

**Low skilled men's access to low skilled female
dominated jobs: An occupational case-study
approach.**

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Abstract

Labour market restructuring and the emergence of the 'service economy' have had profound impacts on the nature of work and the gender composition of employment in industrialised countries. Stagnating participation rates for low skilled men suggests that this cohort is struggling to adjust to the demands of the new economy. Centred around detailed case studies of four strategically chosen female dominated occupations, this research uses occupational sex segregation - a concept traditionally used to explain women's employment outcomes - to understand low skilled men's employment opportunities.

To select the occupations for case study, an analysis of 1996 and 2006 census data was conducted. This located female dominated occupations where employment had increased for workers with low levels of formal education and ascertained the extent to which men had been successful in securing these jobs. Two occupations were chosen where men had not experienced an increase in their gender share of employment, child care and sale assistants; and two were chosen where men had experienced an increase in their gender share of employment, aged care and commercial cleaning. The case study approach involved 107 interviews with men who might take jobs in these occupations (i.e. unemployed men), employers, male workers and clients or customers.

Consistent with existing understandings, a number of supply side processes operate to reduce men's willingness to gain and maintain employment within traditional female occupations. Some of these processes are clearly related to gender essentialism and the thesis highlights the mechanisms by which this operates to generate occupational sex segregation. Other processes are more about men's negative experiences of a female dominated work environment, and broader labour market conditions that attract or deter people from jobs in general. These types of exclusionary mechanisms are largely ignored in existing research.

Importantly, there is compelling evidence that, contrary to existing theories, there are demand side mechanisms that operate at the lower end of the labour market to limit men's movements into gender atypical occupations. Gender essentialism is again central to most of these. Others are related to labour market processes or mechanisms that produce and reproduce occupation sex segregation.

Despite the power of gender essentialism in limiting men's inroads into gender atypical occupations, processes on both the supply and demand side reduce or moderate its impact. In addition, gender essentialism was found to have an integrative function, with many managers, clients and male workers perceiving certain aspects of employment within the case study occupations to require, or be compatible with, male traits or proclivities. This dispels the common contention that gender essentialism operates solely to segregate on the basis of sex.

Importantly, while facilitating men's integration into gender atypical occupations, even these integrative processes in the main actually reinforce male gender essentialism and result in gender segmentation within female dominated occupations. This helps us understand why gender essentialism is so intractable. Even when it operates in integrative ways, its consequence is actually to reproduce itself. These findings have implications for the ways in which gender segregation is theorised and generated in the workplace.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

.....

Megan Moskos

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INTRODUCTION

Australia has enjoyed 17 years of economic growth, and historically strong labour market conditions. Indeed, in October 2010, total employment in Australia reached a record high of 11,360,800 workers in trend terms (ABS 2011b). It is an unfortunate reality however, that some groups of people have not shared in this recent economic prosperity. One group, whose labour market situation continues to deteriorate, is men with low levels of formal education. One index of this deterioration is that men with low levels of formal education have been withdrawing from paid employment at historically unprecedented levels.

In 1981 more than 90 percent of men of all education attainment levels aged between 25 and 60 were employed or seeking work. By 2001, at every age, at least 20 percent of men with no post-school education were not in the labour force (Richardson 2006). These men were not 'unemployed' using conventional definitions; they were not even looking for work. More up-to-date estimates suggest that the 2001-07 economic boom partly reversed the downward trend in low skilled men's labour force participation rates. However, the 2006 participation rate for low skilled men aged 25 to 54 years is still 7.9 percentage points below the rate recorded in 1981 (Kennedy, Stoney, and Vance 2009).

For women, the story is quite different. Women with lower levels of education have always been less likely to participate in the labour force than more educated women. This was the case in 1981 and remained the case in 2001. However, while women of all education levels and ages increased their participation levels over the two decades, women with low levels of education recorded the greatest rise (13 percentage points). More up-to-date figures suggests that female participation continued to rise over the period 2001-2006, and increased particularly for women with no post-school qualifications (Kennedy, Stoney, and Vance 2009). Specifically, women aged 25 to 54 with no post-school qualifications experienced a 6.0 percentage point rise in participation between 2001 and 2006. Those with a non-degree post-school qualification increased their participation rates by 1.8 percentage points, and those with a degree or higher qualification increased their participation by just 0.2 percentage points (Kennedy, Stoney, and Vance 2009).

The withdrawal of low skilled men from the labour market is unwelcome for a number of reasons.

Firstly, it is occurring at the exact time Australia and other industrialised countries are facing increased pressure to raise participation rates to offset the economic and fiscal impacts of population ageing. Indeed, projections of changing participation rates for different age groups by gender, generated by the Productivity Commission (2005), suggest that in the absence of policy responses, the general trends towards increased female participation and declining male participation will continue for the next two decades. Unchanged, these trends mean that men's withdrawal from the labour market will exacerbate existing reported difficulties in attracting and retaining staff (DEWR 2005; NATSEM 2005).

Secondly, it appears to be placing a significant burden on the social security system. This is not only through rising dependence on various pensions and job search allowances, but also because men's lack of full-time employment appears to impact on women's and children's welfare reliance (Frijters and Gregory 2006; Lattimore 2007). Men's withdrawal from the labour market reduces their capacity to support or sustain their partners and children, possibly producing a wide range of long-term consequences (Frijters and Gregory 2006; Richardson 2006).

Thirdly, economically inactive men face a more severe range of socio-economic disadvantages compared to their employed counterparts; poverty, poor physical or mental health, lower wellbeing and skill loss are just a few. Combined, the effects of inactivity can escalate, leading to drug and alcohol abuse, crime, and in some cases suicide (ABS 2007; Lattimore 2007; Western 2006).

The reasons for the deterioration in men's labour market prospects, especially amongst those with low formal education, are matters of debate. Nevertheless, several components of a plausible explanation are clear. These include a changing structure of industry, precipitated by increasing exposure to international competition in product and capital markets; skill-biased technological change; and the growth of non-standard forms of employment and decline of full-time permanent employment.

While these are likely to be major factors in any explanation of men's withdrawal from the labour market, they are relevant only because of the gendered shape of the labour market and employment. If men's withdrawal from the labour market was simply the effect of labour market restructuring, then it would be reasonable to expect women's participation to show similar levels of decline. That this is not the case

suggests that the labour market is changing in gendered ways and that sex segregation in occupations continues to impact on labour market opportunities.

Existing explanations for low skilled men's labour market situation rarely consider the way occupational sex segregation and the changing gender composition of employment are impacting on low skilled men's employment opportunities. This research seeks such an understanding.

Centred around detailed case studies of four strategically chosen low skill female dominated occupations, this research uses occupational sex segregation - a concept traditionally used to explain women's employment outcomes - to understand what supports and what deters low skilled men from obtaining employment in female dominated occupations, in Australia.

The thesis is structured as follows:

By way of an analysis of changing trends in participation in the Australian labour market, Chapter 1 identifies the importance of arresting and reversing the decline of low skilled men's labour force participation not only to ensure future economic growth and productivity, but also to serve social inclusion and equity goals, reversing many of the adverse personal and social consequences resulting from non-participation.

Drawing from national and international literature, the chapter also reviews in detail the major explanations for the withdrawal of low skilled men from the labour force. These include a changing industrial structure; skill-biased technological change; and the growth of non-standard forms of employment. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data is used to document these trends in the Australian labour market.

Chapter 2 reviews the major explanations for and recent trends in occupational sex segregation with an eye to how these may help us understand low skilled men's withdrawal from the labour market. These studies suggest that declines in segregation have largely been confined to professional and managerial occupations, mainly because women have entered occupations formerly the confine of men. Men, however, have entered women's jobs very little at any occupational level.

It is argued that men's aversion to undertaking female typed jobs is a necessary component of the explanation for why men are withdrawing from the labour market. Any solution to low skilled men's withdrawal from the labour market involves men taking advantage of generally rising low level service sector employment opportunities and therefore undertaking work that is seen as women's. The question is why are men not moving into female dominated work?

Drawing on two key scholars of gender stratification the chapter reviews explanations for men's resistance to undertaking gender atypical employment. It is argued however that both explanations rest largely on supply side logic. It is suggested that while supply side explanations for men's limited inroads into female occupations hold at the upper end of the occupational spectrum where men (and women) currently have a number of alternative employment choices, they are less plausible at the lower end of the occupational spectrum where traditional employment opportunities for low skilled men have substantially decreased. The chapter notes however, that there is currently limited empirical research available to test these claims.

The chapter concludes by highlighting the need for research to investigate the possible supply and demand side dimensions to men's segregation from, and conversely their integration into, female dominated occupations. This research has undertaken such an investigation.

Chapter 3 details the methodology employed to carry out the research, including the research questions that were addressed, the research design, data collection and analysis method. This involved detailed case studies of four strategically chosen female dominated occupations where opportunities are increasing, and which are open to workers with limited formal education.

To select the occupations for case study, an analysis of 1996 and 2006 census data was conducted. This located female dominated occupations where employment had increased for workers with low levels of formal education and ascertained the extent to which low skilled men had been successful in securing these jobs. Two occupations were chosen where men had not experienced an increase in their share of employment - child care and sales assistants - and two were chosen where men had experienced an increase in their share of employment - aged care and commercial cleaning. The case study approach involved interviews with men who might take

jobs in these occupations (i.e. unemployed men), employers, male workers and clients or customers. In total 105 individual interviews and two group interviews were conducted for this research.

By way of an analysis of 1996 and 2006 census data Chapter 4 demonstrates how occupational sex segregation has shaped low skilled men's employment opportunities in Australia. The chapter begins by reviewing aggregate trends in occupational sex segregation and occupation employment growth and decline. It then shifts to a more disaggregated analysis of trends in occupational sex segregation and occupation employment growth and decline for low skilled workers. The findings of this latter analysis informed the selection of the four case study occupations. These occupations were subsequently used to derive qualitative insights into what facilitates and what deters the employment of lower-skilled men in female-intensive occupations.

Chapters 5 to 8 detail the findings of the case study research.

Drawing on data collected via interviews with male workers and unemployed men, Chapter 5 details a number of supply side processes that operate to reduce men's willingness to gain and maintain employment within traditional female occupations. Some of these processes were related to gender essentialism and the chapter highlights the mechanisms by which this operates to generate occupational sex segregation. Other processes were more about men's negative experiences of a female dominated work environment, and broader labour market conditions that attract or deter people from jobs in general. These types of exclusionary mechanisms are largely ignored in existing research. The chapter provides evidence that both supports and extends existing supply side understandings of why men are so reticent to enter female dominated occupations.

Chapter 6 details a number of processes that operate to entice or positively impact on men's willingness and ability to enter occupations that are normatively regarded as female. Some of these processes were found to moderate and reduce the impact of gender essentialist exclusion. Importantly however, the processes, while facilitating men's integration into gender atypical jobs, were found in the main to actually reinforce male gender essentialism and result in gender segmentation within female dominated occupations.

Other processes were unrelated to gender essentialism and were more about men's minority status and the benefits accrued to them as workers. Again, others were related to standard labour market factors that attract people to occupations and jobs in general. These include such things as availability of jobs, occupations' immunity from economic downturns and positive identification with aspects of the work.

Drawing on interview data, this time with managers and clients within the case study occupations, Chapter 7 details processes that were found to operate on the demand side of the labour market to exclude men from case study employment or at least limit their representation in gender atypical jobs. Similar to supply side processes, many of the demand side processes were related to gender essentialism and its operation.

Others however were more about labour market processes that segregate on the basis of sex. These include recruitment sources, discrimination and managers' employment practices. These processes are likely to be found in any sex segregated labour market and impact on both men and women. The chapter highlights how these segregative labour market processes operate for men to limit their movement into female dominated occupations.

Chapter 8 details a number of processes that operate on the demand side of the labour market that additionally facilitate men's integration, or at least increase their representation, in gender atypical jobs. Many of these processes are related to gender essentialism in some way.

Similar to its operation on the supply side, gender essentialism also has an integrative function on the demand side with many managers and clients perceiving certain aspects of case study employment to require, or at least be compatible with, male essentialist traits and proclivities. The demand for male essentialist traits in turn increased men's representation in the female dominated occupations. Importantly however, it is shown that the demand for male essentialist traits is confined to particular areas within the case study occupations. This has the effect of producing specialist male ghettos within the female dominated case study occupations, which in turn re-establishes male essentialism. The chapter also details other processes that operate to moderate and reduce the impact of gender essentialist exclusion and/or counteract its negative homogenising processes.

Chapter 9 discusses the implications the findings hold for the ways in which occupational sex segregation is theorised and generated in the workplace. In light of the research findings, the chapter also assesses the prospects for increasing low skilled men's representation into female dominated occupations. The chapter also discusses the limitation of the research as well as pointing to areas for future research.

The thesis makes an important contribution to understanding a major social issue that is poorly understood – that of why men with low levels of formal education have been withdrawing from the labour market. This is an issue that is of concern in most OECD countries, as well as Australia (Faggio and Nickell 2003; OECD 1996). In the words of one British group,

The detachment of large numbers of men from paid employment is one of the most significant social changes of the last twenty years or so. The once near universal expectation that men's working lives would extend from the time of their leaving school through to their state pension age has been shattered. (Alcock, Beatty, Fothergill, Macmillan, and Yeandle 2003: xiii)

The project is innovative in bringing to bear on this social issue a set of conceptual approaches usually focused on understanding women's experience at work. Moreover, while there is already significant research on work and masculinity (Connell 1995; Connell 2000; Kerfoot and Korczynski 2005), the use of the concept of occupational sex segregation in understanding the general withdrawal of men from the labour market has been limited.

The research is significant in that it generates new insights into the processes that exclude low skilled men from the labour market. Through better understanding of these processes, and through investigating low skilled men who are succeeding in the new economy, it also generates new ideas about how to reengage these men in the labour market.