offer to explain the vertical segregation of their occupation by sex. Firstly, florists frequently refer to institutional “gender arrangements” (Pfau-Effinger, 2004) with regard to the sexual division of paid employment and unpaid domestic labour. Societal-level gender norms, particularly in the form of the “(modified) male breadwinner/female carer” model (Crompton, 1999), seem to underlie the florists’ discursive accounts of the over-representation of men in the best paid and most rewarding segments of the occupational hierarchy. In other words, the fact that women are unanimously presumed to experience difficulties in working full-time is taken for granted and this belief serves to legitimize the fact that they are relatively less likely to reach the upper echelons of the professional hierarchy. All the florists we have met insisted on the fact that women rarely work full-time, a “fact” that, as we have seen, is not congruent with the available statistics on their actual working-time patterns (see Table 1). However, female florists do adopt discontinuous activity patterns in the Swiss context and this is taken as synonymous with a “reduced” level of commitment to the profession. Thus, male florists tend to rationalise the relatively low levels of self-employment for women, or their lack of presence in the most highly visible occupational functions, in relation to patterns of women’s labour market participation in Switzerland more generally (Giraud/Lucas, 2009).

When asked why the profession was so attractive to women (rather than men), Mathieu¹³ replied :

Yes, it’s feminized ; perhaps it attracts fewer men ; it’s an occupation where salaries aren’t necessarily very interesting for a family (Mathieu, self-employed, single, childless, aged 38).

In other words, according to this respondent, men are few and far between in this occupation because it is difficult to achieve “main/male breadwinner” status by working as a florist. This vision of the vertical segregation within the occupation is reflected in the experiences of Stéphane (self-employed, married, two children, aged 37). Having worked for several years in partnership with his wife, the couple decided that she should leave the labour market once their children were born. Although Stéphane frequently states that : «we are looking after our children», he actually works a 65 hour-week, including Saturdays and late evenings. He thus seems to take for granted that it is a man’s duty to provide financially for his family, whilst women (must or should) leave the labour market in order to take care of their children.

¹³ All names have been modified, to respect the anonymity of respondents.

Furthermore, these societal-level gender norms are also used to explain why men are generally more successful as florists than their female counterparts¹⁴. According to our respondents, it is precisely because becoming a florist represents such an exceptional choice for a man that their career paths are more upwardly mobile :

As a man, becoming a florist proves that you really want to be a florist, because for a man it is less obvious, it is very unusual. And by really wanting to become a florist, you have to try harder than anyone else and then it is much easier to have your own business and to be self-employed (Dominik, self-employed, in a long-term relationship, aged 31).

Thus, Dominik considers male florists to have a clear advantage over women in terms of determination and perseverance. Not only do they have to “transgress” the prevailing gender norms that make the occupation a typical career choice for women ; they also have to do so in a way that makes it possible for them to continue to be seen as accountable to the “male breadwinner” and career success dimensions of normative masculinity.

This double constraint serves to justify the allocation of additional material and symbolic resources to men within the profession. For instance, when interviewed, Dominik had recently opened another shop for which he needed a manager. He had experienced difficulty in filling this position and explained this by the fact that most of his female colleagues either didn’t want to or couldn’t work full-time (a condition for the position he wanted to fill). He finally hired a young man who had only just finished his apprenticeship. Clearly, simply being a man (maleness) was read as a sign of two important criteria for recruiting a florist shop manager : availability for full-time work and high levels of motivation. Sex membership is, thus, framed as the reason for men’s commitment to their occupation and this commitment is then rewarded in various, material and symbolic, ways.

From this perspective, our male florists clearly demonstrate a high level of orientation to sex categories, which not only shape their own career paths, but also the expectations they have of other florists. They adhere to a strong and consensual belief about men’s distinct availability for employment in general and about their motivations for this particular job.

2. The Gender Assessment of Clients

Likewise, the florists we met clearly see sex category membership as a vital indicator of clients’ preferences and service requirements. The modes of interaction with clients are based on a clear binary distinction, which enables the florists to limit uncertainty and achieve recognition for their work. As in other service occupations (Jeantet, 2003 ; Weller, 2012), florists engage in an active and systematic categorization of their clients. As

¹⁴ Self-employment is one important sign of “professional success” for our respondents.

soon as a person enters the shop, or phones in an order, they attempt to identify their “meaningful traits” (Zinn, 2013), in order to adapt their behaviour to their presumed preferences and, in so doing, to increase the chances of concluding a sale. These meaningful traits include socio-economic status, as expressed by physical appearance, dress style or oral expression, but essentially focus on sex category membership. This gender categorisation follows

methodical procedures, based on a limitation of effort and a maximisation of coherence and on choices about the pertinence and consequences of adopting one category rather than another (Mondada, 2011 :121)¹⁵.

The objectives (and advantages) of this systematic mobilization of sex category membership would appear to be twofold. On the one hand, florists believe that men and women relate differently to flowers and, therefore, that their sales techniques should be adapted to this fundamental difference, in order to increase the profitability of their activity. Sex category membership is thus seen as a vital resource for achieving commercial success. On the other hand, sex category membership is also important for the professional status of the florists themselves. Since women are expected to know exactly what kind of flowers they want to buy and to have predetermined ideas about how they should be arranged, the ability for florists to demonstrate their professional know-how is expected to be more challenging in interactions with female clients¹⁶. In such cases, florists tend to adopt various “face saving” strategies, involving a less interventionist mode of interaction and leaving more room for negotiation around the appearance of the finished product. In the case of male clients, the florists take fewer precautions, and are less likely to take the clients’ stated preferences into account. The risks of subordination (Jeantet, 2003) are seen as limited in the case of interactions with male clients, but the potential for recognition of their professional prowess is also more limited than with female clients.

The importance of sex category membership for determining sales techniques and status enhancement are clearly expressed by Nicolas, who teaches on a CFC training course :

In the way of working, it’s really [laugh], it’s really, umm [...] obvious, it’s really obvious. So, when I’m teaching sales techniques to students, I always start by explaining that they’re not going to behave in the same way with a man or a women ; really in the way of guid-

¹⁵ Our translation, see also SACKS H., 1972.

¹⁶ In this sense, commercial interactions with male clients offer florists more frequent opportunities to demonstrate their professional skills and know-how. When asked to describe their “ideal client”, the florists speak about someone who doesn’t have any pre-conceived idea of the flowers they want to buy, who simply defines a price-range and leaves the florist to decide which flowers and what kind of composition are most suitable. This is clearly an image that is congruent with their expectations of male clients. However, the recognition of their professional skills that florists expect to receive from male clients is also rather limited, since they are perceived as inherently “easier to please” than their female counterparts.

ing the client [...] (Nicolas, floral teacher, married, two children, aged 44).

This is why he suggests distinct selling techniques according to the gender assessment of clients :

When a woman comes into the shop, you're going to leave her to have a look around ; so we're talking about a passive sale here : a passive approach in the way you interact, whereas with a man, you're going to be directly active [...].

Gender assessment doesn't only influence the sales techniques of the florists, but also determines the types of flowers they recommend : to male clients (or to women who want to buy flowers for men)¹⁷, the florist will suggest flowers that are «easy to handle», «simple», that «do not need a lot of care», and that are «not too fancy». In general, the florists try to sell brightly coloured flowers to men, and more pastel shades to women. Our fieldwork observations provide clear evidence of the sex category mobilization strategies used by florists (and clients).

Field Notes : “Gender Assessment as a Sales Strategy and Status Enhancer”¹⁸

In a city-centre florist shop, a young man arrives just before the shop closes and wants to buy some red roses¹⁹. When Michael (salaried florist, aged 26), starts to talk to him, it transpires that this young man had phoned earlier, to check whether the shop was still open and, more importantly, whether they had any red roses for sale. The client chooses three red roses and Michael asks whether he would like him to add any decorative leaves. Following a positive response, Michael gets the leaves from the store room and comes back to the counter with the bouquet to which he has added a couple of red coloured oak leaves. This composition obviously does not please the client ; he looks very surprised and makes a disapproving face and timidly asks : «do you often assemble different reds with very distinct textures like that ? ». Michael then explains that the two go very well together and confirms that this is a frequent practice. The young man seems relieved and reassured, makes no further objection and buys the bouquet as Michael had composed it.

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A middle-aged man enters the shop and begins looking around hesitantly. François (salaried florist, aged 28) comes up to him to ask whether he could be of any assistance. The man gladly accepts and explains that the father of a friend of his has suddenly died and that

¹⁷ It is interesting to note that the clients almost always make explicit the sex of the person they are buying flowers for, suggesting that sex category membership is a shared criterion for judging the appropriate appearance of the purchase.

¹⁸ All the situations related here took place in the same shop.

¹⁹ According to our respondents, men buy the vast majority of red roses, supposedly for their “girl-friends, wives or lovers”.

the funeral is about to take place, nearby. He apologizes for just dropping in and asking for a specific arrangement at such short notice : «I have no idea what kind of flowers or type of arrangement would fit the occasion, could you please give me advice on that ? ». François explains that a colourful bouquet would be appropriate and quickly assembles a mixed bouquet, including sunflowers. The client seems very happy with this choice and relieved at having found a way to appropriately offer his condolences.

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It is afternoon and the florists are preparing various incoming orders ; some of them sent by E-Mail. The local orchestra, a regular client, as Peter explains, orders three bouquets «for their soloists». I glance at the order and see that the orchestras' secretary has taken the precaution of specifying that the soloists were all women, suggesting that this information would be relevant to the florist.

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A female client enters the shop. François (salaried florist, aged 28) is behind the counter ; he says hello, but does not immediately approach her. The client looks around and examines various flowers more closely. After a while, François asks whether she needs more time or whether he could be of assistance. She tells him that she has decided what flowers she would like to buy and shows them to him. François assembles the bouquet in front of her and then suggests some decorative leaves, explaining in detail how they would improve the appearance of the bouquet. The client is not convinced and asks François to try out several different compositions, before finally choosing the one she likes best.

In this sense, gender seems to be accomplished, sustained and reproduced by individuals and continues to act as a normative constraint, which defines how men and women are expected to behave in a given social context. Florists clearly hold clients accountable for their sex category membership, assess the specific behaviour that is likely to result from this, and adapt their own practices to these expectations.

However, when it comes to beliefs about the professional abilities of male and female florists and to the practical organization of everyday activities, we found little evidence of orientation to sex categories, of gender assessment or enforcement. Because florists do not believe that sex membership determines professional skills in any way, they see no reason to allocate colleagues or employees to specific tasks on this basis. In other words, we observed no signs of gender enforcement in the concrete organization of work, where the inter-changeability (Le Feuvre, 2008) of male and female florists appears to be the rule.

B. The Irrelevance of Gender : Neutralising Sex Category Membership

1. Challenging the Gender of Professional Skills

The tasks florists undertake are associated with specific skills that are considered to be important for the occupation : social and business acumen, imagination and creativity, an artistic flair and manual abilities. The most successful florists are thus presumed to be those with an “artistic flair” and with the social skills required to achieve recognition for this from their clients, in the form of sales and customer loyalty.

Most of these skills tend to be routinely associated with femininity. However, florists consider the skills they unanimously define as being important to their professional success to be gender-neutral. All of them agree that men and women are potentially equally suited for this job. When we asked Stéphane to discuss his vision of this occupation, he replied :

[As a man], when you start training as a florist, you just have to accept it, grin and bear it [...] People automatically think it’s a women’s job, being a florist. But, no, no, it’s not at all a women’s job really, there are men who are just as creative and who know how to work creatively (Stéphane, self-employed, married, two children, aged 37).

Later on in the conversation, the question of creativity came up again. Stéphane stressed that there are men and women who have no creative inklings, thus implying that, just like their male counterparts, women are not necessarily particularly suited to this job. Thus, although creativity is seen as a given, rather than an acquired skill : «Either you have it or you don’t» (Stéphane), it is not seen as something that is associated with sex category membership. When asked to explain exactly how the flowers for a bouquet should be arranged, Peter (self-employed, aged 41) shared a similar gender-neutral vision of creativity. He claimed that although anyone could, in theory, learn precise flower arranging techniques²⁰, the creative flair that makes for a good florist could not be taught : «either you have the ability and the creativity, or you don’t... and never will», he said.

Clearly, despite the fact that these male florists overwhelmingly believe that men and women necessarily have a different relationship to the labour market and that women cannot achieve the same levels of time-commitment to the job as their male counterparts (see *supra*), they simultaneously believe that there is no causal relationship between sex category membership and professional talent. As Mathieu states : «Sex doesn’t matter at all, as long as the quality is there, the rest is not important» (Mathieu, self-employed, single, childless, aged 38). Indeed, they claim that the most valued professional skill is not gendered, thereby presenting men and

²⁰ These techniques are of course taught during the apprenticeship and tend to establish a certain common sense of how a bouquet should look (correct positioning of the flowers, dimension and relation between different accessories, complimentary colours, *etc.*).

women as potentially equally “florally creative”²¹. As men, these florists do not see themselves as any more skilled than their female counterparts ; they simply claim the same right of access to the characteristic that distinguishes professional mediocrity (having learnt the techniques required to assemble a bouquet) from professional flair (achieving a “creative” result).

Of course, this simultaneous naturalization (“you either have it or you don’t”) and gender neutralizing of creativity (“men are just as likely as women to have it”) makes it rather difficult for our male respondents to explain exactly why it is that there are, in practice, so few of these potentially creative men working as florists in the Swiss context. As we have seen, one (rhetorical) way out of this conundrum, and that doesn’t require making floral skills gender-specific in any way, is to insist on the societal-level “gender arrangement” effect. More creatively endowed men would undoubtedly enter the occupation, if only they could be certain of receiving a “family wage” in return for this potential career choice.

Another way of dealing with the inability of the gender neutral definition of professional skills to account for the minority presence of men within in the occupation consists in presenting the profession as more highly masculinized than it really is. For instance, one of the self-employed male florists we interviewed explained that the statistical over-representation of women was not reflected in his personal experiences. When asked about his contacts with male or female colleagues, he said :

It’s quite a mixed profession, very much so [...], but whenever I have a General Assembly or a meeting, or something similar, there aren’t many women at all (Stéphane, self-employed, married, 2 children, aged 37).

In other words, in spite of an overwhelming majority of female florists in the occupation Stéphane experiences his work context as largely “male dominated”. This stunted vision of the gender composition of the occupation enables him to reject his affiliation to a statistical minority and to simultaneously maintain a gender-neutral definition of professional skills. The “otherness” which he statistically incorporates is thus rendered socially insignificant.

Men’s accounts of coming into contact with other men is undoubtedly a very real consequence of the homo-sociability that results from the vertical segregation within the occupation ; but they also act as a discursive strategy that enables male florists to maintain a “gender neutral” account of creativity and skill. In this sense, it could be said that they are actively engaged in challenging dominant gender norms (both men and women can excel at creativity). However, the over-estimation of men’s presence within the occupation could nevertheless reflect an overriding preoccupation

²¹ However, homosexual male florists are often presented as being “particularly creative”, suggesting that “gender norm violation” often leads to the “homosexualization of disruptive men” (NIELSON J. *et al.*, 2000). This belief partly contradicts the gender-neutral account of skills to which the male florists adhere in general and is a point that obviously requires further investigation.

with gender accountability : these men seem to need to account for the fact that they are florists, but nevertheless still “real” men. In this sense, it is possible that insisting on the gender-neutral character of skills and particularly of creativity could also serve as a strategy to legitimise their choice of occupation and the fact that they remain in the job.

2. Neutralising Gender Enforcement in the Division of Tasks

The distance the male florists we met adopt towards gender norms in relation to professional skills is also in evidence when it comes to the concrete organization of their everyday activities, which does not seem to depend on the active enforcement of gender accountability. Indeed, we found little sign of sex category membership being mobilized to determine the allocation of tasks in the workplace. Other factors seem to be more prevalent. Firstly, seniority, including amongst trainees, would seem to be a central criterion for task allocation : the complexity of the tasks increases according to length of training and/or service, but largely irrespective of sex category membership. Incoming orders are dispatched according to the availability and perceived ability of the staff present. Seniority is not only used as a proxy for skill, but also as a social resource : the longer a florist has been working in a shop, the more likely s/he is to be familiar with the tastes of regular clients. Secondly, some apprenticeships provide more opportunity to learn certain techniques than others. Thus, tasks are also allocated on the basis of the florist’s past work history, in order to maximize client satisfaction. Thirdly, the most important factor in task allocation is a simple question of timing. We observed a relatively pragmatic handling of incoming orders and on-going tasks : the person who has nothing else to do or is able to put his or her order on hold will often deal with the next incoming order. In one of the shops, we observed the handling of phone orders : frequently, the client describes the desired order in detail (colour, composition, size, *etc.*). The florist who answers the phone will take detailed notes during this exchange, which theoretically means that any other colleague could prepare the bouquet. However, this is rarely the case. In fact, the florists claim that when the client is describing the bouquet over the phone they immediately have a precise picture of the finished product in their mind and this is why it is easier for the person who answered the phone to make the bouquet in question.

In fact, all the florists told us that it is very difficult to plan task allocation in advance, as phone orders can arrive at any time and clients can, of course, come and go as they like. Some of the more time consuming orders (e.g. wedding flowers), generally come in a couple of weeks or months in advance and could, therefore, be forward planned. But, even in this case, the florists often decide who is going to prepare the order at the last minute and, again, this depends more on seniority, work-history and immediate availability than on sex category membership. For example, even when a male florist was around, we never observed a distinct pattern of tasks allocation to them.

Thus the unpredictable timing of tasks, along with the very minority presence of men within the occupation, is obviously not conducive to a strict horizontal division of labour. Neither does it enable the functional specialization of male florists. It would be practically impossible to attribute carrying heavy equipment or producing particular types of bouquets to men, simply due to the statistical over-representation of women in the occupation.

VI. Conclusion

The aim of this article was to investigate the accountability of men in “feminine” jobs to sex category membership and gender norms. We have brought to light the complexity of male florists’ relationship to normative gender categories; they clearly tend to account for some aspects of their professional experiences in stereotypical ways, whilst neutralising²² or challenging gender norms on other levels. The minority status of being a man in a highly feminized occupation is thus associated with somewhat ambivalent forms of gender accountability (Hollander, 2013).

The male florists we studied mobilize stereotypical beliefs about women’s lack of commitment to the labour market in order to explain and justify their over-representation in the most rewarding sectors of the occupation. In so doing, they express a strong identification with the “(modified) male breadwinner/female carer” model of gender relations and suggest that the relatively low wage levels that Swiss florists can command are the main reason so few men decide to enter this occupation. This reflects a clear binary vision of what is “normal” for men and women; self-employment being framed as the only possible way for men to be suitably accountable to the “family provider” normative figure of masculinity. At the same time, this strong orientation to sex category membership is accompanied by a gender-neutral vision of the skill-base and professional know-how of male and female florists. Although men are expected to be more committed than women to their careers, they are not seen as any more “creative” than their female counterparts. In terms of skills, therefore, male florists demonstrate very weak gender accountability.

When it comes to their interactions with clients, sex category membership clearly acts as a resource for male and female florists alike. Gender assessment is a clear component of the florists’ commercial strategies. It also plays a central role in determining the recognition they receive. On the one hand, women clients are expected to be more knowledgeable about flowers, more directive in their orders and more appreciative of exceptional performances by their florists. On the other hand, the rather floundering male clients enable florists to express their professional expertise more freely, but their expected inability to appreciate the final floral

²² Here, we use the term “neutralize” to describe a subjective process of de-activating or defusing sex category membership, in the sense of considering such categories as largely irrelevant to the situation at hand.

products at their full value makes them less rewarding clients to serve. However, despite the strong gender assessment of clients, these very same florists tend to neutralize sex category membership completely when it comes to allocating tasks amongst themselves. The unpredictable timing of their work activities makes the enforcement of a gendered division of tasks objectively complicated to achieve. There is therefore no clear gender-based specialization of male and female florists, who are perceived as largely “interchangeable” in the workplace (Le Feuvre, 1999).

Although these preliminary findings undoubtedly require further refinement, they clearly stress the interest of investigating under what circumstances sex affiliation becomes salient or not to individuals (Emerson *et al.*, 1995 :130-140). One of the principal implications of this study is to confirm that not everything which is done or said at work can be taken as a sign of gender accountability (Martin, 2003). In this sense, we can conclude that sex category membership is mobilized, neutralized or challenged with varying levels of intensity on the different scenes of professional florists. Thus, when analyzing how men in feminine jobs “do” or potentially “undo” gender in their daily work lives, it is important to recognize that gender is not systematically accomplished in the same way by all individuals at all times, despite the fact that it is clearly rendered salient in certain circumstances.

However, it would be exaggerated to conclude that the neutralization of gender norms that we have observed amongst the male florists we have studied necessarily represents a challenge to the “gender order” more generally. Gender is in fact not really being “undone” here ; it is simply considered irrelevant to some aspects of work, whereas the very same male florists undeniably : «remain cognizant of the possibility of gender assessment» (Walzer, 2008 :6) in many other aspects of their daily activities.

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Structured Summary

This article investigates exactly how male florists relate to sex categories and existing gender stereotypes in the course of their daily activities. Our main interest lies in the idea that individuals invest gender norms with varying levels of salience in specific social contexts. We therefore focus on the ways in which male florists account for their professional activities in normative gendered ways, whilst also stressing the opportunities for challenging gender norms that are associated with the minority status of being a man in a highly feminised occupation. We are particularly interested in looking at the way men mobilise, neutralise or challenge sex category membership to explain their own professional practices and career paths.

The existing literature is rather ambivalent as to the implications of men’s presence in highly feminised occupations. On the one hand, some authors have analysed the implications of minority status for male and female career paths and promotion opportunities. On the other hand, some authors have been more concerned with the implications of such atypical career choices for the gender order as a whole. In this paper, we will mainly explore the analytical potential of a third corpus of literature, less often focussed on atypical gender configurations, but potentially useful for thinking about the ways in which men and women in non-traditional occupations “do gender” on a daily basis and about the multiple ways in which gender “accountability” may prevail in such contexts.

Our ethnographic and interview data, based on field notes taken during several periods of participant observation in different occupational settings, suggest that the concept of “accountability”, which combines orientation to sex category, gender assessment and enforcement (Hollander, 2013), provides a useful framework for analysing situations that apparently do not correspond to gender accomplishment in the normative sense of the term. We argue that individuals are not necessarily held accountable to sex categories in the same way at all times and that some social contexts may even offer the op-

portunity for individuals to neutralise or challenge (*i.e.* “undo“) gender to a certain extent.

In conclusion, we show that the accountability of male florists to sex categories and gender norms varies considerably, according to the particular dimension of their experiences studied. They clearly relate very strongly to sex categories when explaining their personal trajectories, and more generally men’s position within the profession. Likewise, they systematically mobilise gender norms in the assessment of clients. Interactions with male and female clients are based on stereotypical beliefs about their requirements and needs and sex categories largely determine the forms of professional recognition that florists expect from their clients. In fact, gender assessment is a clear component of the florists’ commercial strategies. However, sex category membership is seen as largely irrelevant to the division of tasks between florists in the course of their daily activities.

In this sense, sex category membership is activated, neutralised or challenged with varying levels of intensity on the different scenes of professional florists. We therefore conclude that, although gender is not systematically accomplished by all florists at all times, it is clearly rendered salient in certain circumstances. Although we argue that male florists simultaneously mobilise, neutralise and contest normative gender assumptions in the course of their daily lives, it would be exaggerated to conclude that these practices necessarily represent a threat to the gender order as a whole. The male florists we studied do not really “undo” gender ; they simply consider sex categories and some gender norms as “irrelevant” to certain aspects of their daily activities, whereas these are considered to have considerable bearing on other dimensions of their work.