

‘Doing a man-sized job’: A non-traditional trades

In 2005 ANNETTE BENNETT undertook a pilot study involving women who work and study in “non-traditional” (male dominated) manual trades. The study explored how blue-collar tradeswomen negotiate their identity in relation to socially mediated conceptions of femininity and gender.

The Australian context

A relatively small number of Australian women currently work in skilled blue-collar trades and vocations that are considered non-traditional. Although state and federal legislative and policy changes in the 1970s and 1980s removed many restrictions on women’s employment in certain trades, the numbers of women entering into blue-collar trades has not significantly increased. Indeed, the Australian labour market remains the most sex-segregated among the OECD nations.

Stakeholders in industry and education have deliberated over the possible reasons why larger numbers of women do not pursue careers in these vocations. In light of the highly publicised “skills shortage” in Australia, it is a debate warranting a fresh engagement with the issues. One ostensibly “rational” conclusion that has been drawn is that girls simply do not want to do this type of work.

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My contention is that this assumption is over-simplistic. Notwithstanding the enormous social and political changes that have opened the way to a multitude of educational and vocational opportunities for women, especially over the last thirty years, I believe that the low representation of women, especially in the manual trades, has a deeper and more complex basis to do with being a woman/being in a woman’s body and the social imperatives of femininity.

The project genesis

The impetus for this project arose while I was reading the autobiography of Australia’s first female major airline pilot, Deborah Wardley-Lawrie. As a licenced electrical fitter-mechanic and holder of a commercial pilot’s licence myself, I was fascinated and irritated to read of the blatant sex discrimination Deborah endured in her struggles to gain

employment with Ansett Airlines — discrimination that came from both men and women. However, one aspect of Deborah’s struggles to gain employment as an airline pilot that I could not relate to was her apparent inordinate fear of, as she described it, “losing” her femininity (McKenna & Lawrie, 1992, p.241).

Why was it so abhorrent to Deborah to be portrayed or perceived as unfeminine? It was Deborah’s experience of struggling to negotiate and reconcile her sense of feminine identity with her chosen vocation that inspired and sparked off my research. I pondered about other women working in non-traditional vocations — especially the blue-collar trades — did they also have similar struggles? Were they also reconciling an apparent social imperative to maintain femininity with a vocation that could be perceived as a male domain?

Delineating the research questions and framework

What then does a body that has been medically categorised as female experience in society when she chooses to pursue a vocation that has been historically defined as suitable to bodies that are male? Given the powerful gender demarcation and the structures of dominance implicit within the gender binary (male/female), how does the subject “woman” operate in such a historically and culturally male domain?

From these broad research questions I sought to focus on uncovering the ways in which tradeswomen position themselves (and are positioned) within dominant discourses of femininity, how (or if) gender as a performance (Butler, 1999) impacts on the way these women perform “men’s work” and how they experienced being in a “woman’s body” whilst performing that work. Discourses, within a sociological framework, are what allow us to understand the social world. Gender discourses, for example, define what it is (and what it is not) to be a woman or man — hence, acting to delimit possibilities for the individual. Focus groups were utilised as the primary data source for this project. Focus questions were employed to guide

A study of women in



popular discourses of femininity by their gender performances — in the actions and presentations of their bodies. Conversely, other women were confounding stereotypes of tradeswomen (the butch/lesbian conception) by simultaneously “playing out” and “playing with” conventional gender subjectivities.

Exploring issues of the female body and femininity, in the context of strongly masculine work environments, raised some essentialist notions of the nature of women compared to men. Intriguingly, there were contradictions and alternative stories to the essentialist narrative, indicating that, among these women at least, identity and ways of being female are not fixed or immutable but constantly under negotiation. It was apparent that the women, simply by competently performing their work in these male-dominated environments, were creating fissures in the stereotypes that circulate about women’s bodily strength, feminine movement and shape. Accordingly, the women’s experiences flag possibilities for seeing through/reframing ways of being in a women’s body, and the relationship of the feminine to heavy manual labour.

Bartky (2003) argues that the achievement and display of femininity is inextricably connected to a woman’s assessment of herself as female, and therefore her sense of individual existence in society. Since the gender system as it is currently maintained recognises individuals as belonging to one of two distinct and separate categories, it follows that incongruous gender displays may result in sanctions for aberrant bodies (Davies, 2003; Bartky, 2003). Hence it was also significant that many of the women, since taking up a vocation that may be considered unfeminine, identified a tendency to be less worried about outward inscriptions of femininity (hairstyles, makeup, clothes etc), both within and outside the workplace.

Concluding Commentary

Although various and competing discourses and ways of being exist, which may position women in multiple ways, commentators have acknowledged the expectation on women to conform to socially and culturally mediated gender norms. These norms are resistant to change and women who take up non-traditional vocations must work against the imposition of dominant discourses of femininity; negotiating and re-negotiating a female subjectiv-

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ity and ways of being in a woman’s body. This negotiation takes place within a gendered framework that privileges certain discourses of femininity over others — discourses, nevertheless, that vary historically and in correspondence with changes in dominant discourses of masculinity.

This project, made possible by the generous and invaluable contribution of the participants, represents a work in progress. This is the work of relentlessly inquiring into how gender-related knowledge is produced, troubling its truth claims and identifying new gender/sex discourses that may be deployed in challenging stereotypes and bringing about social change. The political and activist aim of these strategies is to further smooth the way for women’s participation in non-traditional vocational education and training. ❖

Annette Bennett is a licensed Electrical Fitter-Mechanic and works as an Electrical Trades Teacher at Granville TAFE. She has a Bachelor of Adult Education and Honours Degree from the University of Western Sydney. She is currently further exploring the situation of women in non-traditional trades in her doctoral research.



the discussion. My aim was to allow the group to direct the dialogue, within the broad parameters set by the open-ended focus questions, and to create their own meaning making within the group context.

Findings/discussion

In my analysis of the data I do not claim to have uncovered the true ‘answers’, but by presenting the talk of the women, have sought to lay bare various discourses and social practices to questioning. Analysis of the women’s talk across and within the focus groups revealed the diverse and at times surprising ways that the women constituted themselves within their work environments — male-dominated cultures that have historically marginalised women.

There was considerable work going on that simultaneously upheld and challenged popular discourses of femininity. Notably, many of the women were actively and overtly resisting and subverting

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