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## **Managing difference in feminized work: Men, otherness and social practice**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article presents a qualitative study of men who do traditionally female dominated and feminized work (specifically nursing and primary school teaching). Men are often seen as not only a minority to women in these contexts, but also their Other. The article explores the processes of doing gender as a social and discursive practice, highlighting the necessity to manage difference and the processual, emergent, dynamic, partial and fragmented nature of gendered identities. We show some of the complex ways in which men manage difference and how they transcend Otherness by doing masculinity and appropriating femininity so that masculinity is partially subverted and partly maintained. This analysis not only relies on the doing of gender through the doing of difference but also surfaces the undoing of gender and difference to disrupt gender norms and practices in work organizations.

### **KEYWORDS**

doing gender ■ feminization ■ identity ■ masculinity ■ social practice

### **Introduction**

Identity is about sameness – it is the identification of how we see ourselves and others in relation to being the same. Perhaps more importantly it is also about difference – whom we are not the same as. The sense of self, then, is about both who we are and who we are not. Located within an

interpretative perspective in which identity is understood as being constructed between self and other, this article investigates men's gendered identities in two feminized occupations, namely primary school teaching and nursing. Here, men's experiences of difference – or Otherness – are managed through the process of 'doing' gender thus contextualized. From this perspective, gendered identities are relational processes and gender itself is a social practice that both defines and is a product of social relations between men and women rather than indicative of the properties of their fixed identity positions. The self and gender are consequently embedded in and emerge from discursive structures. From this theoretical orientation, we explore how male nurses and primary school teachers actively and discursively draw on masculinity and femininity as well as on difference and sameness in their work contexts to manage their status as token or 'marginal' men.

This article explores the discursive production of identity which recognizes identity as not only constantly changing but as fragmented, multiple and emergent (see Ainsworth & Hardy, 2004; Ashcraft, 2006; Pullen & Linstead, 2005; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). This initiates an appreciation of the multiplicity of lived experience out of which processes of identity construction are grounded in power, knowledge and language (Foucault, 1980). This approach provides increased discursive heterogeneity by demonstrating the wider variety of discourses through which the gendered self is established as well as highlighting the ways in which men and women relationally resist the discursive subject-positions institutionally prescribed for them. This emphasizes both the embodied and gendered nature of subject-formation.

To investigate men's gendered identity work in feminized occupations, and building on a body of work that explores the marginal roles and identities of men in non-traditional work contexts (Heikes, 1991; Lupton, 2000, 2006; Simpson, 2004, 2005; Williams, 1993), we concern ourselves with how 'being Other' is managed by the practices of doing masculinity. This contrasts with research that has concentrated on male dominance as a source of privilege and power (Collinson & Hearn, 1994; Connell, 1995, 2000; Kerfoot & Knights, 1993, 1998) while at the same time it disrupts the common reading of women as Other. From Hearn (1996), an understanding of masculinity and masculine identity practices can be gained by focusing on (e.g. non-traditional) contexts where men as 'the One' become 'the Other'.

The findings of a qualitative empirical study of 25 men in feminized or 'non-traditional' occupations, nursing and primary school teaching, are presented. This feminized work has been well documented as having been traditionally held by women (only 10% of nurses and 14% of primary

teachers are male, EOC, 2002) and as requiring feminized skills and attributes (such as sensitivity, nurturing and care) that society normally attributes to women (Heilman, 1997; Hochschild, 1983). In such feminized contexts, men are 'marked' as different from traditional masculinity (Lupton, 2000; Morgan, 1992; Williams, 1993) and, at the same time, as being different from the female norm where it is usually women's experiences that exist as the 'unmarked' case (Evans, 1997; Murray, 1996). This article contributes to research on men in feminized work by exploring men's gendered social practices, that is how men discursively construct, maintain and resist Otherness or difference. We show how through the management of difference – by doing masculinity and appropriating femininity – masculinity is both partially subverted and maintained, as men engage in a gender doing and undoing that involves the negotiation of One/Other (Hearn, 1996), masculine/feminine (Knights & Kerfoot, 2004; Linstead & Brewis, 2004; Pullen & Knights, 2007), and same/different (Lorber, 1994). This takes us beyond an analysis of difference which, in the context of men in gender atypical occupations, has been largely conceptualized as a separation or distance from the feminine and which, from Deutsch (2007), has tended to draw conclusions in terms of the preservation rather than disruption of the gender order, to include a more nuanced account of the dynamics of difference that can capture resistance as well as conformity to gender norms.

This article unfolds in the following stages. First, existing literature on men in feminized work is examined to surface the relationship between men and masculinity in what has commonly been referred to as 'women's work'. We develop a discursive approach to gender identity to show how the management of difference is central to overcoming Otherness. Second, the doing gender/doing difference argument that underlies our approach is discussed and we introduce the processes of undoing gender to this debate. Third, the interpretative research methodology adopted for the empirical study is outlined and the rationale for the data presented is articulated. Fourth, the analysis of the data is presented to show how the men in our study do and undo gender as a social practice. In particular, we discuss the relations between male and female colleagues; the employment of femininity as a strategy within caring occupations; and male bodies as 'matter out of place'. We point to the complexities and dynamics of difference and show how by appropriating femininity as well as actively doing masculinity to manage difference, masculinity is both challenged and maintained. We conclude that men experience alterity as partial and fragmented and that managing difference requires attention not just to Otherness but to the discursive relationships between the One and the Other.

### Men doing 'women's work'

Against an extensive literature on 'token' women (Bagilhole, 2002; Kanter, 1977; Simpson, 1997), a small but growing body of work has in recent years explored the experiences of men who have moved into non-traditional or feminized work. Such research has largely focused on career trajectories and challenges faced in such roles. Thus, despite common perceptions that men moving into traditionally female jobs have stepped down in status (Benton DeCorse & Vogtle, 1997), positive career outcomes have been found to accrue for 'token' men. Men working in non-traditional occupations benefit from the assumption that, as men, they have enhanced leadership and other skills and a more careerist attitude to work (Fløge & Merrill, 1986; Heikes, 1991). Male nurses for example often ascend the hierarchy more quickly than female counterparts (Williams, 1993) or gravitate to career enhancing specialist areas and away from general nursing care (Evans, 1997; Simpson, 2004; Williams, 1995). More generally, the research suggests that men tend to monopolize positions of power and are rewarded for their difference from women in terms of higher pay and other benefits (Budig, 2002; Williams, 1993).

Men do, however, face challenges in their non-traditional career. In particular, teaching and nursing, which rely on emotional labour may call for special abilities that only women are seen as possessing (Hochschild, 1983). This creates problems for men (Heikes, 1991) whose competence and suitability are often called into question, especially if traditional forms of hegemonic masculinity are displayed (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). In primary school teaching, for example, men have been found to be in a double bind: their presumed masculine interests in sport and male bonding give them an initial hiring advantage but these same characteristics can alienate them from female staff (Allan, 1993; Sargent, 2001). Despite this, when men display the required feminine approach their sexuality becomes questioned (Evans, 2002; Sargent, 2001). These challenges raise issues about how male workers manage and reconcile the feminine nature of work and associated demands for its performance with hegemonic gender regimes that may need to be unlearned – challenges that have been highlighted by Lupton (2000) who has pointed to the fear of feminization and stigmatization that often accompanies the non-traditional career choice. Existing research suggests that responses to these challenges are largely oriented around the creation and maintenance of distance from the feminine. Men have been found to reconstruct the job so as to minimize its non-masculine associations (Heikes, 1991; Lupton, 2000; Simpson, 2004) and engage in compensatory gendered practices so as to 'restore' a dominating position (Alvesson, 1998; Cross &

Bagilhole, 2002). Men may confer on women, for example, a subordinated position of 'hyper-sexuality' instituted in the 'gaze' of men. Other strategies have included 'careerism' where men aspire to management or supervisory posts and veer away from day-to-day professional practice (Heikes, 1991; Williams, 1995). Men have been found to align and identify themselves with more powerful male groups (Evans, 2002; Floge & Merrill, 1986; Simpson, 2004) and/or to emphasize the male and downplay the female elements of the job for example by moving into what may be seen as more 'masculine' specialisms (Williams, 1993). In nursing, for example, men often gravitate towards mental health, with historic links to custodialism, or to accident and emergency, seen as more technologically oriented and 'adrenalin charged' than standard nursing care (Simpson, 2004).

The research outlined above explains some of the challenges faced by men in feminized work contexts and considers strategies adopted to deal with those challenges. Such research, however, risks overlooking the more complex aspects of difference that go beyond men's distancing or separation from femininity. This suggests a need to surface the complex nature of power relations between male/female and masculine/feminine, to consider how men might draw on, resist and transcend difference in the discursive spaces within and between the two. Attention to managing these perceived differences is assisted by a 'doing gender' approach which illuminates the processual, dynamic and fluid nature of gender grounded in discursive regimes.

### **Doing gender, managing masculinity**

The 'doing gender' approach conceives of gender not as the property of the individual or as a simple, unambiguous category, but as 'situated doing' (West & Zimmerman, 2002). Gender is a social practice (Gherardi & Poggio, 2002) that is (re)produced in its performance (Butler, 1990; Pullen, 2006a). From the work of Fenstermaker and West (2002;<sup>1</sup> West & Zimmerman, 2002) difference and the gender binary are actively produced as part of the work of gender in everyday interactions that take place in light of normative and localized conceptions of what it means to be a woman or a man (Moloney & Fenstermaker, 2002). Doing gender thus involves the (re)creation, negotiation and maintenance of difference in specific social and institutional contexts. These provide a 'repertoire of practices' (Martin, 2003) concerning what it means to perform a particular gender position.

For West and Zimmerman (2002), gender performances take place in particular institutional contexts so that institutions, as purveyors of gendered narratives (Ashcraft, 2006), as well as institutions are implicated in the

appropriate 'doing' of gender. In the institutional context of teaching for example, men 'do' masculinity in that they are often called upon to be the disciplinarian or to take on difficult or challenging groups (Simpson, 2004) while within hospitals male nurses are expected to do heavy lifting work and to manage angry or abusive patients (Evans, 1997). However, as West and Zimmerman point out, failure to do gender appropriately will call individuals (their character, motives, predispositions) rather than institutions to account – an accountability that is all the more visible in a non-traditional context.

As Deutsch (2007) has argued, the focus on 'doing' gender outlined above may overlook the ways in which gender is challenged and difference dismantled. In this respect, Pullen and Knights (2007) note that gender studies tend to focus on 'the processes of doing gender as an organized performance, often a project of achievement and completeness – whether in producing or reproducing gendered identities and discourses or resisting and subverting them' (p. 505). However, Butler (2004) reminds us that *doing* gender involves considerable ambiguity, incompleteness, fragmentation and fluidity. This is so because it is often tied up with processes of *undoing* at levels of identity, self, text, and practice – where undoing refers to those social interactions and associated discourses that reduce, dismantle, disrupt and challenge gender difference (Deutsch, 2007). Therefore while organizations might 'prompt conformity' (Ely & Padavic, 2007) that appears as sex differences, individuals might resist these normative pressures. Moreover, as Pullen and Knights (2007) state 'any undoing of identity, self or gender is at one and the same time also a positive doing of some alternative' (p. 506) – alerting us to the complexity in which doing and undoing unfolds. A focus on doing therefore incorporates undoing and raises issues around managing difference in specific work contexts.

From their early work on 'doing gender' (West & Zimmerman, 1987), West and Zimmerman accordingly moved to a focus on 'doing difference' (West & Zimmerman, 2002) in order to better capture the dynamics of managing difference, in all its manifestations, in organizations. As Ashcraft (2006) argues, a focus on doing difference allows for a more complex inquiry into the varied articulations of and meanings attached to difference as well as how differences intersect. This presents a dynamic and unstable view of difference that serves to challenge the binaries of male/female, masculine/feminine as well as an associated view of gender as a stable 'gap' between the two (Ashcraft, 2006). In the context of our study, it leads to a consideration of how men construct, maintain, resist and subvert difference through their gender performances – as well as how dominant discourses of heterosexual masculinity form the basis for the 'doing of difference' at work. Against the

acknowledgement of the instabilities of difference (West & Fenstermaker, 1995) and an appreciation of the multiplicity and intersectionality of identity, doing difference can sustain, resist, and transgress (Butler, 1990, 1993) traditional gender binaries.

A focus on doing and undoing difference supports the notion of gender as social practice. Through this reading, gender and its performance can be understood as a 'relational' and situated project (Ashcraft, 2006; Pullen, 2006a) which surfaces the doing and undoing of gender and difference at work. In this respect, gender and identity are conceived as emergent and incomplete (see Kerfoot & Knights, 1998; Pullen & Linstead, 2005; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Whitehead, 2001) rather than a product that can be achieved. Masculinities, as social practices, can therefore be seen as created and negotiated in interaction, partly dependent on discursive, institutional and social contexts (Kerfoot & Knights, 1993) and characterized by multiplicity, ambiguity and tension (Alvesson, 1998; Collinson & Hearn, 1994; Connell, 2000; Kerfoot & Knights, 1998) as some masculinities are given priority over others and as some overlap or contradict one another. In other words, masculinity is never complete (Collinson, 2003) and is the product of performances in specific situations. These performances involve the doing as well as the undoing of gender and of difference at work.

In summary, this article addresses the question of how men manage difference as 'marginal men' in feminized occupations. In so doing, the article provides empirical support for the notion of gender doing and undoing and highlights some of the complexities of negotiating Otherness. While acknowledging the importance of previous studies of men in non-traditional work contexts, the article moves on from a focus on separation and distance from the feminine and, as Deutsch (2007) argues, commonly drawn conclusions in existing work regarding the preservation of the gender order, to consider the complex ways in which differences and identities are managed. We argue that the management of difference is complex, fragmented and incomplete and is pivotal to the negotiation of gendered practices in these contexts.

## **Research methodology**

The research reported in this article adopted an inductive interpretative research methodology. As discursively produced practices, identities are produced within social and institutional constraints (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Thomas & Linstead, 2002) and our data collection concentrated on how men talked about their gendered experiences as men in feminized work contexts. In particular, we focused on the narration of lived

experience and how this reflected doing (Gherardi, 1995) and undoing gender (see contributors to Pullen & Knights, 2007). The production of gendered identities relies on how individuals see themselves as different and as same to others (Lorber, 1994, 2005; West & Fenstermaker, 1995). Throughout the research we were concerned with how men made sense of their identities as Other and how this difference was created, embraced or resisted by them.

Data were collected via interviews, focusing on how gender emerged in the interaction with the researcher through talk: talk as text (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Silverman, 1993). The interviews became an active resource for exploring men's situated Otherness and how men managed this difference in feminized work. The interview was understood as a co-construction of knowledge between the researcher and research subject (Shotter, 1993). To explore the processual nature of gendered identity the people interviewed were given the space to talk fluidly and uninterrupted, prompted by the researcher, on key themes. These included experiences of a gendered division of labour (e.g. are there expectations that as a man you should perform particular roles or tasks at work); the nature of the relationship with colleagues and key personnel (e.g. do you sometimes talk about non-work issues with doctors/headteachers); perceptions of skills and attributes brought to the job (e.g. What qualities do you think you need to be a good teacher/nurse? Which of these qualities do you/female counterparts bring?); attitudes to and practices of emotional labour (e.g. What does 'caring' mean to you? What challenges do you as a man face in performing a caring role?). These themes provided a starting point for an exploration of the meanings attached to difference (from women, from other men) as well as of the practices of gender in the context of a caring role.

Twenty-five men participated in the study. Fifteen nurse participants came from six different hospitals in the south-east of England, UK. Five were involved with mental health, four in accident and emergency, one in palliative care and the remainder worked in general nursing. The 10 primary school teachers who took part were employed in six different schools around London. Two men were part of the senior management team, one was a nursery manager and seven were classroom teachers. The interviews took place in their respective workplaces and were conducted by the second author. The interviews were digitally recorded and fully transcribed. Anonymity was guaranteed and pseudonyms are used in this article to protect the research subjects. The data were entered into NVivo (qualitative data software) and a first level of analysis was conducted around themes outlined above (i.e. divisions of labour within the nursing/teaching role; nature of relationships at work; perceptions of skills required for the job; attitudes to and practices of care). A second level of analysis was then



conducted on themes of sameness and difference. From this, identity implications of and specific meanings attached to difference and non-difference emerged (e.g. differentiation from women through activation of (masculine) discourses of rationality and detachment; differentiation from men through activation of (feminine) discourses of care). This second level of analysis was conducted separately by the two authors with later corroboration given to emerging themes by comparing and discussing individual insights and interpretations.

Reflexivity was a key driver for this process and centred on reflexive engagement during the interviews, the acknowledgement that reflexivity forms part of the socially constructed nature of knowledge and the reflexive representation of data (Cunliffe, 2003; Hardy et al., 2001). Reflexivity was important in acknowledging how gender difference between interviewer (female) and interviewee (male) may have influenced data collection and analysis. As Evans (2002) has suggested, research collaboration between women and men can raise epistemological issues concerning the most fitting standpoint (Harding, 1987) from which to explore men's experiences. She subsequently concludes that the standpoint of women, due to their marginalized position and hence greater sensitivity to gender dynamics and gender power relations, might produce a more appropriate lens. Men by contrast, at the centre of knowledge production, tend to remain 'imprisoned' within established epistemological frameworks and might have more difficulty uncovering dynamics of gendered power. In the context of the present study, while not wishing to claim that a female interviewer would necessarily produce a 'better' interpretation, there was an ease in terms of shared reflections and disclosures in the interview situation. This might reflect the fact that men worked with and communicated with women on a daily basis as well as the perception that women are sympathetic (and non-threatening) listeners. Further, the first author, having not been involved in the data collection, acted as a reflexive lens, through subsequent discussions and corroborations, for data analysis and interpretation.

The data presented in the next sections of this article illustrate specific relationships and processes within the emerging themes surrounding identity and difference. In particular, we selected data where the doing and undoing of gender could be read in relation to the theme of difference and non-difference. This article represents *fragments* of accounts from individual transcripts. These fragments were illustrative of particular issues and themes that emerged as significant to the participants concerned, in terms of a high level of emphasis placed on and a 'weight' given to these accounts. They also resonated across other accounts from the wider data set. In other words, they were significant to both the participant in question and emerged as a theme more generally. We do not, however, claim that the data we present and

discuss are representative in any quantitative sense or that ours is the only possible interpretation of either these or of the wider data. As Trethewey points out, interview data are not intended to be 'a clear and unblemished window on reality' (1999: 428) but should be understood as 'an opportunity to explore the contours of a particular discourse' (Silverman, 1993, cited in Trethewey, 1999: 428). Our fragments are representative of themes of difference articulated by the individual and more generally by other men interviewed. The main themes that emerged from the data within the context of doing and undoing gender were how men accommodated and resisted femininity in the management of masculinity; how femininity was appropriated by men; and how men's bodies are an important aspect of identity work in nursing and primary school teaching. Each of these themes are discussed below.

### Managing and reinforcing masculinity

... if the charge nurse is a male he gains more respect than the ward sister, where discipline, structure, routine has to be respected and abided with.

(John, nurse)

In this section, discourses of masculinity that reveal how men reinforce their maleness and associated masculinity are analysed. Two strategies for independence can be seen in the data: a differentiation of emotional labour skills through an appropriation of the feminine and the activation of ties of fraternity with higher status men.

Men routinely differentiated their skills, particularly emotional labour skills, from those practised by women. This differentiation strategy involved men seeing themselves as having 'a different form of compassion', caring in a more 'detached' way, as being 'more rational' and having 'more authority' and 'more discipline' than women. These attributes can be associated with stereotypical characteristics of masculinity, and the management of masculinity through talk can be seen as a form of rhetoric that serves to present men as more competent than their female colleagues.

I think men tend to be more understanding – not so short tempered, we maybe don't rush around – I've worked with someone [female nurse] who was I've got to do this, I've got to do that, always here, there and everywhere and the patient becomes a very poor third and I think that men tend to be more placid and listen to the patient – and if what the patient wants does not fit what the ward can do then we'll

try and get something changed so that can happen, rather than just say oh we can't do that because . . .

(Lawrence, nurse)

Masculine characteristics of rationality and cool headedness can thus be deployed to add value to caring skills and to render them different from those of women. The ability to mobilize resources and circumvent bureaucracy was another commonly expressed differentiating factor:

What do I mean by care? Well, for me it's being able to do the best for the patient, and if that means breaking rules then so be it . . . if a patient is obviously dying, he wants a cigarette, there's no point refusing him a cigarette, I would take him outside whereas my female colleagues would say 'no you're not allowed to smoke' . . . Now, with the women he'll get a hard and fast, 'this is what's good for you' and that's it, that's the way . . . I don't feel that way. You tell me what's good for you, what you want – and I'll do it . . .

Presenting women as 'rule bound' and bureaucratic supports the uptake of a more satisfying oppositional and 'maverick' identity around independence and non-conformity. Overall, this can be seen as a 'masculinization' of emotion (Lewis & Simpson, 2007; Tyler, 2005) in which feminine emotions are appropriated and expressed as part of masculinist rationality, independence and/or career strategy. The creation of such distance by men enables the management of difference aimed at transcending their perceived secondary position as men. As such, undoing femininity is necessary for the management and reinforcement of masculinity.

A shared discourse in the data was one of fraternity – an important feature of the male club culture. Here, male nurses in particular sought assimilation into the group of higher status male doctors and consultants:

I do have a close relationship with the (male) doctors – I find that I can be pally with them and sit down and chat with them and we can talk about men things.

(George, nurse)

I get on very well with the consultant . . . he would respect me for what I've done and the majority of the time he would back me up – whereas if a female colleague approached him and said I am very concerned about one of the patients, he has many a time said to female colleagues you are projecting your own anxiety.

(David, nurse)

Unlike women (too deferential, too emotional), men can draw on masculinity and on ascriptions of specialist expertise (commanding 'respect for what I've done'), to partly enter this privileged space. However, this positioning is never secure. Marked as different in their work context, male nurses see themselves as feminine, subordinate, Other. To secure ontological presence, male nurses' rehearsed stories of encounters with (always male) doctors where norms of deference and of hierarchy were challenged and overturned.

I've sent doctors out of my unit before – I've sent them off because I felt they were behaving inappropriately in front of my patients and I've said don't come back to my unit until you either apologize or you can conduct yourself appropriately.

(Steve, nurse)

I was at a meeting yesterday and there was three consultants were just chit chatting away while I was trying to discuss something and I asked them if they could keep quiet and they just carried on chatting so I said if you don't f\*\*\*\*\* shut up I'm going to walk out of here . . .

(Nick, nurse)

Here, Otherness needs to be managed and overcome. Resistance to alterity could take the form of aggressive or overly assertive emotional displays, demonstrating a reliance on masculine behaviours when dealing with other men. As Nick commented reflexively, in possible recognition of his marginal status:

I can be aggressive in meetings and I find that I get exasperated and shout at people very easily, especially doctors, especially male doctors which I think says a lot about how I see myself next to a doctor.

(Nick, nurse)

Such displays of masculinity as attempts at dominance are resonant with Kerfoot's contention that masculine subjects strive for control – which, after Pullen (2006b), could be seen to be a fundamental element of hierarchy both in general, and in hierarchical institutions like medicine.

As we have seen in this section, masculinity can be reinforced through gender doing and undoing – through the strategic masculinization of emotion and the alignment with other men. Often femininity is undone, appropriated to men's advantage in the management of difference. Conversely, we have also seen the fragility and vulnerability of male nurse's masculinity through confrontations with alterity in their dealings with more senior men. Even

though difference is managed through the promotion of masculine selves, we are reminded by Hearn (1996) that masculinity is itself a source of struggle and resistance. As a consequence any casting of men as masculine as an attempt to render themselves different from women is a process of incompleteness rather than completeness and is likely to require ongoing identity work to be maintained.

### **Projects of femininity**

I often compare myself with my brother who's making million pound deals and he's earning money for his company and I tend to feel when I compare myself with him I tend to feel emasculated really because he's a big City fat cat and would be sat around with a big cigar talking money and I talk about buying more mattresses to enable patients to be more comfortable and it feels kind of soft and unimportant compared to what he's doing.

(Nick, nurse)

In this section we argue that in order to manage difference in response to threats to masculinity, men activate projects of femininity. This can paradoxically partly support and partly undermine masculinity's dominance. Nick's opening account depicts how the feminized work of nursing emasculates his identity. Caring is equated with femininity, against strong imagery of masculine financial and corporate success ('big cigar', 'big City fat cat'). Care can therefore be read as 'soft and unimportant' when considered in terms of dominant masculine values. Within nursing, although care is a fundamental skill and attribute, it becomes marginalized against the virility and potency of corporate masculinity. Nick's experience represents a common view held across men in the study that feminized work becomes an uncomfortable choice when compared to the work often associated with men.

In drawing comparisons with other men in terms of the perceived masculinity of their jobs, and against common conceptions of men's work as hard, dirty (Ackroyd & Crowdy, 1990) and heavy (Willis, 2004), men present their occupational choice in terms of femininity, physical weakness and an uncomfortable alterity:

Most of my friends when they say what do you do and I say a primary school teacher and they're like . . . maybe they think I'm a wimp or something.

(Mike, teacher)

Because I am a man in early years I'm aware that I am a freak and that I'm weird and in the wrong job.

(Matt, teacher)

Through the lived experience of difference, and reflecting the need to manage that experience, some men used what we call 'projects of femininity' to create and maintain distance from traditional masculinity (Witz & Marshall, 2003). Here traditional masculinity was partly 'undone' and, in the following quote, concepts of rationality used, paradoxically, to create distance from the masculine:

I worked for the public works department with the electricians and it was the worst time of my life working with foul mouthed men . . . I felt intimidated, I felt physically intimidated . . . I felt I couldn't have rational conversations with people, or rationalize things and I just, working with women to me meant that I'd be able to talk to people.

(Joe)

Men promoted femininity, commenting and placing value on their 'feminine side', disidentifying with normalized assumptions of what it is to be a man:

I think in a way I'm not your average male because I'm more caring towards children . . .

(Josh, teacher)

I'm really in touch with my caring side, my feminine side if you like. Not like other blokes I know.

(Keith, teacher)

Discourses of care (Williams, 1995) were thus activated, capitalizing on nurturing, empathy and emotion to promote difference. Difference through doing femininity was also manifest in dress and body performance:

. . . I wear pink quite a bit and boys say you can't wear pink you're a man, why can't I wear pink I'm wearing pink today . . . I'm quite happy being seen in a motherly role. I've got no problems with my feminine side at all, I'm quite proud of it . . . and I think they [the children and parents] see that I'm very approachable and motherly . . .

(Matt, teacher)

Matt draws specifically on a discourse of motherhood to promote and celebrate difference from other men – developing an original subjectivity as someone who has ‘broken the mould’. More generally, men recounted feelings of pride in their ‘caring’ skills which, as one teacher commented, ‘the Dads don’t have time or the inclination to do’.

Whilst Kerfoot sees men as denying ‘the possibility for “play” within social relations – of shifting between subject positions’ on the grounds that masculinity ‘necessitate(s) that the other is subordinated to self’ (Kerfoot, 1999: 197), in our interviews there were some examples of men engaging comfortably with the feminine. In the following quote, a nurse discusses his experience on night duty, seen in some contexts as a more feminine space where greater informality presides (Lewis, 2008).

I had no problem doing the girly things, chattering away with the girls and, for example, one of the things we used to do to make money towards the end of the month was we would on night duty we would starch the hats for people who didn’t want to fold their own hats, so we’d be sitting there in the bathroom with a bath full of starch and a dinner plate making the hats for a pound a go (laughter) and I was quite happy to do things like that, so I’ve always found it very easy to fit into the female way of things being done and so that’s never been a problem at all . . . I’ve always been one of the girls.

(Steve, nurse)

Here, Steve positions himself as ‘one of the girls’, playing with femininity in the pursuit of managing difference. As in the earlier quote from Matt, some male teachers appropriated femininity through identification with the role of mother.

I feel quite happy being seen in a more motherly [role], I’ve got no problem with my feminine side at all, I’m quite proud of it. On initially seeing a man in my role I think children might, and parents also, might find me . . . they wouldn’t want to approach me, but once they’ve seen me two or three times and see how I am with the children and see how I am with other parents, I think they then see that I am very approachable and motherly, if you will.

(Tony, teacher)

Masculinity is therefore something to be controlled and managed (as distant, unapproachable) in practices of care. In this sense, the management of

masculinity requires its undoing and this partly depends on the doing of femininity as men draw on feminine discourses of motherhood and care to position themselves in their non-traditional role. One teacher commented on the 'caring soft' place of the staffroom, enjoying the gifts of food and female conversation, which he contrasted with the less welcoming and competitive masculine culture of his previous job in a bank. However, while men could comfortably participate in and share practices of femininity, the undoing of masculinity could be fragmented and incomplete.

I think it's easy for me working in a female dominated profession because those are characteristics that I had before I came into nursing . . . like caring and looking after people and listening to them and all that and working within nursing has allowed them to flourish really, but I often catch sight of myself or hear myself and think that's not really what I'd expect to hear from a man, I'd expect men to be a lot tougher!

(George, nurse)

Men therefore see themselves through a traditionally gendered gaze. This 'mirror image' highlights both the insecurity of masculinity and the strength of its presence as expectations around dominant notions of gender impress on subjectivity in the day-to-day practices of care.

More generally, whilst care performed by women is often devalued as a 'natural' part of femininity (Taylor & Tyler, 2000) and an essential part of being Other (McDowell & Pringle, 1992), men's emotional labour can be celebrated as an asset, divorced from Otherness and from nature. In this way, men are able to build a satisfying identity that subverts but also builds on traditional notions of gender and through which men create value. As Davies and Thomas (2004) point out, to resist something is also to reify it, legitimizing the subject position that is being denied. Thus, discourses of 'New Manhood' (Knights, 2001) that claim difference from and privilege over other 'masculine' men, reject traditional masculinity but in so doing acknowledge and reinforce its dominant status. Men claim special status within the discursive spaces of femininity and care because they are men and carry 'traces' of privilege and power. The undoing of masculinity is therefore partial and incomplete, achieved by the doing of femininity. These paradoxically collide in the management of difference as men secure their identities by endorsing the very feminine or masculine norms that they might otherwise wish to discredit.



**'Matter out of place' in feminized occupations**

... I'm tall and big and unshaven and got a big scar on my face ... I didn't feel comfortable in a woman's world ... I didn't feel able really to be myself and I think to feel comfortable you have to adapt yourself in many ways ... For example, if I was working on a building site I'd be much more boisterous and outspoken, but working as a health visitor with a group of middle aged, middle class women ...

(Nick, nurse)

Discourses of the body permeated the data as men drew on their materiality to manage difference. As Connell (2000) points out, bodies matter in that biological differences between men and women play an important part in determining what is seen to be 'masculine' and 'feminine' work. Gendered meaning is grounded when the body complies with its social definition, in our case within feminized contexts. In teaching and nursing, masculine bodies were seen as problematic and men's bodies conceptualized as 'matter out of place' (Douglas, 1966). This is illustrated in Nick's account above as he tells of his discomfort with his body in a feminized role. Even if men's identity can be discursively performed to manage issues of sameness and difference, the appearance of the physical body locates their sense of self as something more permanent and harder to manage.

In caring roles that routinely require bodily contact, men and their bodies are further marked as different from the feminine norm (Evans, 1997; Murray, 1996; Simpson, 2004). Being Other is again associated with being abnormal (note references to 'freak' and 'wimp' in previous extracts) as well as dangerous, sexualized and potentially paedophilic in a feminized context where women's bodies (as emotional, nurturing) are unmarked, unthreatening and congruent with feminized work. In both teaching and nursing rules and procedures dictate ethical, appropriate behaviour with children and female patients and impose constraints on how certain aspects of the job were performed by men. Not surprisingly, men did not welcome the marking of their bodies in these contexts and there was evidence of resentment to the restrictions and stigmas attached.

If you've got a child who's really worried and upset, instinct tells you to put your arm round them but you don't – you get somebody else in there to witness – a female teacher would not have the same stigma attached to it. It is restricting because you might want to break through to a child ... and you cannot do it any other way.

(Robin, teacher)

Robin illustrates the constraints in performing his role as a male teacher, drawing on the tensions between 'instincts' for caring and the need to resist them. Similarly, Matt demonstrates, physical closeness is linked with intimacy and its inappropriateness for men:

There are certain things I can't do with the children, I can't hug children as much as a woman teacher would be able to do, because again it would be seen as being too close and too intimate with them, which is nonsense, but it still would be seen . . . (as inappropriate). I should be able to hug somebody as much as a woman should be able to hug someone . . .

(Matt, teacher)

Through the sexualization of men's touch (Evans, 2002) intimacy is problematic unlike the 'safe' touch of women. The management of physical space for Matt becomes central in the conduct of his work in which intimacy is associated with femininity (Simpson, 2004; Williams, 1995). Subsequently whilst masculinity can be partly undone in the discursive production of men's identities at work, bodies cannot be easily undone and ground men's experiences of working in feminized roles. For example, in both contexts, men were routinely assigned body congruent work that demanded physical strength (e.g. lifting heavy patients), discipline or an engagement in sport.

Despite strong pressures to conform to these demands, attempts were made to 'undo' the meanings around the masculine body. Wearing pink can be seen as one such practice. In another example, resistance to being 'lumbered' with sport was performed by a teacher through a body presentation of disinterest and detachment:

When I was teaching junior children I did get lumbered with taking the football team, but I used to deliberately stand there, I used to wear my leather jacket, smoke roll-ups on the touch line and do as little running about as I humanly could and wear my sunglasses as well (laughter).

(Sean, teacher)

Here, through body performance, masculinity in the form of sporting proficiency was undone, to be replaced by the doing of another masculinity in the form of 'cool' non-conformist. As 'sign emitting text' (Trethewey, 1999) bodies and body deportment therefore convey meanings that can support or undermine particular identities and presentations of self. Tensions between the performance of care, embodied within femininity, and the masculine body routinely led to assumptions of homosexuality, triggering a need to manage difference against a heterosexual norm. As Robin commented:

One of the male teachers at school is happily married with two children, but everybody thinks he's gay because of his mannerisms and the way he talks to the children, whereas I am gay but I'm perceived to be the big bloke about the school . . . The way you deal with children you're obviously going to sound more feminine . . . because you're talking to younger children you do tend to address them in a certain way.

(Robin, teacher)

Here, sexual meanings around men's bodies in their interactions with children are disrupted by contradictory body size (as the 'big bloke' around the school Robin is not perceived as gay). Managing perceptions of homosexuality, in this case by drawing on difference between body-size, gendered meanings and sexuality, was an issue for many men and sexuality emerged as highly pertinent to how men negotiated difference. In the following quote, David managed alterity and thus his positioning against the wider heterosexual norm by 'camping it up' as an oppositional response:

In my last job there was myself and a chap called Alan who were both openly gay and we were quite happy, I'm not naturally effeminate but I can be as camp as they like if they want me to and Alan and I used to try and goad each other into excesses of camp and outrage so we were very much one of the girls.

(David, nurse)

Through harnessing sexuality as a mode of resistance, humour can become an important form of play (see Collinson, 1988, 2002; Fleming, 2007) which potentially threatens masculinity (Skeggs, 1991). 'Excesses of camp and outrage' help promote difference from hegemonic masculinity – undoing masculinity through hyper-feminized performances and through hints of drag. In the following quote, David manages a potentially threatening difference through playing Otherness, whilst promoting his service in a caring role:

. . . the more butch ones [male homosexual nurses] we used to tease that they were honorary girls and one aggressively heterosexual male nurse that I worked with who'd been in the army who I used to be terrified of, but he and I became quite friendly actually because I nursed his wife and being a neuro-specialist he actually asked if I would look after her, which was a great compliment and we got on very well after that, to the point that he used to come up to me every morning and say good morning you're all clean and I'd say good morning you're all bastard (laughter) . . . I've never had any problems sexuality wise and as I say my last job was very much members of the girls, or honorary girls . . .

(David, nurse)

David draws on irony to align caring, femininity and homosexuality in juxtaposition with contradictory body images (more 'masculine' gay nurses are mockingly aligned with femininity). Paradoxically, it is through performance of feminized care, the trigger for assumptions of homosexuality and for potential displays of homophobia, that he is able to negotiate a relationship with a supposedly hyper-masculine colleague. Through humour and by drawing on meanings around homosexuality (clean) and heterosexuality (bastard) this relationship can be tested and potential difficulties breached. Sexuality can challenge gender dualisms whilst difference, rendered non-threatening, is bridged.

## Discussion and conclusion

This article has presented a qualitative study of male nurses and primary school teachers that explored the gendered division of labour and gendered identities in traditionally female dominated and feminized work. We argued that men are commonly positioned as women's Other in these contexts. Moreover, while male teachers' and nurses' experiences related to subjective modes of difference, the individual men in our study embraced and resisted both sameness and difference, experiencing Otherhood in partial and fragmented ways. As token men in their professions, the management of difference became an active strategy in the performance of gendered identities.

The doing gender/doing difference approach of West and Zimmerman (2002) and others in the field was employed to surface the relationships between the doing of gender as a social and discursive practice. We considered difference, and its management, to be of central importance to both the theory and the research subjects. Reading gender as a social practice we showed the processual and dynamic, partial and fragmented nature of gendered identities, albeit stabilized in and through discursive contexts. Moreover, we examined the paradoxes, ambiguities and relationality of gendered experiences and identities as enacted within the gendered division of labour. This article focused specifically on the management of difference, showing how the men in the study engaged in the discursive construction, maintenance and resistance of their position as Other in negotiating their identity as marginal men.

In this respect, through the imposition of rationality and emotional distance on desirable job attributes, we have seen how some men 'do' masculinity by reframing discourses of care to privilege the masculine – discursively positioning themselves as different from women. Men colonize

the feminine by calling up discourses of rationality and detachment and bringing them into the masculine domain, so reinforcing, as Tyler (2005) contends, masculine norms and hierarchical gender difference. Some men, by contrast, respond to and manage difference through strategies of assimilation, drawing on ties of fraternity to seek entry into the dominant centre of male medical practice whilst others resist identification with traditional, heterosexual masculinity. At the same time, men comfortably engage with behaviours and practices culturally coded feminine and through projects of femininity, seek to partly 'undo' masculinity as they minimize difference from women, drawing on discourses of distinctiveness to support and reward unconventional identities.

As in other studies (e.g. Evans, 1997, 2002; Sargent, 2001), we have seen how difference is experienced through men's bodies – marked as potentially dangerous and disruptive in their caring roles and which, in a 'reversal of gaze' (Butler, 1999), are inscribed with meanings around homosexuality. From the lens of 'doing gender', this study has shown how bodies also ground men's experiences and may render the undoing of masculinity problematic. Despite this, feelings and experiences of alterity can be mitigated or celebrated through embodied practices that conform to or resist traditional gender norms and occupationally prescribed identities as, for example, men draw on sexuality and humour to have fun with and bridge difference from a heterosexual masculine norm.

Earlier in this article we argued that an interpretation of men's experiences in non-traditional occupations as separation or distance from the feminine may overlook the more complex ways in which men in these contexts manage gender. This is supported by Deutsch (2007) who has pointed out that studies of men and women in unconventional occupations tend to draw conclusions in terms of the preservation of the gender order rather than how it is disrupted or challenged. Our contribution, through an analysis of difference, is to highlight the complexities and occasional paradoxes of difference and how men in non-traditional occupations both do and undo masculinity and femininity – supporting and subverting the status quo – as they seek security and legitimacy within their non-traditional role. We therefore move beyond separation and distance from the feminine to include the diverse and complex ways in which gender norms are both resisted and undermined. For example, by doing masculinity and by appropriating femininity, masculinity is challenged and yet also sustained; it hangs suspended when men attempt to contest and resist it whilst simultaneously accommodating and reinforcing it. Dominant cultural discourses (e.g. of heterosexual masculinity) both obscure difference and render them possible such that all things 'can be ranked on the same scale and everyone can be accountable

against the same standards' (Knights & Kerfoot, 2004: 437, cited in Pullen & Knights, 2007: 507).

In this way, subversion, disruption and challenge can be seen to work in complex ways to partly overturn the dominant order of organizations but also to partly support it – working relationally in the dispersion of gendered relations *per se*. Men call up discourses of rationality and detachment and so bring emotionality into the masculine domain while at the same time they engage comfortably with 'feminine' practices of care: teachers listen patiently to their children in the classroom and mop up spilt paint; nurses change dressings and attach babies to the breast. In other words, some elements of gender relations may be questioned, others may become further entrenched and still others are quietly transformed in day-to-day activities of teaching and nursing care.

Doing gender equates with doing difference as West and Fenstermaker (1995) contend. In this respect, the article has highlighted the complex ways in which doing difference unfolds – through performances that enable men to attain authenticity through the mobilization of sameness while creating opportunities where difference is engineered. More specifically, men have been shown to engage with difference in complex ways. We have seen how they embrace difference, inviting it in as they claim a special status within the feminine domain; make strategic use of difference to signal authority and control; activate difference through displays of alterity; invoke difference to separate from associations with 'feminine' care; play with difference in informal work spaces; deny difference as they seek alignment with higher status men while at the same time they resist and struggle against the differences that are subsequently displayed. The performance and management of difference in situated practices are therefore integral to the doing and undoing of gender at work.

These dynamics of difference alert us to the complicated ways in which men do and undo gender, suggesting that lines of inclusion and exclusion, rendered more visible through the experiences of men in non-traditional work contexts, are not fixed or totally definitive but are, from Fournier (2001: 82) 'contingent, temporal and liable to shift', drawn in complicated ways to define a sense of self. Managing difference as Other requires versatility – an ability to move between the masculine and the feminine and in and out of categories of difference as well as to stand apart and resist being framed. As Bruni and Gherardi (2002) suggest, in a study of a woman in a male dominated role, 'gender switching' involves oppositional positionings that are activated, defended and sometimes abandoned as well as gender practices that are drawn on lines of differentiation, affiliation and Otherhood. In a similar way, through gender enactments and processes of

assimilation and differentiation, men enter and leave masculine and feminine discursive locations, moving between the One and the Other. However, these positions are not equally valued and their enactments never complete. So, while some men manage difference through projects of femininity, partly 'undoing' the masculine dominant order, traces of the masculine can stubbornly and paradoxically remain. An understanding of managing difference and the associated practices of gender therefore requires attention to not just the One and the Other, the masculine and the feminine, but also to the complexities of the movements and interactions between these domains.

## Note

- 1 The authors are indebted for the advice of an anonymous reviewer for seeing the relevance of this work for this article.

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