

Muriel Mellow.

Defining Work: Gender, Professional Work, and the Case of Rural Clergy.

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We all have projects that we wanted to do or would like to tackle, but due to restraints of time, money, or discipline we don't get to them. Mine was to look at the unpaid work that goes on in rural Protestant churches. I wanted to locate this particular project in a materialist framework and in the subdiscipline of sociology of work as opposed to the perhaps more obvious choice of sociology of religion. My efforts got diverted onto other paths, but Muriel Mellow's book, *Defining Work: Gender, Professional Work, and the Case of Rural Clergy*, explores this trail by looking at the paid clergy in rural Protestant churches. She sets out to problematise "how definitions of professional work are socially constructed and how such definitions pose different challenges for women and men negotiating the relationship between their professional and their personal lives" (3).

Mellow contextualises her project theoretically and methodologically, and also reflexively and substantively. She is reflexive about her position and educates the reader about the workings of the United Church. Firstly, Mellow establishes that she, in some respects, is an insider to this social world. She is married to a United Church minister who, after the project begins, takes on a parish in a rural location. Her candour adds credence to her analysis. Secondly, as someone who has not been raised within the United Church, I appreciated the time and effort Mellow took to acquaint the reader with the basic structure and jargon of the church. Understanding the way this denomination operates, even in a very basic way, enriches the reader's experience.

Substantively, Mellow's project is firmly located within sociology of work debates pertaining to gender and work. Drawing on the likes of Miriam Glucksmann (1995), Mellow establishes that work needs to be contextualised as broadly as possible in order to see the boundaries between stereotypically male and female work, and how in some professions they become blurred and / or transgressed. This is particularly important for the case study at hand, as the rural clergy has been a male-dominated occupation with expectations and activities that are closely tied to social notions of "women's work" (i.e., caring work). She argues that in order to explore this, we need to use qualitative methods to interrogate clergy's experiences. Using interviews with 40 rural clergy (20 women and 20 men), Mellow frames her analysis around three central concepts: occupational culture, gender and locale. Using these core concepts she teases out ambiguities in clergy work, negotiations between private and public spheres, and the definition of emotional boundaries inherent in professional work. She is able to highlight both the differences between the female and male clergy experience, and their similarities. One difference is that emotional labour is separated from the "instrumental forms of labour" (153) that are needed to support it. Women clergy are expected, for example, to do all their own housework, and contribute to community events (such as potlucks) while their male counterparts are not. Second, in this occupational culture, lines between various aspects of life are blurred so that activities like caring become masculinised through specialised terminology and norms of practice. Third, Mellow argues for the importance of locale and in particular rural culture to understand gendered work, especially with respect to the distinction between private and public spheres, which are much more fluid in rural settings.

While reading this book a few theoretical and methodological questions arose. First, I was surprised there was no connection made with Weber. Mellow does discuss the notions of vocation and calling, but nowhere does she actually discuss the contributions or problems with Weber's theories. I am not

advocating a Weberian approach, but expected Mellow would have problematised his Protestant work-ethic as it connects to her case study.

Second, some of the literature she draws upon in her discussion of work is dated. A case in point is her use of Miriam Glucksmann. To a limited degree, Mellow employs Glucksmann's concept "Total Social Organisation of Labour," but critiques its silence on work that falls within a volunteer sphere, for example. However, Glucksmann has refined and expanded her concept since the 1995 article of which Mellow makes extensive use, especially in the monograph *Cottons and Casuals* (2000). These later versions incorporate work that falls outside the traditional dichotomy of paid and unpaid labour to include voluntary work.

Third, some methodological questions arose while I was reading this book. Mellow uses her qualitative data in a quasi-quantitative manner, as in "Eleven women and eight men discussed how a lack of choice about attending social events led to their being considered work" (88). She argues that reporting frequencies is an indicator of the degree of occurrence of a social phenomenon. While I am sure this is not her aim, it is as if she is ranking experiences. It detracts from the richness of the respondents' explanations, as does the assigning of alpha-numeric labels to participants. This depersonalises the participants, and I would much rather see pseudonyms used. Mellow's aspiration to maintain participants' anonymity also mean that we do not get a true feeling for "place," or "locale." She does not wish to provide information about where her respondents live as it might make it too easy to identify them. While I do not need to know the exact town they live in, to know that respondent F34 (selected at random) lives in Saskatchewan within driving distance of an urban area would help to contextualise the person's responses and increase the richness of the book.

Despite these concerns, *Defining Work* makes worthwhile contributions to our understanding of gender and the professions. It highlights that when we go out to interrogate professions, we need to look at the intersection between occupational culture, gender and the oft-forgotten locale. When we take these into account we can see how complex work is. With Muriel Mellow having done an admirable job on the paid work in rural Protestant churches, I may not have to take up my abandoned project on unpaid church work — or perhaps this is the "calling" I have been waiting for.

References

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