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Professions from a Gendered Perspective

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Summary and Keywords

Professions or professional occupations have been studied through a large number of empirical and theoretical lenses over the last decades: as potential substitutes for organizations and markets, as protected labor markets, and as the site of the subjective experiences and socialization processes of their members. Combining a sociological and a gender perspective, a growing number of studies have shed new light on the growth and dynamics of professional occupations since the mid-20th century. They show how the massive entry of women into the upper reaches of Western labor markets has played a major role in the expansion and reconfiguration of the professions. However, by studying the barriers to women's access to once exclusively masculine environments, scholars tend to show that the feminization processes coexist with persistent inequalities in income, promotion opportunities, career patterns, and access to leadership positions, popularized by the metaphor of the "glass ceiling" effect.

These contradicting trends—numerical feminization and the persistence of gender inequalities—have inspired a large range of empirical research projects and conceptual innovations. This article distinguishes three ways of framing the gendered dynamics of professional and managerial occupations.

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A first way of framing the issue adopts a resolutely *structural perspective*, presenting feminization as a process that ultimately leads to the crystallization of traditional gender inequalities, thus confronting women with the risk of deprofessionalization or dequalification. Some of these studies observe variations in the rhythms and patterns of feminization across occupations. They reveal complex processes whereby the overall increase in women's education levels comes with the persistence of gender-differentiated choices of study and occupation. Rhythms and patterns of feminization may also differ within a given occupation, from one specialty to another and from one type of organization to another, depending on the internal hierarchy of the occupation. Very significant gaps may also be observed according to employment status: wage labor or self-employment, for example.

A second way of framing the question adopts an *organizational-level perspective*; showing, for example, that a "glass ceiling" systematically hampers women's career progression in all sectors of the labor market. These studies explore the combination of direct and indirect discriminatory processes—from the persistence of "old boys' networks" to the legitimation of certain gendered body images of professionalism—within different organizational and professional contexts. In the face of such resistance, women's career progression is particularly slow and arduous, both due to the prevailing symbolic norms of leadership models and due to the collective strategies of closure by male professionals at the organizational level.

Finally, a third way of framing the issue adopts a more *holistic perspective*, with a stronger focus on the agency of women within the occupational context and on the societal implications of changes to the gender composition of the professions. These studies insist on the potential or real changes that women may bring to the professional ethos and to the occupation-specific "rules of the game" in previously male-dominated bastions. Interested in the undoing of conventional norms of masculinity and fathering as well as of femininity and mothering, this third perspective explores a potential shift to more egalitarian gender arrangements at the organizational, interpersonal, and societal levels.

Keywords: feminization, professions, careers, bureaucracy, glass ceiling, gender regimes, gender discrimination, work-life balance, masculinities

Introduction

Professions have been studied through a large number of empirical and theoretical lenses over the last decades: as institutions and potential substitutes for organizations and markets (Evetts, 2011; Freidson, 1986), as protected labor markets (Abbott, 1998), and as the site of socialization and identity issues for their members (Hughes, 1971; Hochschild, 1979). Combining sociological, gender, and organizational studies perspectives, a growing number of scholars have shed new light on the gender dynamics of professional occupations since the mid-20th century (Crompton & Le Feuvre, 2000; Hearn et al., 2016). They show how the massive entry of women into the upper reaches of the labor market has played a major role in the expansion and prosperity of the professions (Bolton & Muzio, 2008).

However, by studying the barriers to women's access to once exclusively masculine environments, scholars have shown that feminization processes coexist with persistent inequalities in income, promotion opportunities, career patterns, and access to leadership positions, popularized by the metaphor of the "glass ceiling" effect (Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986; Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1987; Scott et al., 2010).

These contrasting trends—numerical feminization and the persistence and reconfiguration of gender inequalities—have inspired a large range of studies, which generally use the concept of "gendered professions" to designate a complex system of power relationships (Scott, 1999).

This article identifies three distinct ways of framing the gendered dynamics of professional groups, which have each studied the feminization process from a slightly different angle and with a precise analytical focus: the first way of framing the issue adopts a resolutely *structural perspective*, the second favors an *organizational-level perspective*, and the third suggests the need for a more *holistic perspective*.

This analysis adopts a broad definition of the theme "professions from a gendered perspective," encompassing a large range of occupations, from the established professions, such as medicine or law, to managerial occupations, like bankers, consultants, or accountants, the main criteria being a high level of educational requirements. Inspired by an interactionist perspective (Hughes, 1971), we are particularly interested in occupations that were once considered "male bastions," on the condition that they are also characterized by a relatively high level of social prestige and by a history of social closure.

The Structural Frame: Feminization as a Threat to Occupational Prestige

For a large number of early studies, the sociohistorical mechanisms that had enabled women to enter into those areas of the labor market that had previously been reserved for men were seen to reflect and reinforce overriding gender hierarchies. The studies developed within this frame share a structural, macro-level perspective, with a central focus on issues of professional prestige and the global hierarchy of occupations and gender categories.

The main argument developed emphasized the idea that the social foundations of “patriarchy” (Walby, 1990) or “masculine domination” (Bourdieu, 2001) were in no way threatened by women’s increasing access to what had once been male preserves: positions of professional expertise, associated with high levels of material and symbolic rewards. On the contrary, women’s tentative incursions into these “male bastions” were seen either as the cause or as a consequence of a changing hierarchy of professional prestige. Thus, it was argued, the feminization process was largely dependent on men’s decision to invest in more rewarding professions (or occupational niches), leaving the least desirable opportunities open for the new generations of highly qualified women to take over. Despite giving the appearance of increasing equality, changes in the gender composition of particular occupations were said to reflect the immutable nature of gender hierarchies. Thus, whether the focus was on the nature of “gender queues” over a wide range of occupations (Reskin & Roos, 1990) or on the internal (re-)segmentation of specific professions (Witz, 1992; Sommerlad, 2002), these studies questioned the social significance of women’s access to previously male-dominated occupations.

Gender Queues, Job Queues

The highly influential theory developed by Barbara Reskin and Patricia Roos (1990) is based on the comparison of various occupations that had undergone a rapid shift in their gender composition since the mid-1970s. Their case studies included publishers (Reskin et al., 1990), insurance brokers (Thomas, 1990), real estate dealers (Thomas & Reskin, 1990), computer programmers (Donato, 1990), and pharmacists (Phipps, 1990; Collin, 1992; Tanner & Cockerill, 1996). From this comparative approach, the authors developed the notions of “gender queues” and “job queues” in order to account for the enduring gender segregation of occupations. On the basis of their US case studies, they argue that women are systematically placed at the back of the “queues” that enable access to the most desirable sectors of the labor market. As a result of this gender hierarchy, they have to accept the positions and occupations that their male counterparts have fled. Women’s mass entry into a new occupation is thus taken as a sign of the fact that the men placed at the top of the “job queue” had deliberately avoided that particular career option.

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Feminization is thus deemed to rhyme with gender segregation and “ghettoization.” This is, for instance, the case in banking (Bird, 1990), where the female newcomers are overrepresented in the least prestigious area of retail banking.

Reskin and Roos’ seminal work focuses on the demand and supply side of the labor market. First, the notion of “gender queuing” accounts for the ways in which candidates are ranked by their potential employers from the most to the least desirable. Due to patriarchal influences, women are always placed behind men in the employers’ preferences. Secondly, Reskin and Roos identify another process, “job queuing,” which refers to the fact that workers evaluate the prestige and rewards expected from particular occupations and rank their job search preferences accordingly (Hardy-Dubernet et al., 2003). In practice, gender and job queues are presented as intertwined social processes, which reinforce each other, since those candidates who are placed in the front of the gender queue (i.e., men) have “first choice” and therefore more opportunities to access the positions they rank highest in the job queue.

According to this perspective, women can only enter those professions where demographic and structural changes imply a reduction in rewards—notably prestige, pay, or promotion opportunities—leading the most-valued members of the labor force to shift their aspirations to other fields. Feminization also takes place, Reskin and Roos argue, when an expanding profession faces labor shortages. However, in this case, women are relegated to certain occupational segments, characterized by the least-desirable working conditions. This predictable pattern of “ghettoization” may translate into a variety of concrete patterns of feminization, depending on how the internal hierarchy of the occupation is reconfigured during the expansion phase. However, women always end up in the least rewarding positions, at the back of the “job queue.”

While shedding light on the processes of internal resegregation within occupations, Reskin and Ross also demonstrate the economic consequences of women’s increased access to former “male bastions.” Feminization is systematically associated with decreasing relative earnings. Thus, although the women who enter those occupations that have been “rejected” by men actually earn more than they would have in the most highly feminized sectors of the labor market, the average salaries of both men and women in these feminizing occupations tend to decrease over time, accelerating the loss of prestige and the shift in gender composition (cf. Bourdieu, 2001).

As Denise Bielby (1993) has argued, the analytical framework developed by Reskin and Roos provides a stimulating account of the dynamics at work in occupations undergoing both a rapid demographic expansion and a spectacular short-term change to their gender composition. It is perhaps less useful for understanding situations where the pace of occupational expansion or feminization is slower.

Professions as Patriarchal Projects

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Other structurally focused studies provide alternative, although often complementary, accounts of the barriers women face in accessing the most prestigious and established professions. Writing from a sociohistorical and feminist perspective, Anne Witz (1990, 1992) argues that the British medical profession can be seen as a paradigmatic case of the profession as a patriarchal project. According to this neo-Weberian approach, women are seen as the victims of a project of “occupational closure” (Larson, 1977; Parkin, 1974; Paradeise, 1988), aimed at defending “an occupational monopoly over the provision of certain skills and competencies in a market for services” (Witz, 1990, p. 675). In the dynamic analytical model offered by Anne Witz, occupational closure is simultaneously protected and threatened by conflicting strategies: the protective and defensive strategies of a dominant group, men, and the countervailing strategies of a subordinate social group, women. Examining the history of the medical profession in the United Kingdom, she identifies two strategies to sustain closure, each facing countervailing attempts to open up the medical labor market to previously excluded social groups.

Thus, through the active use of “exclusionary strategies,” male doctors seek to “create women as a class of ineligible” (Witz, 1990, p. 676) and to protect the male prerogative of access to legitimate knowledge and medical practice. But since the second part of the 19th century, women in a series of Western countries have counteracted these gendered strategies with their alternative “inclusionary strategies,” mostly based on legal action. Through the courts, they started to challenge the male monopoly over medical knowledge and to gain admission to medical schools, and then to the right to set up in medical practice (Schweitzer, 2010).

A second type of occupational closure strategy is also identified, under the guise of “demarcation strategies.” These strategies aim to maintain the professional’s authority and control over the members of other related occupations (particularly nurses in the case of the medical profession), and are based on the subordination of related occupations to the professional’s “mandate” (Hughes, 1971). However, Witz shows that the subordinated groups are able to reply to these exclusionary with their own “dual closure strategy.” She cites the examples of midwives and nurses to show how, over time, the professional associations of these highly feminized occupations were able to negotiate different forms of autonomy with regard to the medical profession, resulting in accommodating or challenging forms of professional independence according to the sociohistorical context. Laurence Tain and her colleagues propose a similar analysis of the strategies adopted by female speech therapists with regard to the medical profession in the French context (Tain, 2016).

In much the same vein, Hilary Sommerlad (2002) takes a critical look at the legal profession and its relations with capitalism and the patriarchal order. She describes an ongoing process of fragmentation within the British legal profession, which leads to an increasing specialization of lawyers and their progressive division into two “separate worlds.” On the one hand, we find the wealthy corporate law firms, and on the other hand, practices that are dependent on legal aid or specialized in less lucrative fields of

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law. In this segmented professional landscape, Sommerlad argues that women make up a cheap and marginalized labor force—a kind of proletariat—that is excluded from any real career perspectives. In this case, a combination of explicitly discriminatory practices (such as the sexual harassment which she claims is rife in corporate law firms) and of professional norms (for example, the “long hours culture” of penal law firms) creates an informal set of “demarcation rules,” which tend to hamper women’s professional progression.

This first raft of studies illustrate the insights provided by a macro-level perspective, which reveals a series of intertwined processes, with feminization being seen as partly the source and partly the outcome of major structural changes in the labor market. However, this perspective tends to focus on global movements and on the sexual division of labor within and between professions. For this reason, it is less likely to identify, describe, and analyze more subtle and middle-range sociological phenomena related to women’s access to positions of professional power.

The Organizational Frame: Barriers to Women’s Professional Careers

A second perspective puts other social processes under scrutiny and focuses on horizontal and vertical segregation within specific professional groups or occupations. Studies carried out from this angle observe the limits placed on the progression of women in previous “male bastions,” who almost always come up against what has been called a “glass ceiling” effect (Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1987).

As Kathleen Hull and Robert Nelson (2000) have argued, this second perspective encompasses a wide range of theoretical frameworks, which may either insist on the “individual choice” component of women’s professional careers or on the organizational obstacles that restrict women’s access to the leading or most lucrative professional positions.

Human Capital and Rational Choice Theories

Based on the “human capital” (Becker, 1964) or “preference” theories (Hakim, 2000), a first group of studies explain the fact that women always come up against the “glass ceiling” effect by a combination of gender differences in education, work experience, skill, etc., and by the individual aspirations and anticipations that are associated with wider gender differences in society. Inspired by rational choice theory, this perspective explains women’s less successful careers by the “choices” they make, notably in relation to other life domains. Thus, since housework and childcare are seen as the primary responsibility

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of women, the later tend to acquire objective skills in this domain and to develop (modest) career anticipations that are conducive with the domestic commitment that is socially expected of women as mothers (Becker, 1985).

The utility of human capital theory for analyzing gender inequalities in occupational careers has been widely discussed and criticized (Bielby & Bielby, 1984, 1988; Tanner et al., 1999; Hull & Nelson, 2000). On the basis of two successive surveys, Denise and William Bielby (1988) argue that individual preferences and human capital factors obviously need to be taken into consideration when analyzing the feminization process as a whole, but they are unable to account for the complex processes that produce gender segregation within a given occupation. As they remind us: "Human capital models emphasize how people choose jobs. Missing from these supply-side models is any consideration of the process whereby those who design jobs choose the kind of people who will fill them" (Bielby & Bielby, 1988, p. 1057). In order to gain a better understanding of sex segregation processes and gender inequalities on the labor market, they propose a more comprehensive analytical model, which combines microeconomic approaches to household decision-making with other explanatory factors. They argue that understanding the gender dynamics of particular occupations requires simultaneous attention to psycho-sociological processes regarding "personal entitlement" and gendered job labeling with more macro social considerations (Bielby & Bielby, 1988). In particular, the overall increase in women's education levels comes with persisting gender-differentiated professional aspirations (Gianettoni & Guilley, 2016).

Direct and Indirect Discriminatory Processes

To account for women's "evaporation" from the higher levels of the occupational hierarchy, an alternative group of studies develops the idea that all organizations and workplaces are fundamentally "gendered." While operating under seemingly neutral rules and practices, organizations are based on biased processes, which produce discriminatory outcomes for women and other minoritized social groups (Moss-Kanter, 1977; Acker, 1990; Cockburn, 1991; Crompton & Le Feuvre, 1992). A number of scholars have explored the formal and informal processes that determine access to positions of professional and organizational power. They insist on the increasing complexity (and potential invisibility) of these selection processes, due to the growing influence of large bureaucracies in the professional labor market.

Some of these studies shed light on the crucial importance of social capital accumulation strategies for successful careers. They tend to demonstrate the persistence of "old boys" networks (Bird, 1996). As a recent study of women's careers in Swedish consulting firms has shown (Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2010), even though women are aware of the importance of social networks for their reputation and career advancement, they face specific difficulties and symbolic barriers in creating and maintaining effective support networks. Female consultants have to deploy various and active strategies to accumulate social

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capital. They have to carefully manage their public image within the firm; they also have to combat stereotypes regarding their (lack of) ambition and their (lack of) adhesion to the dominant professional ethos (Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2010; Boni-Le Goff, 2012). In the US legal profession, the accumulation of social capital also plays a fundamental role in women's access to partnership status (Kay & Hagan, 1998). The urge to develop social capital explains the dramatic surge of more or less institutionalized executive women's organizations, canvassing for equal access to corporate leadership (Blanchard, Boni-Le Goff, & Rabier, 2013).

According to Rosemary Deem (2003) and Karen Jonnergard and her colleagues (2010), the performance evaluation criteria used in professional organizations also produce subtle barriers to women's career progression. Based on a meritocratic principle, these systems often discriminate against women by overvaluing certain types of skills and performances (for instance, commercial aggressiveness) that are more easily attributed to their male counterparts. In Muzio and Tomlinson's opinion, "informal mechanisms are likely to be the key source of inequality in contemporary organizational and occupational contexts" (2012, p. 460). They insist on the shift from "formal to informal closure regimes" in the contemporary period. These informal mechanisms encompass the question of the body images that contribute to the symbolic construction of professions and professionalism (Witz, Halford, & Savage, 1996). Likewise, Kathryn Haynes' work (2012) on the identity formation processes in accounting and law firms illustrates the influence of professional cultures on the definition of normative forms of embodiment and professional body image. Haynes shows how "physical capital" is relevant to professional success, particularly because it inspires confidence or mistrust on the part of colleagues and clients. Although women are well aware of the need to display the right "professional demeanor," and are active in "altering their self-presentation through the management of their body" (Haynes, 2012, p. 499), they nevertheless find it harder than their male counterparts to conform to the self-presentation norms and expectations of their clients and colleagues.

In fact, as Angela Trethewey (1999) has shown, women's bodies appear to be more closely scrutinized than those of their male colleagues, and any deviation from the expected "slim and trim" professional body form is unlikely to be tolerated in women, by male and female "disciplinarians" alike (Trethewey, 1999). Whereas the ideal professional body is expected to reflect an ideal of self-control and discipline, female bodies tend to be perceived as "overflowing" and excessively sexual (Trethewey, 1999, p. 430). In a similar vein, Caroline Gatrell (2007) observes how professional women try to make their bodies invisible in the workplace, particularly by banishing any sign of pregnancy or breastfeeding. More generally, professional women face a permanent "double bind" (Wajcman, 1998). They are required to elaborate "strategies of self-presentation that are at once engaging, though not too inviting, soft but not weak, and interested, but not threatening" (Trethewey, 1999, p. 437).

Revisiting the “Glass Ceiling” Effect

Academic discussion has been rife around the best way to designate women’s experiences of vertical segregation. The accuracy of the popular “glass ceiling” metaphor has been called into question and a number of alternative or complimentary notions have been proposed, including “sticky floor” (Kee, 2006), “glass escalator” (Williams, 1992, 2013; Maume, 1999), “leaky pipeline” (Blickenstaff, 2005), “iron cage” (Morley, 1994), “lead ceiling” (Marry, 2008; Fassa & Kradolfer, 2010), “firewall” (Bendl & Schmidt, 2010), and “decline” (Beaufaÿs & Kraiss, 2005). As Regine Bendl and Angelika Schmidt (2010) argue, the debate around words and metaphors is partly related to changing organizational structures and the increasing diversity of career paths. Interestingly, some of the more recent metaphors no longer refer to women’s exclusion from the peak of the occupational hierarchy, but rather aim to describe the difficulties faced by the growing numbers of women who are successful in breaking through the glass ceiling, only to find themselves on the edge of a “glass cliff” (Ryan & Haslam, 2005), a term coined to account for the precarious and particularly challenging nature of the leadership positions they may finally have access to.

By considering gender inequalities as a result of dynamic social processes, studies by Acker (2009), Connell (2006), and Le Feuvre and Lapeyre (2005) show how a combination of formal and informal mechanisms influence women’s careers across the entire adult life course, requiring the collection of longitudinal data. Seen from this angle, the idea of a static and “once and for all” glass ceiling appears somewhat misleading. Both Acker (2009) and Connell (2006) prefer the notion of “gender regime,” which refers to intertwined macro-, meso-, and micro-level processes. According to this dynamic perspective, gender inequalities are produced locally, at the institutional or organizational level, through a series of simultaneous or successive actions and decisions, formal and informal rules, the consequences of which are not always easy to observe, since there may be a “time lag” in their effects. In this sense, professional organizations also “do gender” (West & Zimmerman, 1987) on a daily basis, in multiple and complex ways. They produce “systematic disparities between participants in power and control over goals, resources, and outcomes; workplace decisions such as how to organize work; opportunities for promotion and interesting work; security in employment and benefits; pay and other monetary rewards; respect; and pleasures in work and work relations. Organizations vary in the degree to which these disparities are present and in how severe they are” (Acker, 2006, p. 443). In other words, professional settings not only reflect the gender inequalities produced and institutionalized elsewhere (for example, in the domestic and family sphere), they actively produce their own “inequality regimes” at the intersection of gender, race, and class relations (Acker, 2006).

From a similar perspective, a number of authors explore the “gendered scripts” of professional practice, which serve to define the performance criteria and thus the distribution of recognition and rewards in relation to a dominant professional “ethos” or

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value system. Whereas Elaine Hall (1993) insists on the day-to-day mechanisms which contribute to the systematic devaluation of the professional practices of female waitresses as compared to their male colleagues, a number of studies have analyzed the difficulties faced by female lawyers in conforming to the normative definition of a “successful career” in different national contexts (Menkel-Meadow, 1989; Le Feuvre & Walters, 1994; Le Feuvre & Lapeyre, 2005; Schultz & Shaw, 2003). Although some occupations or occupational settings may tolerate deviation from the standard professional career model, this often comes at the price of marginalization and subordination.

Diversity and Family-Friendly Policies: A Double-Edged Sword

Studies on gender regimes increasingly recognize that some professions or organizations have adopted policies explicitly aimed at helping women and other disadvantaged groups in overcoming barriers to their career progression, particularly through gender equality, diversity, and so-called family-friendly policies and practices. For instance, Janet Walsh (2012) has shown how law firms that have taken “active steps to accommodate women’s work-life requirements” (Walsh, 2012, p. 527) can really make a difference to women’s career aspirations and promotion chances. However, a large majority of organizations appear to be unsuccessful in challenging and changing the historical criteria used to evaluate professional advancement and promotion. Despite the widespread generalization of an “equal opportunity rhetoric” (Lees & Scott, 1990), most organizations (along with a range of client groups) continue to expect unlimited availability and moral commitment from all professionals, and the pressure to conform to this “script” or “ethos” is often reinforced in times of economic downturn. The discrepancies between the rhetoric of “family-friendly” or “flexible” working arrangements and the actual expectations and objective workloads can cause uncertainties for women who aspire to achieving some form of “work-life balance,” particularly at strategic points in the professional career track, such as the run-up to partnership status in the legal profession (Walsh, 2012; Sommerlad, 2002).

As Walsh observes in her study of British law firms, women were systematically “sidelined and passed over for promotion, particularly if they had had children prior to partnership” (Walsh, 2012, p. 527). Despite their apparent “gender neutrality,” recent corporate policies in favor of family life and parenthood may actually have had little impact on the inequalities they claimed to reduce (Connell, 2005B). Insofar as they are usually designed exclusively for mothers (rather than for parents of both sexes), these policies actually tend to reproduce gendered norms and stereotypes (Kugelberg, 2006), particularly regarding childcare, and thus subtly contribute to the resegregation of internal labor markets (Glass, 2004).

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Of course, professions should not be seen as isolated from the rest of society. Embedded in particular sociohistorical and political contexts, they potentially contribute to the reproduction or transformation of gender norms, particularly as far as the sexual division of domestic labor and childcare is concerned (Crompton & Lyonette, 2011). We know only too well that becoming a parent or taking on other caring activities doesn't only affect the professional practices of women, it also has a significant impact on those of men. And yet, as Anita Garey (1999) notes, the term "working father" is hardly ever used, whereas the rhetorical figure of the "working mother" conjures up vivid images of time pressure and divided loyalties. Being in employment and indeed having a career remain "what fathers do, as *fathers*" (Garey, 1999, p. 6), and the labor market remains a central site where men are expected to "manage their masculinity" (Kerfoot & Knights, 1998), conforming to and performing "hegemonic masculinity" (Connell, 2005B; Collinson & Hearn, 2005).

Hence, even when they adopt innovative family-friendly policies, most organizations seem to ignore the domestic and paternal role of fathers—that is, their ability to take direct care of children or other dependents. In such a context, fathers are still seen as "organizational ghosts" (Burnett, Gatrell, Cooper, & Sparrow, 2013) or as "deviant others" (Kugelberg, 2006). The symbolic denial of men's parental identities has a direct impact on the career opportunities of mothers, who are still often considered as "alien figures" in various types of workplaces (Gherardi, 1995), even after the adoption of family-friendly policies (Lyng, 2010).

Despite evidence of the subtle forms of reproduction of ancestral patriarchal forces, a number of recent studies insist on the need to analyze the contradictions and tensions between social reproduction and resistance to gender stereotypes, thus opening up a new research agenda.

The Holistic Frame: Reconfiguring Gender Norms and the Professional Ethos

Less focused on status and prestige issues, and more interested in the complexity and ambivalence of contemporary life courses, this third wave of studies attempts to understand how "gender configurations" (Lapeyre, 2006), at the intersection of the private and the professional sphere, evolve over time. This approach combines micro- and meso-level perspectives as well as large macro-level data sets, and pays particular attention to women's agency and the potential or real changes they may bring to the professional ethos and to the rules of the game.

Reconfiguring Gender Norms

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Using various empirical materials (biographical interviews with male and female professionals, panel surveys, interviews with personnel managers about work-life balance and equality policies), these empirical studies bring interesting evidence about the potential changes in gender norms and the division of domestic labor and care that are associated with women's increasing access to the previous "male bastions."

First, some authors highlight the significant influence of gender equality or work-life balance policies, especially measures such as compulsory paternity leave for fathers. As several studies stress, the legal frame imposing a mandatory paternity leave seems to have a very positive effect on gender equality, increasing a "sense of entitlement" (to work-life balance and to hands-on involvement with their children) for men (Brandth & Kvande, 2001; Gregory & Milner, 2011). When rights are obtained as part of a global social protection regime, men have a greater sense of the right to time away from work than when they have to negotiate with their companies an individual use of flexible "time accounts" (Brandth & Kvande, 2001; Valarino & Gauthier, 2016). But welfare state initiatives may sometimes have unforeseen negative side effects and can reinforce the unequal share of domestic labor. Comparing French and British childcare policies, Janice Windebank (2001) concludes that, in the absence of national childcare provision, "French fathers appeared to be less ready to look after the children when their partners were employed, as they did not feel forced to do so out of financial necessity or lack of alternatives" (p. 287). These studies are nonetheless mainly focused on salaried workers and do not take into account the case of independent professional workers—in law, medicine, accounting—on whom these new "family-friendly" organizational policies may have little impact.

However, even with the ambivalent impact of these equal-opportunity initiatives, gender norms regarding childcare and the sexual division of domestic labor appear as a site of significant social transformation (Crompton & Le Feuvre, 2003). In their comparison of three generations of British fathers, Julia Brannen and Ann Nilsen (2006) highlight the interactions between historical changes in social structures and labor markets and changes in both the objective and subjective conditions and experiences of fatherhood. The current generation of fathers embarked on and achieved fatherhood "over a longer period and via a pattern of staggered life course transitions" (p. 346). A diverse range of paternal models characterizes the contemporary situation, with one emergent group of "working fathers" (Ranson, 2012) who appear to take on a more equal share of housework and whose members have consciously modified their employment patterns in order to accommodate their family responsibilities.

Likewise, Jonathan Gershuny and his colleagues (2005) note that women with promising career perspectives tend to dramatically reduce the time spent on domestic activities. The (joint) responsibility for keeping daily life ticking thus becomes the subject of regular negotiations within dual-earner families. In a similar vein, Laurence Bachmann (2011) shows how women's changing relationship to money is both a symbol and a result of their

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emancipatory aspirations, nurtured by a democratic ideal, although often at an individual rather than a collective level.

The question that remains is the extent to which the significant shift in gender norms at a societal level, including the spectacular increase in the proportion of dual-earner households, is reflected in the gender dynamics of the professional and managerial occupations. Several studies conclude that there are ambivalent and contradictory forces at play here (Collier, 2013; Lapeyre, 2006; Ranson, 2012).

Thus, in an empirical study of men and masculinities in contemporary globalized law firms, Richard Collier (2013) observes two related but seemingly opposing trends: on the one hand, the development of a “more fragmented, entrepreneurial, hyper-competitive, and increasingly commercial profession” (p. 433), associated with the rise of “a dominant form of transnational business masculinity” (p. 433) and, on the other hand, the increased commitment of male lawyers to “an idea of active, intimate, engaged fathering and to being ‘a good dad’” (p. 433).

Other scholars insist on the remaining barriers to the emergence of “new masculinities” (Holter, 2007) within professional occupations. In particular, the professional ethos of extensive and unlimited availability is difficult to reconcile with the emergent figure of the “new father.” Against that backdrop of women’s claim on professional expertise and recognition, even if male professionals reveal ambivalent attitudes to gender equality issues, those who attempt to negotiate part-time or flexible time arrangements run the risk of being stigmatized as “time deviants” (Brandth & Kvande, 2001) in a context of more or less “aversive sexism” (Tracy & Rivera, 2010).

New Workplace Practices and the Diversification of Professional Career Paths

As several studies of fatherhood in professional settings seem to suggest, the changes in gender norms in the private sphere intersect with the structural evolution of global labor markets (Brannen & Nilsen, 2006). Researchers address two different sets of questions here. Firstly, how do new work organizations and the increasing unpredictability of professional careers affect traditional gender configurations in the family sphere? Secondly, how does the increasing uncertainty of professional careers affect gender configurations in the private sphere?

Some authors go so far as to observe “collapsing boundaries between work and home” (Halford, 2006), aided by the widespread adoption of a range of communication technologies. The opportunity to dissociate working time and physical location is seen as an opportunity to question the conventional rigid dichotomy between public and private spheres and as having a potentially long-term effect on gender roles in general and on women’s professional careers in particular.

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Along with changes in day-to-day working practices, the rising uncertainties in occupational and professional careers have recently appeared on the research agenda. In organizational studies, the rather dated notions of “boundary-less” (Defillippi & Arthur, 1994) or “protean” careers (Hall, 2002) have been revisited, whilst also continuing to attract criticism (Inkson, Gunz, Ganesh, & Roper, 2012). In the general context of unstable and unpredictable career paths, scholars try to figure out the relations between changing career patterns and the reconfiguring of gender relations and inequalities. In stark contrast to the optimistic tone of the “protean” career theorists, several authors insist on the fact that women tend to experience “frayed careers” (Sabelis & Schilling, 2013). From a gender perspective, this implies “a rhythmic view of career across the life course, which encompasses a range of non-typical career patterns including multiple career identities and career change” (Herman, 2015, p. 326). While Clem Herman stresses the persistence of gendered barriers for women returners, her sample of British and Irish women highlights the variety of potential strategies to “reboot” or “reroot” professional tracks after a career break for family reasons.

Although the concept of “frayed careers” was elaborated in order to describe women’s atypical careers, some studies insist on the fact that “careers are now frequently long but also more frequently interrupted for both sexes. There continues to be a significant gender wage gap, but there is also a significant rise in the heterogeneity of careers within each sex category” (Berton et al., 2013). In an increasingly uncertain economic environment, male and female professionals may now be experiencing increasingly similar challenges and obstacles. With the rise of dual-earner and dual-career couples, both sexes may display various—and sometimes similar—responses to professional constraints, including conformity to or rejection of formal and informal requirements regarding job and geographical mobility and availability (Guillaume & Pochic, 2009).

Although they do not necessarily word things in this way, many of these studies seem to suggest a certain blurring of gender divisions in the professional and family spheres (Le Feuvre & Lapeyre, 2005). However, some researchers go a step further, and explicitly explore how women may actively change the professional ethos of the historical “male bastions.”

Women as Potential Change Agents

In the most recent studies of occupational feminization, the question of women's agency and ability to influence professional norms appears to be a growing subject of interest. These issues are addressed in various ways. Some studies insist on the complexity and ambiguity of women's experience of demanding jobs and positions of power. While still stressing the conflicts that exist between social and organizational norms, increasing attention is paid to the strategies women adopt in order to solve or circumvent such tensions. Several studies reveal how women in high-level jobs struggle with two powerful "competing devotions," that of the long-standing professional "devotion to work" and that of the normative female "devotion to the family" (Blair-Loy, 2003; Marry & Jonas, 2005). While avoiding excessive optimism, these studies recognize that an increasing number of women are better able to deal with the "double bind" (Wajcman, 1998) that sets femininity and professionalism in opposition to each other. In so doing, they challenge the established professional ethos and can influence the evolution of professional norms and practices over time.

Other studies reveal that "women talk about their career progressions as deeply embedded in the context of their family needs, yet they maintain a clear set of career aspirations" (Maher, 2013, p. 180). While she does not explicitly mention the idea of "agency," Jane Maree Maher uses the psychological concept of "resilience" to express how interviewees deal proactively with any professional downturns and resist opting out of a career path. In a similar way, Clem Herman's work on women's "frayed careers" in science and engineering occupations (Herman, 2015) also shows how women maintain a strong commitment to their careers, even in the face of discrimination and exclusionary practices.

Women's attrition from different professional fields is often misinterpreted as a flight from the most demanding sectors of the labor market. However, Jennifer Glass and her colleagues (2013) question whether women are really giving up on their career ambitions when they "exit" from academic occupations. They insist on the fact that working environments—including such things as working conditions, job content, and promotion prospects—have a direct influence on women's attrition rates. Thus, when masculine exclusionary practices continue to hamper women's chances of promotion and progression in particular occupations, they are sometimes able to transfer their professional aspirations to other occupational fields (Glass et al., 2013). Studies like this suggest that part of the underrepresentation of women and their high attrition rates in scientific and technical professions are due to the fact that they make strategic moves out of particular professional environments in order to pursue their careers in fields where they expect to find fewer sexist attitudes and, therefore, more opportunities for recognition and promotion. These authors argue that women are no longer solely

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concerned with work-life balance issues, but also with ensuring their own promotion prospects and avoiding the historical pitfalls of tokenism (Moss-Kanter, 1977).

Furthermore, some studies show that the increase in the number of dual-earner or dual-career couples in established professions such as medicine may represent more of a threat to the dominant norms and ethos of the profession than the increase in the number of female doctors per se (Lapeyre & Le Feuvre, 2005). No longer being able to count on the unpaid support of a stay-at-home wife makes it increasingly difficult for younger generations of male doctors to adopt the long-hours culture of their predecessors, and this in turn leads them to express similar work-life balance aspirations to their female counterparts.

Increasingly, the numerical presence of women tends to be considered as source and symbol of the “modernity” of professional environments, and occupations that fail to attract and retain women in sufficient numbers run the risk of appearing backward and old-fashioned. This may have serious economic consequences, especially when professional structures depend heavily on a small number of corporate clients whose executive boards now include a larger proportion of women (Beckman & Phillipps, 2005). However, other studies temper such an optimistic perspective, underlining the “tension between realities and rhetoric within contemporary professions.” Thus, “beneath these optimistic assumptions, the comparative experiences of a broad range of professions reveal the obstinate persistence of historical patterns of gendered exclusion, segmentation and stratification” (Bolton & Muzio, 2008, p. 298).

Conclusions

The spectacular increase in women’s presence in high-level occupations over the past 30 or so years is both a cause and a consequence of powerful changes in contemporary labor markets. Three ways of framing the issue of gender and the professions from a theoretical or empirical perspective highlight and analyze the changes at play at different levels. A first frame adopts a structural approach, presenting feminization as the effect of a modified hierarchy of prestige and as a synonym for women’s “ghettoization” in the least rewarding and prestigious niches of the labor market. A second insists on the organizational level and on the middle-range social mechanisms that produce the dynamics of inequality in given professions, occupations, and organizations, thus maintaining a principle of vertical segregation. A third and more holistic way of framing the question acknowledges that the dramatic increase in women’s presence in a wide range of qualified occupations may be challenging social and professional norms regarding career patterns, personal aspirations, and work-life balance issues. These more recent studies often lead to contradictory conclusions, since the changes at hand are not without ambivalence. As Sullivan (2004) has remarked, changes to gender processes are “not easy to identify or analyze,” and therefore require “the integration of different levels

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of analysis” (p. 220). This calls for the continuing collection of high-quality empirical data on gender and careers and for the elaboration of novel and innovative analytical perspectives. We need to focus not only on the forces that work to the detriment of women’s professional potential, but also on the emergence of “inequality regimes” that may not overlap as neatly as in the past with a straightforward gender divide.

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