An Exploration of Gender-Related Tensions for Male Social Workers in the Irish Context

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Abstract

Previous research has highlighted that men's location in social work becomes vulnerable as they experience tensions between their gender and the feminine nature of social work (Simpson, 2004; Christie, 2006). This article explores of gender-related tensions for male social workers in the Irish context. Employing a qualitative approach, the study investigates whether men discern specific feminine qualities in social work, as well as exploring their perceptions on what qualities they bring to social work. The study explores the tensions men encounter between the feminine aspects of social work and their gender, and how they might go about resolving these tensions. As well as questioning the idea that social work comprises of specific feminine qualities, the research shifts the prevailing discourse regarding male qualities away from traditional stereotypes and into a domain that appreciates men for the positive qualities they bring. The research illustrates that male social workers quite comfortably locate themselves in practice, where they value and treasure the more direct, caring work with clients. Importantly, the research also identifies that some male social workers position themselves as 'different' to the 'typical' man, which seems critical to their ability to negotiate through social work comfortably and securely.

Key Words: Men in Social Work; Gender; Tensions; Non-Traditional Occupation

Background

The numerical dominance of women in social work (NSWQB, 2006), as well as the perception that social work requires specific qualities that only women possess, seems to confirm the idea that social work is 'mainly a woman's profession' (Bruckner, 2002: 269; Christie, 2008). Such qualities include skills in caring; the ability to build relationships; provide nurturance; as well as dealing with the emotional labour inherent in social work (see for example, Gerstel & Gallagher, 2001; Orme, 2002; Simpson, 2004). In contrast, men are seen as bringing qualities to social work associated with hegemonic masculinity, such as rationality and leadership abilities (Kulik, 1998). This normative masculinity also determines that men must remain emotionally distant while avoiding 'feminine' qualities (Cree, 2001).

The perceived preponderance of feminine aspects in social work results in masculinity and social work clashing, culminating in tensions between men and their masculinity (Lupton, 2006). Tensions such as a fear of feminization and stigmatization result in men undertaking 'considerable "gender work" to re-establish a masculinity that has been undermined by their female occupation' (Simpson, 2004: 366). One such example is what McLean (2003: 48) terms 'distancing strategies', leading to the horizontal and vertical segregation of men in social work. Men are actively seeking higher educational qualifications, attempting to attain management positions while moving towards more 'masculine' areas of social work in a desperate effort to resolve these tensions (ibid). Interestingly, strong statistical evidence supports this, highlighting the disproportionate representation of men at managerial level as well as the tendency for male social workers to be employed in the more masculine areas of the profession which often involve more 'control' than 'care', such as Probation and Welfare (Christie, 2008).

Yet amidst these ruminations, male social workers have also been found to encounter little threat to their masculinity, while many proclaim a sense of comfort and enjoyment within social work practice (see Chusmir, 1990; Cree, 1996). As well as questioning the idea that the masculinity of male social workers is under threat, this

also places the notion that they employ strategies to escape the feminine aspects of social work in doubt.

Aims and Objectives

In light of this competing and often conflicting domain, the researcher endeavoured to garner a greater understanding of the gender-related tensions that exist for male social workers in the Irish context. In achieving this goal the study focused on a number of the noteworthy issues raised above. Firstly, the research sought to move away from traditional stereotypes by asking participants what qualities they bring to social work. Secondly, the researcher sought to seek participants' opinions on the idea that social work comprises of specific feminine qualities, which also allowed the researcher to explore how respondents positioned themselves in relation to stereotypical feminine qualities. Thirdly, the researcher sought to investigate participants' perspectives on what conflicts they encounter between their gender and what often are considered feminine aspects of social work. Fourthly, the researcher sought to explore how men resolve any tensions between their gender and social work. This also encouraged the researcher to garner a further understanding of how participants locate themselves in social work.

Methodology

Employing interpretivism as the theoretical framework to underpin this study permitted the researcher to understand respondents' actions and meanings from their point of view which in turn complimented the study's appreciation of the unique and individual experiences of each participant (Bryman, 2004). Instructed by the interpretivist notion of hermeneutics, the researcher was concerned with an empathic understanding of human behaviour rather than subscribing to the positivist paradigm of explanation (ibid). Additionally, by employing a qualitative approach to the research, the author was able to explore the participants' 'interpretations, perceptions, meanings and understandings' of their world (Mason, 2002: 56). Indeed, instructed by qualitative methodology's value on rich discriptions of the social world, the researcher contends that this strategy endorsed access to a deeper and closer understanding of the participants' perspective (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Both a

literature review and semi-structured interviews were the methods of data collection employed. While the literature review ensured the researcher, for example, was able to frame a context for the study, semi-structured interviews offered the author an in-depth and flexible exploration of the meanings participants attribute to their world. Often associated with qualitative methodology, the study followed a non-probability approach to sampling (Alston & Bowles, 2003). Using elements from both convenience and purposive sampling, five interviewees (labelled, A,B,C,D,E below) were chosen from different social work fields including child protection, mental health and social work with young people. Additionally, it was decided that the research would benefit from participants who maintain a consistent interaction with the practical aspects of social work. This would strengthen the research's aim of exploring how male social workers interact with the more feminine aspects of social work on a daily basis, such as direct work with clients. Consequently, it was decided that principal social workers, though adding to the research's understanding of management and gender issues for example, would not be able to meet this requirement, and were therefore not invited to participate in the study. Data was analysed using a two stage process of coding.

Ethical Considerations

Guided by the idea of informed consent the researcher explained the purpose and main features of the research to all participants (Kivale, 2007), as well as reminding them of both their right to withdraw from the study at any time as well as their right of refusal in answering any questions. Additionally, confidentiality was preserved by maintaining all recordings and transcripts in a secure location, destroying the audiotapes after the study was completed (Bryman, 2004), while ensuring any private data identifying participants was not reported (Kivale, 2007). Finally, being ethically aware ensured the author remained sensitive and aware to any personal beliefs, feelings and values held by the researcher and their potential influence by being self-reflective throughout the study (Bryman, 2004).

Limitations

For reasons of feasibility such as the size and scope of the project, as well as imposed time limits, the sample size of this study was relatively small. The researcher therefore acknowledges the findings from this study cannot be generalised onto the whole population of male social workers (Robson, 1993). The study is also limited in how it can be replicated as 'social situations are never sufficiently similar, across space and time, to make replication possible' (Blaikie, 2000: 254). Additionally, studies conducted by different researchers with different participants will be unique 'because of the particular characteristics of the researcher and the researched' (ibid).

Literature Review

The following is an examination of literature concerning gender-related tensions and men in social work. It should be noted that literature exploring this topic within the Irish context is minimal, and so the majority of literature referred to in this section originates from outside of Ireland.

Masculinity

While it is important that the literature review should benefit from a discussion on the nature of 'masculinity', this proves difficult considering the contested and complex nature of the term (Alvesson, 1998). Nevertheless, Alvesson (1998: 972) offers some clarity, defining it as the 'values, experiences and meanings that are culturally interpreted as masculine and typically feel "natural" for or are ascribed to men more than women in the particular cultural context'. While it is 'increasingly common to recognise multiple masculinities', the literature stresses that 'the overwhelming image of masculinity remains traditional' (MacDougall, 1997: 810). Contained in this image of masculinity is traditional male attributes such as technical competence and leadership skills (Lupton, 2000). Furthermore, normative masculine behaviour includes sustaining a difference from femininity, an avoidance of feminine conduct, an emphasis on success and status as well maintaining an emotional distance (Cree, 2001; McLean, 2003). This 'hegemonic masculinity', which has been central to the important writings of Connell (1995), ensures that all 'other masculinities are subordinate' to it (Bowl, 2001: 117). While this conception of masculinity seems

outdated and may have never 'been as functional as might be expected', one should not 'underestimate their continuing impact on the psyche of men' (ibid). Importantly, employment remains imperative to the construction and maintenance of masculinity by providing 'evidence of manliness, competence, self-reliance, self-expression, self-respect, social status, power and money' (Mclean, 2003: 48). This has led writers such as Williams (1995: 12) to suggest that men are subsequently led into fields requiring 'stereotypical masculine qualities, such as strength, technical proficiency and managerial ability'.

Is Social Work a 'Woman's Profession'?

The question also arises as to why social work is perceived as so distinctively 'feminine'. Figures contained in the National Social Work Qualification Board's 2005 (NSWQB, 2006) survey provides an excellent standpoint, evidencing that the percentage of male social workers employed in Ireland in 2005 was 16.8% while females constituted 83.2% of the workforce. While the report confirms 'a considerable gender imbalance persists' in social work, it also highlights this is 'unlikely to change in the short term as the number of male entrants to professional social work training courses continues to be low' (ibid: 22-23). Social work therefore seems firmly rooted as a non-traditional occupation for men (see also McLean, 2003; Christie, 2006).

A further contribution to this construction of social work as a 'non-traditional' occupation for men is its location as a profession 'requiring "feminine" characteristics' (Christie, 2008: 21). These feminine features include nurturing; warmth; expressiveness; as well as skills in establishing close relationships (Kulik, 1998; Gerstel & Gallagher, 2001). MacDougall (1997: 812) adds to these stereotypical constructions citing 'dealing with dependency, acknowledging emotions and intimacy' as distinctively feminine. Additionally, women are perceived to be natural carers, where there is a special and inimitable association 'between social work, care giving and the feminine' (Orme, 2002: 802). Simpson (2004, p.352) explains that such feminine qualities are fundamental for dealing with, for example, the emotional labour inherent in social work and are abilities 'that only women are

deemed to possess'. Importantly, they have also helped fuel the 'stereotype of social work as a "female occupation"' (Iarskaia-Smirnova & Romanov, 2008: 67).

Tensions

From the above, it appears traditional masculinity and social work collide spawning tensions for male social workers attempting to locate their masculinity in practice (see for example Lupton 2000; Christie, 2006) .

Stigmatisation and Feminisation

Simpson (2004: 352) suggests that 'men working in female dominated occupations fear feminisation and stigmatisation'. Fuelling such fears is social work's identity as a 'woman's profession' as well as how the social work role is associated with femininity (ibid), which in turn 'unsettles the identity of "man" and puts it under scrutiny' (Christie, 2006: 407). For example, because of the gender assumptions embedded in social work, a male social worker may fear that he is not seen as a 'real' man (Bates & Thompson, 2002). Such a view is supported by Lupton (2000: 35) who explains men 'suffer a challenge to their masculinity' by 'performing a role which is regarded by society as one which women normally undertake'. This can lead to some men been seen as soft, effeminate, unusual or even gay (Hicks, 2001), which 'represents a challenge to the heterosexual and macho construction of hegemonic masculinity' (Lupton, 2000: 35-36). Additionally, locating women as natural carers tends 'to raise questions about men's presence in a "caring profession" such as social work' (Christie, 2001: 29). Consequently, many male social workers experience mistrust and suspicion 'because they are viewed as not being able to obtain "proper" men's work and/or potentially seeking opportunities to exploit children' (Christie, 2006: 391).

Locating the Masculine-Avoiding the Feminine

How men interact with social work practice also proves complex and difficult, with masculine qualities running the risk of conflicting with the 'feminine' aspects of social work (Orme, 2001). On this point, Orme (2001: 98) highlights the Younghusband (1947; 1951) reports on social work, which proposed the emotional

qualities inherent in social work 'were at odds with rational man, and therefore unnatural if they were performed by a man', where male qualities are instead best used 'within the organisation and management of care work, rather than participating in service provision'. Accordingly, women's unique and innate qualities ensure they retain a 'natural comfort' within the caring nature of social work (Orme, 2002). This contrasts with men social workers' insecurity and uneasiness when engaging with 'service users who express emotional needs' and are thus 'enthusiastic to fall back on the rationality of "objective" assessment because that is what makes them feel more comfortable' (Bowl, 2001: 123-124).

Importantly, by exercising traditional masculine qualities 'men risk being accused of insensitivity' (MacLean, 2003: 50), whereas, paradoxically, demonstrating traditional feminine abilities they risk 'being accused of being too 'feminine'' (ibid; see also Simpson, 2004). Even if a male social worker is able to strike a balance, they can still find 'it difficult to gain recognition for professional caring abilities' (McLean, 2003: 64). Therefore, many male social workers feel pressurised into proving 'themselves as genuine carers in order to overcome the stereotypical assumptions about their role in social work' (Bates & Thompson, 2002: 101). Ironically, these stereotypes can also force men to reluctantly conform 'into more "masculine" roles' (Simpson, 2004: 363).

Dissident Research I

Yet not all literature complies with the idea that men are somehow uneasy with the 'feminine' aspects of social work. Chusmir (1990: 14) notes that men in non-traditional occupations are generally 'comfortable with themselves and their masculine sexuality' while, interestingly, contending that they possess many qualities often attributed to women such as being caring. Additionally, Cree (1996: 81) puts forward a notable study which found that, though some tensions existed for men social workers, they were just 'as comfortable as women with the caring aspects of social work'. Despite this relatively small body of research, the literature offers a limited investigation into the qualities men bring to social work other than those complimenting hegemonic masculinity. Certainly, using the concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' proves an important tool with which to fathom men's actions and

behaviour (Lupton, 2000). Nevertheless, it seems to constrain how the literature explores men's place in social work. For example, while much of the research has focused on the 'feminine' qualities within social work, it is somewhat fragmented and lethargic in how it examines the positive qualities, other than the traditional, that male social workers bring to their work.

Resolving the Tension

Certainly, one of the most remarkable themes arising from the discussion found in the literature concerning men in social work is how gender-related tensions are resolved.

Horizontal Segregation

The pursuit of horizontal gender segregation in social work is one method male social workers employ to resolve gender-related tensions in their practice. Christie (2008: 22) offers the example that the over-representation of men in the Probation and Welfare Service may be due to the perception that this area of social work is 'less "feminized" than in other areas of social work' (see also Pringle, 1995). While fields such as this, as well as other areas where men are overrepresented in such as mental health, are commonly seen as 'the most skilled and prestigious in social work', they also 'tend to entail a greater element of "control" than other areas such as working with older people or people with learning disabilities' (Pringle, 1995: 24; see also Perry & Cree, 2003). This further compliments the impression that men are task oriented and managerial while remaining uneasy with the caring aspects of social work (Christie, 1998; Kulik, 1998). Importantly, these studies indicate that male social workers may 'position themselves, and be positioned, by work identities which limit the need to develop and maintain caring relationships with clients' (Christie, 1998: 500).

Vertical Segregation

Christie (2008: 24) argues that tensions are also being resolved through a process of vertical segregation, where men are 'working as managers and moving away from direct contact with service users'. Again, this further reinforces the impression that men are emotionally restricted, unwilling 'to seek emotional help...and are reluctant to

express feelings' (Bowl, 2001: 114). Cree (1996: 80) expands on this, outlining research carried out in the United States some twenty years ago that suggested 'men move into administrative posts within social work in part as a strategy to cope with feelings of incongruity in a woman's profession'. This resonates with what McLean (2003: 48-49) terms a 'distancing strategy' where, for example, men actively seek higher educational qualifications while viewing the 'job as a way to gain experience for more challenging or prestigious jobs or careers in the future'. Indeed, Christie (1998: 503) colours the corollary of this stating 'men social workers may be in a non-traditional profession for men yet often occupy traditional positions for men within that setting'.

Re-Defining Social Work - (Re) Constructing Masculinity

In an attempt to locate their masculinity, Simpson (2004: 364) explains that men in non-traditional occupations restructure 'the job in order to enhance its "masculine" components'. For example, Cross & Bagilhole (2002: 223) found that the men in their study denied the work only involves feminine aspects, such as being caring, while in turn emphasising 'the different tasks they perform than their female colleagues'. Such strategies also involve men focusing on the more masculine aspects of the job, such as the technical facets (Simpson, 2004). This 'gender work' then helps to minimise the job's feminine associations while aligning 'the image of the job within a more conventional notion of masculinity' (Simpson, 2004: 361).

A particularly important finding emerging from the literature is highlighted by Lupton (2000: 46) who argues men also engage in a process of expressing and enacting 'a different masculinity'. As men experience challenges to their gender, a process of realignment is invoked 'to bring masculinity into line with the occupation' (ibid) by emphasising feminine traits of the job (Cross & Bagilhole, 2002). As a result, these men begin to identify with a masculinity that does not see women as the 'other', that rejects certain traditional masculine values such as control and leadership, while embracing qualities popularly seen as feminine (Lupton, 2000). Importantly, this ensures men work at an expression of masculinity which allows 'them to operate comfortably in a female domain' (ibid: 46).

Dissident Research II

Of course, it is essential to remember that a number of studies (see Chusmir, 1990; Cree, 1996) have concluded men are secure with the feminine aspects of social work, that they do not encounter difficulties arising from their gender and, as a result, do not employ the above 'strategies'. Cree (1996: 81) takes this point up, proposing that the reason for 'men's ability to accept the caring bits of social work without experiencing status confusion or role strain might be that they are somehow different from other men'. Importantly, such findings suggest that men who do not strive to conform to hegemonic masculinity find it easier to locate themselves in social work (Lupton, 2000). Unlike theorists, such as Cross & Bagilhole (2002), who believe that this 'different masculinity' arises as a consequence of challenges to a man's gender (see above), Cree (1996) asserts that these men came to social work with this different masculinity already formed. Unfortunately, literature available on this theory is sporadic, while those researchers who do address it do so in a limited way.

Findings and Discussion

Crossing the Gender Divide

The findings prove notable in garnering an understanding into how some male social workers negotiate through practice 'tension free'. Although accepting that qualities in social work such as relationship building and caring are traditionally feminine, respondents rejected the notion that these are qualities only women possess. 'A' outlined this further, stating that *'anyone working in social work would be identified as having those skills'*, while 'B' underlined they *'are not feminine qualities, they are qualities I think all social workers need to have'.* Importantly, participants' willingness to identify themselves with traditional feminine qualities not only contradicts the belief that these are 'at odds' with men (Orme, 2001), but it also questions the idea that social work's association with femininity unsettles a male social worker's identity (Christie, 2006). Instead of fearing feminisation and stigmatisation or employing distancing strategies, these findings highlight that participants actually portrayed a comfort and enthusiasm in their association with the

'feminine' attributes of social work, recognising that '*most male social workers possess these 'feminine' qualities'* ('D').

This perspective was also evident in what respondents considered they bring to social work, again citing traditional feminine qualities. For example, 'A' affirmed that he brings good *'communication skills altogether and an ability to relate to different people, I think I can establish a working relationship with pretty much everybody'*. 'E' echoed this, while 'C' emphasised those 'feminine' qualities associated with caring: *'I always strive to assist or listen to people, to be there for them, to give people the encouragement, support and confidence to bring about change in themselves'*. These findings strike a particular similarity to Chusmir's (1990: 14) study which declared that men in non-traditional occupations purport to possess 'many of the same traits and characteristics often attributed to women'. Furthermore, such findings once again refute the notion that traditional feminine qualities are unnatural or at 'odds' with male social workers who, as a result, prefer to maintain an emotional distance from clients (Bowl, 2001; Orme, 2001). As well as willingly associating themselves with femininity, this also illustrates that participants desisted from overly emphasising traditional masculine qualities so as to reaffirm their 'vulnerable maleness', which in turn indicates their sense of comfort in social work (discussed further below). Certainly, this research offers a point of departure in discerning what men bring to social work. Instead of subscribing to traditional stereotypes by positioning men as rational and managerial, the research illustrated that some men bring qualities to social work popularly attributed to women such as nurturance and emotional sensitivity (Chusmir, 1990). Additionally, though participants did not contend they bring qualities specific to their gender, this is not a particular disappointment for the researcher. Indeed, it instead highlights male social workers are willing and determined to evidence that they bring more to social work than traditional stereotypes determine.

Embracing the Feminine

Respondents noted a real sense of enjoyment when carrying out the more 'feminine' aspects of social work. For example, rather than avoiding or limiting their

involvement in direct, caring work with clients so as to evade challenges to their gender (Christie, 1998), participants felt these were the most valuable elements of the job. 'E' stated that he found *'direct work with clients is the most rewarding'*. 'D' expanded on this declaring that *'I love working directly with children'* while, interestingly, lamenting that *'there's little or enough opportunity to do direct work in this post'*. These responses dispute notions that 'non-traditional' men fear feminization and stigmatisation when engaging with the more 'feminine' aspects of social work, which Simpson (2004: 364) contends are 'common anxieties for men in non-traditional roles'. It further questions the impression that men are desperately seeking to re-cast or re-label the job so as 'to bring the job more in line with dominant notions of masculinity' by emphasising the 'male' elements of the job, such as the managerial and technical facets (ibid: 359). Additionally, though it is believed 'considerable 'gender work'' is undertaken due to the feminine nature of the job, such as the pursuit of vertical and horizontal segregation, participants expressed apathy to being careerist and seeking the more prestigious aspects of social work (ibid: 364; Christie, 2008). For example, 'A' stated that *'I would not be keen on a managerial position to be honest'*, while 'B', echoing this, contended that *'from a personal point of view it wouldn't draw me, what I like and what I enjoy is the client contact'*. Finally, participants insisted they never experienced mistrust or suspicion in their jobs as a result of their gender, while they never encountered pressure to conform into particular masculine or feminine roles (Simpson, 2004; Bates & Thompson, 2002).

Rejecting the Masculine
Similar to Lewis' (2004: 402) study which uncovered that 'there is a strong perception in the narratives of male participants of their difference from other men', the respondents' willingness to identify with the feminine and somewhat reject the masculine opposes features frequently associated with hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005). This was further supported with how participants felt social work fits in with a man's identity. 'A' explained *'I think I am not a typical man'*, 'D' echoed this while 'E' outlined that *'if you were to ask a hundred people, most of them would not identify a typical man as being a social worker'*. Respondents also identified that traditional masculine traits do not fit in with how they see themselves as men. For

example, 'C' elucidates that *'I don't believe in society's image of what a man should be'*, while 'B' believed male social workers are different as *'we are not afraid to say I'm not feeling great, we are not afraid to show weakness'*. Interestingly, four respondents' elucidated that because they were 'subscribing to a version of masculinity which was not predicated on notions of control, domination, and definition of female as 'other', they were able to easily and comfortably engage with the 'feminine' aspects of social work ('E' stated he was unsure on this point) (Lupton, 2000: 46). This seems a significant finding in fathoming men's ability to remain 'tension free' in social work. For example, 'C' explained that society's construction of a man would prohibit such a man from dealing with the emotional labour of social work; while 'A' added that *'I think the overly masculine type wouldn't work well here'*. 'B' further supported these beliefs, which 'D' echoed, stating *'typical, or ordinary males...they might find it difficult to work, or be employed, in this line of work'*. Therefore, because respondents do not fulfil hegemonic masculinity by, for example, maintaining an emotional distance or positioning feminine qualities as the 'other' they are able to deal with the emotional labour inherent in social work (Lupton, 2000). Interestingly, these responses are supported by Chusmir's (1990: 15) noteworthy point that 'men in these jobs tend to be less masculine gender-typed than men in traditional occupations, indicating that they may be quite comfortable with their gender role behaviour and therefore unlikely to experience conflict due to their gender-atypical jobs'.

(Re) Constructing Masculinity as a Reaction?

While the findings have firmly conveyed that the men in this study were not encountering any gender-related tensions, accounting for Cross & Bagilhole's (2002) research raises an important consideration. Their study purports that men in non-traditional occupations respond to 'challenges to their gender identity by attempting to (re)construct a different masculinity by identifying with their non-traditional occupations' as well as actively attaining feminine traits (ibid: 222-223). Certainly, participants' rejection of features of hegemonic masculinity, as well as their embrace of feminine aspects of social work, indicates they have 'developed or worked at an expression of masculinity which would allow them to operate comfortably in a female

domain' (Lupton, 2000: 46). However, whether this is as a consequence of challenges to their gender is questionable. Rather than embracing feminine aspects of social work as a *reaction* to gender-related tensions as Cross & Bagilhole (2002) suggest, participants affirmed their present masculinity and appreciation of traditional feminine qualities had been consistent throughout their life. For example, 'A' explained that family experiences as a child *'stood me well in the sense of empathising and caring for people'*. 'D' echoed this, while 'B' stated *'ever since school I was interested in helping people, in this type of work'*. As a result, it seems participants brought an already formed masculinity to social work – rather than one constructed in response to any tensions they encountered - that has accepted certain feminine qualities and rejected aspects of the 'typical' man (Cree, 2001). Cree (1996: 83) supports this, believing that men who are able to comfortably locate themselves in social work come to the profession already 'in the knowledge that they are different – that they have qualities which are not stereotypically held to be male' (see also Chusmir, 1990).

However, any certainty that men in non-traditional occupations do not experience tensions may be premature. Respondents feared that men who ascribe to traditional masculinity may be vulnerable to gender-related tensions and may subsequently pursue the 'strategies' outlined in the literature review. Additionally, this study cannot be generalised onto the whole population of male social workers as discussed in the methodology, which also infers, for example, that the researcher cannot claim all men that come to social work are somewhat different to 'typical' men. It is therefore essential to remain cognisant that many of the tensions men are purported to experience may be very real for many male social workers.

Conclusion and Recommendations

As no Irish study concerning this topic has come to the researcher's attention (with the exception being Christie, 2008) the study seems rather unique by being rooted in an Irish context. Significantly, this research challenged a number of stereotypes. As well as questioning the idea that social work comprises of specific feminine qualities, it also moved the prevailing discourse about male qualities away from traditional stereotypes and into a domain that appreciates men for the positive qualities they

bring. The research also illustrated that male social workers comfortably locate themselves in practice, where they value and treasure the more direct, caring work with clients. Importantly, the research also identified that several male social workers position themselves as 'different' to the 'typical' man, which seems critical to their ability to negotiate through social work comfortably and securely. However, the research also cast doubt on the ability of men who aspire to a hegemonic masculinity to locate themselves as 'tension free' in social work.

It has been recommended that male social workers are offered the opportunity to express how the feminine nature of social work affects them – if this is an issue for them – through a forum such as supervision. As well as building on a worker's strengths and improving their weaknesses, it may also help to mitigate tensions. Undoubtedly for this to work, a great deal of responsibility must rest on supervisors to remain sensitive to a male social worker's potential unease with certain aspects of social work. Failing to address these tensions may have a resulting negative impact on clients and the work done. The researcher also believes the issues discussed in this study and others similar studies should be incorporated into social work training. While this would raise awareness of the issues male social workers potentially face, it also assures male students that possessing traditional 'feminine' qualities is to be valued and appreciated. Considering the dearth of information regarding men in female occupations and the potential conflicts their gender identity encounters (Simpson, 2004), it is recommended that more research is required on the gender-related tensions male social workers encounter in their practice. More specifically, a more in-depth exploration into the vertical segregation of social work is needed. While previous research is rather conflicting (see Davey, 2002; Christie, 2006), as well as the dismissal by this study's participants that men actively seek vertical segregation so as to 'consolidate and affirm their gender identity' (Williams, 1995: 17), statistical evidence remains undeniable (see NSWQB, 2006). Importantly, such research would benefit from the perspectives of those already employed in management positions by, for example, exploring what influenced them to enter such areas. Research of this nature would also profit from women's interpretations of why women are disproportionally represented in these areas of social work.

Finally, the author recommends that future research regarding this study's topic should include longitudinal research. Importantly, longitudinal research on the movements of male social workers through different areas of social work would add to the debate on the vertical and horizontal nature of social work. A longitudinal study could also explore whether male social workers perceive a decrease or an increase in their experiences of gender-related tensions over time, and what, if any, are the reasons for this.

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