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Challenging Professions: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Women's Professional Work edited by Elizabeth SMYTH, Sandra ACKER, Paula BOURNE and Alison PRENTICE, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999, 334 pp., ISBN 0-8020-4319-4.

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Challenging Professions: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Women's Professional Work

edited by Elizabeth SMYTH, Sandra ACKER, Paula BOURNE and Alison PRENTICE, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999, 334 pp., ISBN 0-8020-4319-4.

Critical analyses of the professions have been few and far between. The early literature, largely American, tended to define professions by listing the traits or attributes of particular occupations. Theorists such as Eliot Friedson (1973) later challenged this perspective, thus paving the way for more theoretical analyses that placed professions in the context of the larger stratification system (see Natalie J. Sokoloff, *Black Women and White Women in the Professions*, New York: Routledge, 1992). Most of these more recent contributions, however, have focused on *class* relations, with relatively little attention to the relationship between *gender* and professionalization. For their part, feminist researchers have tended to move away from the study of paid employment generally, and there have been only a limited number of new feminist studies of women in the professions (see for example, Kathryn

McPherson, *Beside Matters*, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1996; Natalie J. Sokoloff, *Black Women and White Women in the Professions*, New York: Routledge, 1992; Anne Witz, *Professions and Patriarchy*, London: Routledge, 1992). The collection of articles edited by Elizabeth Smyth, Sandra Acker, Paula Bourne, and Alison Prentice therefore comes as a welcome and timely contribution to those of us who still care about women and work; the material inequities in women's lives, and the gendering of jobs and occupations.

The authors of *Challenging Professions* were participants in an SSHRC-funded interdisciplinary network on women and professional education. The collection is the culmination of ongoing discussions of this group. On the whole touched by feminist scholarship, the authors seek to "pare away some of the mystique of professionalism, by putting particular professional groupings under

scrutiny and examining their gendering and its consequences, in various places and over time." The network, consisting largely of university professors, began this project with a skeptical look at professionals' claims to exclusive expertise, the power of one profession over another, the category of semi-profession, and other related themes. A critical examination of the relationship between the mystique of professions, professional control and power, and gender relations is indeed long overdue. The promise of a fresh approach to the seemingly outdated concept of *the profession* is inspiring. I thus approached the collection with enthusiasm.

It is not clear, however, if *Challenging Professions* delivers on this promise. And I hesitate to describe the book itself as inspired. The collection is divided into three sections. Part One, "Individual Odysseys" profiles four women in Canada's past: Aimee Semple McPherson, a Pentecostal evangelist; Elizabeth Gowan, a professor of Social Work; Florence Jessie Murray, a medical missionary; and Jean Coulthard, a musician/composer at the University of British Columbia. Part Two, "Multiple Reflections," presents us with group biographies of women in Physics, Nutrition and Dietetics, Nursing, and Forestry. Part Three explores larger collectivities of women in the professions: women students in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Toronto, Roman Catholic religious women, women chartered accountants in Nova Scotia, and women in pharmacy. As I made my way through the many chapters, my level of enthusiasm wavered. My reaction to the book as a whole was therefore mixed.

One problem is that while the collection presents some meticulously researched, informative commentaries on the lives and careers of woman professionals, there is a lack of consistency from chapter to chapter—a unifying argument, a coherent theoretical frame-

work, and a clear conceptualization of a *profession, professionalization, gender, and patriarchy*. While on the whole interesting, the various articles need to be pulled together by some common analytical (and political) threads. Without such interweaving, one is privy to rich detail about individual lives, but does not learn significantly about ways in which to *analyze* the professions—notably in the wider context of gender relations, gender politics, and power at work.

The first section of the collection is most deficient in this respect. In Part One, we acquire information about professional luminaries (with an emphasis on obstacles and barriers to middle-class women, minorities in a male-dominated sphere) but we do not move much beyond the particularities of their lives. I found the chapters in Part Three (especially Millar and Gidney's discussion of female medical students, Sandra Acker's research on women educators, and Linda Muzzin's study of women pharmacists), pieces that departed from the theme of individual mobility, to be far more thought-provoking. The substantive content of these cases stayed fresh in my mind weeks after reading them. And I will likely draw on the data in teaching courses on women and work. Yet it remains that only a handful of articles in the collection significantly advance our understanding of professional control, the process of professionalization, and the social, political and economic interests that shaped the process. Indeed, in some case studies, discussions of professionalization make little mention of struggle (or even process).

Importantly, upon reading many of the chapters, I began to experience a growing sense of detachment and distance from the women and their lives. Perhaps, this distance is rooted in the authors' presentation of these women. Clearly, the focus of many pieces (again, this is especially evident in the first two sections) is on the *career*. As a result,

some women seem to be lacking in human dimension. While a dual roles approach to women and professions (that is, competing and conflicting demands of paid work and family) is clearly limited, feminist research has also taught us the importance of understanding women workers in the context of the totality of their lives. In overlooking the latter, the authors run the risk of relying on a traditional masculine framework in which to study women.

The portraits of professional women are furthermore limited insofar as they focus on *gender* identity and location, without much (adequate) mention of race, cultural background, citizenship status, and with a couple of exceptions, sexual-orientation. The *class* background of women medical students is highlighted in Millar and Gidney's article, but is given only passing mention in most of the other pieces. Not only did the majority of the women come from privileged families, but in their professional capacities, they themselves represented the status quo (for example, Florence Murray and Violet Ryley). Admittedly, the editors attempt to address the neglect of these considerations in the introduction to the book. They state that while they aimed for as much diversity as possible, "we ourselves were less diverse, as authors, than we might have wished. Although there was one young woman among us, we are otherwise a group of white, middle-class, middle-aged women and (two) white middle-class, middle-aged men." They further assert that "[n]ot surprisingly, the focus in much of our work was on English-Canadian white women." Is this a convincing explanation? One does not have to possess a shared racial identity in which to document racial exclusion from the professions; it is not a requirement that one be oppressed in order to examine privilege. The assumption that the reader will feel an immediate affinity, if not familiarity with, indeed empathy for the women is disturbing.

Notwithstanding these critical points, I do wish to emphasize that good portions of *Challenging Professions* reminded me of the reasons I chose to study gender and work.

Given that the barriers and challenges women have long faced are still with us, these longstanding concerns are worth echoing. Yet, at the same time, I would have hoped that the collection would also prompt me to think through new and innovative ideas about the field, to further extend the earlier writings on women, work, and the professions. For example, one could probe the relationship between *sex* and *gender* (that is, theoretical inquiries about an *essential woman*), thus prompting questions about what it is that brings these women together? What do they have in common? In what ways are their struggles aligned? Moreover, where do the *politics of gender* come into play? How are these politics played out? These questions lead to others. Can we speak of a larger *political agenda*? Did these women share an agenda? Could we describe them as *feminists*? What could we say about their relationship to feminism? Are the authors themselves presenting a strong critique of professionalism/professional control, or are they speaking to women's entry and acceptance into the professions, as well as the definition of women's work, as *professional*. And lastly, it would have been interesting to reflect on the relationship between professional women and other groups of women (clearly, the majority of women in Canadian society), and comment on the implications of this well-funded project for understanding issues of power and control in the lives of working women generally—women for whom a professional designation, much less workplace control and recognition, are beyond reach.

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