Men and the ‘caring professions’ issue

Last month I highlighted the ratio of men and women social workers and suggested we should be careful when seeking to increase how many men are in social work. In this article, I discuss some of the reasons why there are fewer men and make some suggestions how to address this if, indeed, we wish to.

When considering the profession as a whole, it is helpful to look at trends and changes, allowing us to explore whether these need to be addressed. It is also crucial to point out that gender is more fluid than the binary simplifications of woman or man.

The current ratio of men in social work courses is 15 per cent - significantly lower than the recommended ratio of at least 25 per cent.

Subjects with a low proportion of women or men often have progression difficulties, but there has been little policy response to this in social work.

In one positive move, the Scottish Funding Council is seeking to address the disparity in subjects with less than 25 per cent of a particular sex, with social work specifically identified (as are nursing and primary teaching).

In addition to fewer men enrolling, social work includes more men nearing retirement age than younger men. This means the proportion of men in the profession will continue to decrease unless more men seek to join than have for the past two decades.

Why are men less likely than women to choose social work? Social work is often called a ‘caring profession,’ a group which includes nursing and teaching.

There are barriers for men to choose a profession so closely identified with women and femininity. Theories of masculinities suggest that men’s masculine identity is often constructed in opposition to femininity, termed ‘the repudiation of the feminine.’

This conflict between masculinity and femininity creates a societal view that social work (and nursing and primary school teaching) is a role undertaken by women. Consequently, men contemplating becoming a social worker may feel they would be going ‘against the grain,’ or making an unusual choice. It’s probable that this societal perception is a factor in the low numbers of men applying to become social workers. Such tension between masculinity and professional identity is part of the reason that men have more challenges than women when studying social work.

Some of my research has considered how male social workers experience their programme. It found men experience several challenges on social work courses: complications arising from societal expectations of men and masculinity; concerns with working with children and women service users; and settings that do not encourage their participation.

Men in my study often felt reduced to a stereotype by the students and practitioners around them. They frequently struggled to see how they could ‘fit’ into the social work profession. For some, these experiences combined with general student issues to impact their progression. It is important, however, to remember the ‘glass escalator’ effect for men in professions like social work, with swifter promotions than women when qualified.

So how do we address the issues identified?

First, the social work profession should have a wider debate about the implications of increasing the proportion of men. There is research and theoretical work that would be able to help inform this discussion.

Second, social work degree programmes should improve how they engage and support male students. There are some examples of mentoring schemes for men on social work courses, and these may be helpful. Social work programmes should specifically consider the particular needs of male students.

Lastly, we need to consider how men are encouraged into the profession, and recruited to social work programmes. Using gender stereotypes does not support men to be able to effectively manoeuvre their entry into social work. Some men are more likely to be successful. More work should be done to both understand why this is the case and to help encourage these men to choose social work.

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The second of two articles by Dr Jason Schaub exploring social work’s gender disparity.